

Off the radar

The blah and the boring is for others. For the most exciting journey of your life, the beginning should be just as thrilling. Presenting the national parks of America that no one would dream of visiting for a honeymoon. Except you.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **STEPHEN CUNLIFFE**



Black Sand Basin in Yellowstone National Park derives its name from the concentration of black obsidian sand in the basin.

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The United States of America is synonymous with big cities like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, not to mention Disney World and the casinos of Las Vegas. But there's another largely unknown and not-to-be-missed side to this incredibly diverse country: the rugged wilderness of the Rocky Mountains and the old Wild West. This picturesque land of deep canyons, tall waterfalls, towering snow-capped mountain spires, prolific wildlife and old-fashioned hospitality beckons newly-weds to seek an outdoorsy, adventure-driven honeymoon with a difference.

Below: In the heart of Grand Teton National Park, Triangle X is an authentic working dude ranch that offers unparalleled horseback riding.

Right: Furry marmots scamper around in small groups, munching on grasses and lichens at Grand Teton National Park.

GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK

Grand Teton is a small park that packs a real punch with plenty of activities and attractions to tempt the outdoor enthusiast. The regal and imposing peaks of the Teton Range climb over 2,000m above the valley floor. Unencumbered by foothills, the slopes rise steeply through coniferous forests into fragrant alpine meadows strewn with colourful wild flowers. Fed by numerous mountain streams, a chain of glacial lakes gleams like a string of pearls draped around the valleys below.

At the centre of the park, the highly popular and quaint Jenny Lake can be crossed by a ferry boat, giving visitors easy access to the impressive Hidden Falls and breathtaking views from the aptly-named Inspiration Point. If you've got energy to burn, why not stretch your legs on one of the well-maintained hiking trails or trekking loops? Tracks vary in length from one to 20 miles, so choose a day-hike route that's well-suited to your level of fitness and comfort with the great outdoors.

There are two highly recommended places to stay in Grand Teton. Triangle X Ranch in Wyoming is an authentic working horse ranch located deep within the national park. In Jackson Hole, Triangle X offers an opportunity to honeymoon in a traditional setting, while enjoying horseback riding, cookouts, dancing, hiking, park tours, wildlife-viewing and photographic safaris. This ranch-style honeymoon would be a perfect option for horseback riding enthusiasts in search of one of the most complete outdoor recreation packages on offer in the mountainous West.

By contrast, Jenny Lake Lodge is a place of simple elegance. The hotel enjoys an enviable setting of jaw-dropping mountainous vistas right at the doorstep. With the grandeur of the towering Tetons as a backdrop, even sitting in a rocking chair on the porch can be a surreal experience. The rustically elegant rooms are well-appointed and ooze cowboy country charm, making the lodge ideal for couples seeking top-notch service, comfy lodgings and an array of entertaining outdoor activities. Horseback rides, bicycle rentals, gourmet breakfasts and elaborate five-course dinners are all included in the price of your stay.



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YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

Yellowstone is a geological smoking gun that continuously reminds visitors of how powerful and violent the earth can be. A plethora of boiling hot springs, fumaroles and geysers make it the epicentre of geo-thermal activity on the planet, so be sure to immerse yourself in the magic of this awesome natural monument. Declared way back in 1872, Yellowstone was the world's first national park and attracts in excess of three million visitors every year.

The celebrated geyser basin in the west of Yellowstone contains the world's greatest concentration of hot springs and geysers, making it a place where you can connect with earth's raw power as it bubbles up and explodes from just below the surface. At over 100m wide, Grand Prismatic Spring is the largest hot spring in the entire national park and well worth a visit.

However, even that can't hold a candle to the world-renowned Old Faithful. This geyser was named for the predictability and steadiness of its scalding hot eruptions. Stop by the local visitor centre to find out the predicted timings for its eruptions, which will help ensure you're in position in time to catch the explosive action. The park is

Right: Within Yellowstone's thermal features, you can see millions of years of geology at work. The park is home to some 10,000 thermal features, over 500 hundred of which are geysers

Below: In a meadow filled with dandelions, horses mill around against the dramatic Teton Mountains as a backdrop.



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also home to the deep and multi-hued Yellowstone Canyon, along with the best wildlife-viewing in all of North America. The Hayden and Lamar valleys are at the centre of the action and boast a rich and visible fauna.

When planning a visit to Yellowstone, do plan your stay at the Old Faithful Inn. Built in 1904, Yellowstone's legendary inn is a historic landmark and a favourite, so be sure to book well in advance. This popular log and wood shingle lodge houses an immense lobby with a massive stone fireplace. Remodelled in recent years, guest accommodations now include spacious suites overlooking the Old Faithful geyser.

GLACIER NATIONAL PARK

Glacier National Park forms the southern portion of the conservation area shared with Canada—the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park. The ascending mountain slopes and jagged summits, here, have been whittled by ancient glaciers to produce steep mountain walls topped by imposing rock buttresses.

Only one east-west road crosses this mountainous park. The Going-to-the-Sun Road is a feat of engineering brilliance, taking vehicles past Lake McDonald, Avalanche Creek, Bird Woman Falls and over Logan Pass into East Glacier. 700 miles of walking paths traverse the rugged wilderness, giving energetic honeymooners the chance to delve into the park's scenic beauty. The Iceberg Lake trail deserves to be recognised as the greatest day-hike in all of North America. The track is easy to follow and gently sloping, making it accessible to anyone with a semblance of an adventurous spirit. The Grinnell Glacier hiking trail is another great option.

After spending the day getting mesmerised by landscapes, honeymooners can retreat back to some classic hotels. The Prince of Wales Hotel on the Canadian side of the park is arguably the best known, but the attractively located Many Glacier Hotel is a personal favourite. Built in 1914, Many Glacier Hotel is situated on the shores of Swiftcurrent Lake and at the base of Mount Grinnell

With 650 lakes, Glacier National Park has numerous creeks and streams running throughout its territory. Seen here, a small waterfall on Virginia Creek on the continental divide trail near St Mary's Lake.



QUICK FACTS

BEST TIME TO VISIT

The scenic beauty, wildlife-viewing and park accessibility of the American West are at their best during the summer months. Visit between May and October with August-September being prime time.

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways has daily flights from Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai to New York (via Brussels). Catch a connecting flight to Jackson Hole Airport for Grand Teton and Yellowstone, or Glacier Park International Airport near Kalispell for Glacier National Park. Hire a car or rent an RV (www.cruiseamerica.com) upon arrival.

ACCOMMODATION

Check out Triangle X Ranch (www.trianglex.com) and the Grand Teton Lodge Company (www.gtlc.com) for lodging options in the Tetons. Xanterra operates the lodges in Yellowstone (www.yellowstonenationalparklodges.com) and the best accommodation option in Glacier National Park is the Many Glacier Hotel (www.glacierparkinc.com/lodging)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For Grand Teton, visit www.nps.gov/grte; for Yellowstone, visit www.nps.gov/yell; and for Glacier, check out www.nps.gov/glac

inside the national park. Park tours, boat cruises, evening entertainment and a host of other activities are also available at this appealing Swiss-style lodge.

Radically different from anything else on offer in the United States, the three parks form an impressive land of gobsmacking beauty and untamed wilderness. Active and adventurous couples in search of a unique journey need to pack their bags and embark to the heart of America's old cowboy country. For the Wild West is a honeymoon like no other. ■

Clockwise from above: Yellowstone boasts the best wildlife-viewing in all of North America with prime habitat for black bears. The bears descend to the lower slopes and forage for flowers and fresh grasses in springtime; As you explore the wilderness of the Wild West, you never know what you'll bump into around the corner. A moose sauntering along the edge of the road is a good reason to stop and appreciate the park's abundant natural riches; The day-hike to Iceberg Lake gives honeymooners a chance to stretch their legs. A gentle stroll into the snowy heart of incredibly craggy mountain peaks.