

I wasn't thrilled at the idea of spending a week in a tiny cabin in a small, unknown Wyoming town, but one of my best friends insisted that we go on a nature-centered vacation — plus she wanted a break from the New York City summer. Brenna Chase and I met in Salt Lake City, hopped in an overpriced taxi, rented a car, purchased some groceries — including beer with a maximum ABV of four percent — and began the three-hour drive north toward Afton, Wyoming.

Nestled in the Star Valley, the town of nearly 2,000 is home to the world's largest elk antler arch — it bears the town's name over the center of the town's main strip. The summer weather was perfect; it was warm, with no humidity and a couple of intense hail-producing thunderstorms.

We were lucky to catch the Lincoln County Fair, where I finally tried not one but two fried Oreos, and watched an unexceptional Beatles cover band donning cheap, choppy wigs.

Our trip was centered on exploring Grand Teton National Park and Yellowstone. The drive to both parks was filled with views of quaint cabins and small towns throughout the Star Valley with the Snake River winding below. Once we arrived in Jackson, which is just south of the Grand Tetons, I was surprised by how many tourists filled the beautiful ski resort town comprised of antique wooden buildings and expensive restaurants. I splurged on elk tacos at Lotus in Jackson and indulged in some of the best Pad See Ew I've had outside of Bangkok at Thai Plate.

The National Elk Refuge along the way to Grand Teton was filled with grazing elk, bison and deer. The Grand Tetons look fake, honestly — like the backdrop paintings used in old movies. Regardless of photos I've seen, nothing can quite capture the crevasses, the minuscule traces of snow and the jagged edges of these gargantuan beauties.

For our first hike, we picked what we thought was a six-mile loop around Phelps Lake, but the entire loop is actually about nine miles. The landscape is diverse and the hike winds through dense pine forests, along low-lying creeks, streams, open meadows filled with wildflowers, rocky terrain and views of the Tetons.

I became quite irritated as I passed teenagers blasting music on their phones but later realized the noise was to deter grizzly bears, which kill 14 people a year. After seeing that statistic printed on a sign in the park I sang

everything from "The Sound of Music" to "Beauty and the Beast" while intermittently shouting, "I am big; I am loud" over and over again while clutching my rented bear spray.

So as the perfect hike on the perfect day came to a close, my GPS alerted me that the main highway back to Afton was closed, and instead my iPhone routed us through spotty back roads — where the speed limit dropped to 15 mph in places.

Suddenly, the pavement ended and we hit a rocky road. About a mile in, our little GM eco car ran over a big-ass rock, and we heard a loud cracking sound. I just knew that we hit the oil pan, or something equally as important, and then the car stopped accelerating and the dashboard check engine light and other warning lights lit up like a Christmas tree.

So in the middle of nowhere, with no cell phone service, I push the car slightly up hill to the side of the road, grabbed my water bottle, a couple of layers of clothes and my purse, as Brenna and I started walking back towards the last town we passed through. Luckily, a large truck with a nice couple stopped and offered us a ride. They made room for us in the back, but left a James Bond-looking gun case in the middle seat between Brenna and me.

Once we arrived back in town, we split up in order to get a new rental car and guide a tow truck back to our broken down car in the middle of nowhere. So I waited at a gas station, while Brenna hopped in a taxi to the Jackson Airport.

Finally a tow truck arrived, and I spent the next two hours with a guy named Burt who shared stories about guns, hunting big game and telling me he wouldn't fight off a bear to protect his girlfriend.

"I can probably run faster than most people," I said. I thought if I was going to die in the wilds of Wyoming, it was going to be because I was mauled to death after being caught by a wolf or bear, and not by a tow truck driver who smoked while fueling his vehicle.

Two hours later, with a broken rental car leaking oil everywhere in tow, we made it back to the gas station where Brenna was waiting with our new rental car. She had to do some maneuvering to lose a guy who followed her from the airport, to a restaurant and then to the gas station — our agreed upon meeting point because our phones were dead.

We drove 35 mph back through the winding mountain roads as what seemed like hundreds of deer darted in front

of us. Ten minutes from our quaint little cabin, a police car stopped us. The officer told us to speed up because we could be "rear-ended because we were driving too slow." We got back to Afton around 2:30 am.

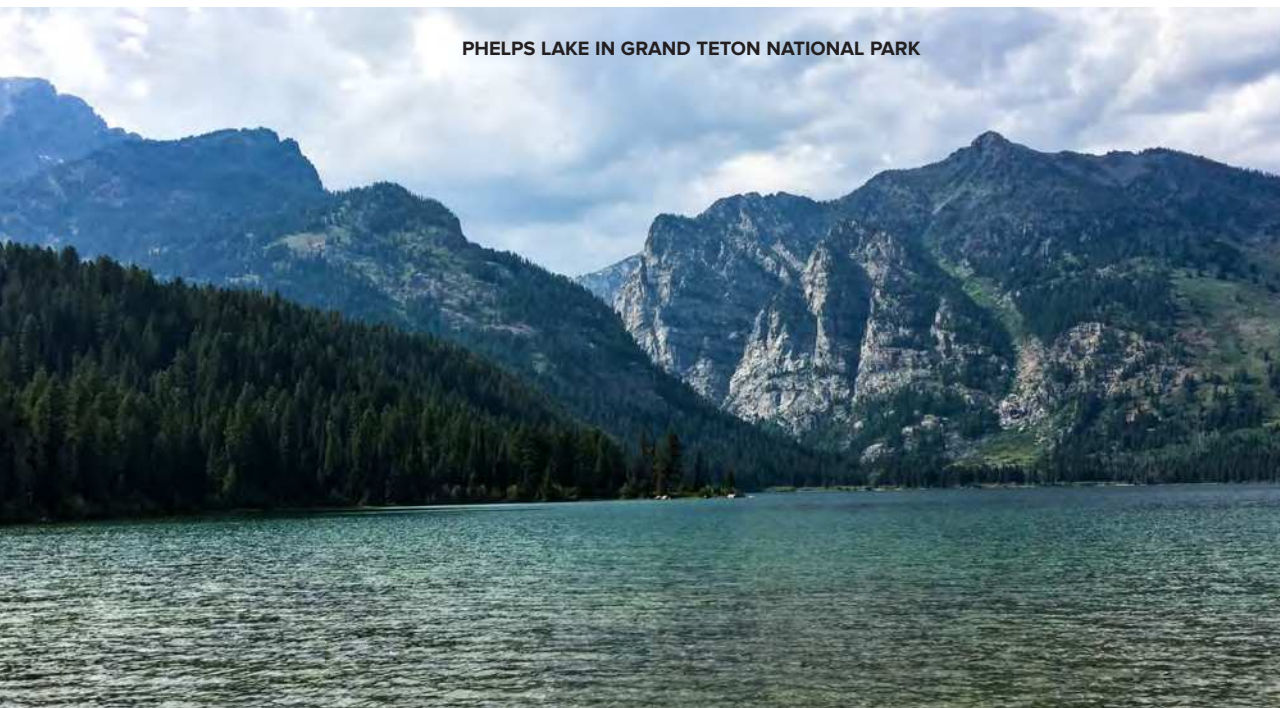
We decided to brave the summer crowds at Yellowstone a few days later. Driving through Yellowstone was like being teleported back what I believe the '70s must have been like — the sun cast the trees along the continental divide with a soft orange-yellow glow, similar to the tint of all of the photos I've ever seen from the '70s. And scanning through the radio stations, we heard Cat Stevens; Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young; Fleetwood Mac and the Carpenters, to name a few, so I'm still convinced that we traveled slightly back in time.

But that feeling soon faded as we arrived at the lodge outside of Old Faithful. If you do not like crowds, this place is not for you. I'm glad I saw the predictable cone geyser, but people were touching and bumping into me to get the best angle on their iPads, yes; people take iPads to national parks, and watching the whole event through their phones.

A walking path surrounding Old Faithful winds around other geysers and other geothermal phenomena that the dinosaurs most likely walked through, but there's nothing quite like people who litter and smoke in national parks to totally kill the mood. I yelled at a tourist to, "Stop smoking and put out your cigarette — it's fire season!" He started to say, "Oh sorry, I didn't know," and I cut him off and threatened to report him to the park rangers.

The most spectacular site I saw in Yellowstone is the Grand Prismatic Spring. The rainbow colored hot spring is "the third largest spring in the world," and its multiple colors come "from different species of thermophile (heat-loving) bacteria living in the progressively cooler water around the spring," according to Yellowstonepark.com. And when the wind blows, the light mist of tepid water feels refreshing, even on a hot summer day while shuffling through hoards of other tourists.

Wyoming is breathtaking and all of the locals were helpful and welcoming — aside from the stalker. although a square state may not be on top of your list, I can't recommend visiting Grand Teton National Park enough — you may even get to have your own experience hitchhiking with friendly strangers.



PHELPS LAKE IN GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK



PHOTOS BY CORINNE BOYER

GRAND PRISMATIC SPRING IN YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

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"Ah, that is a perfume in which I delight; when they roast coffee near my house, I hasten to open the door to take in all the aroma."  
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