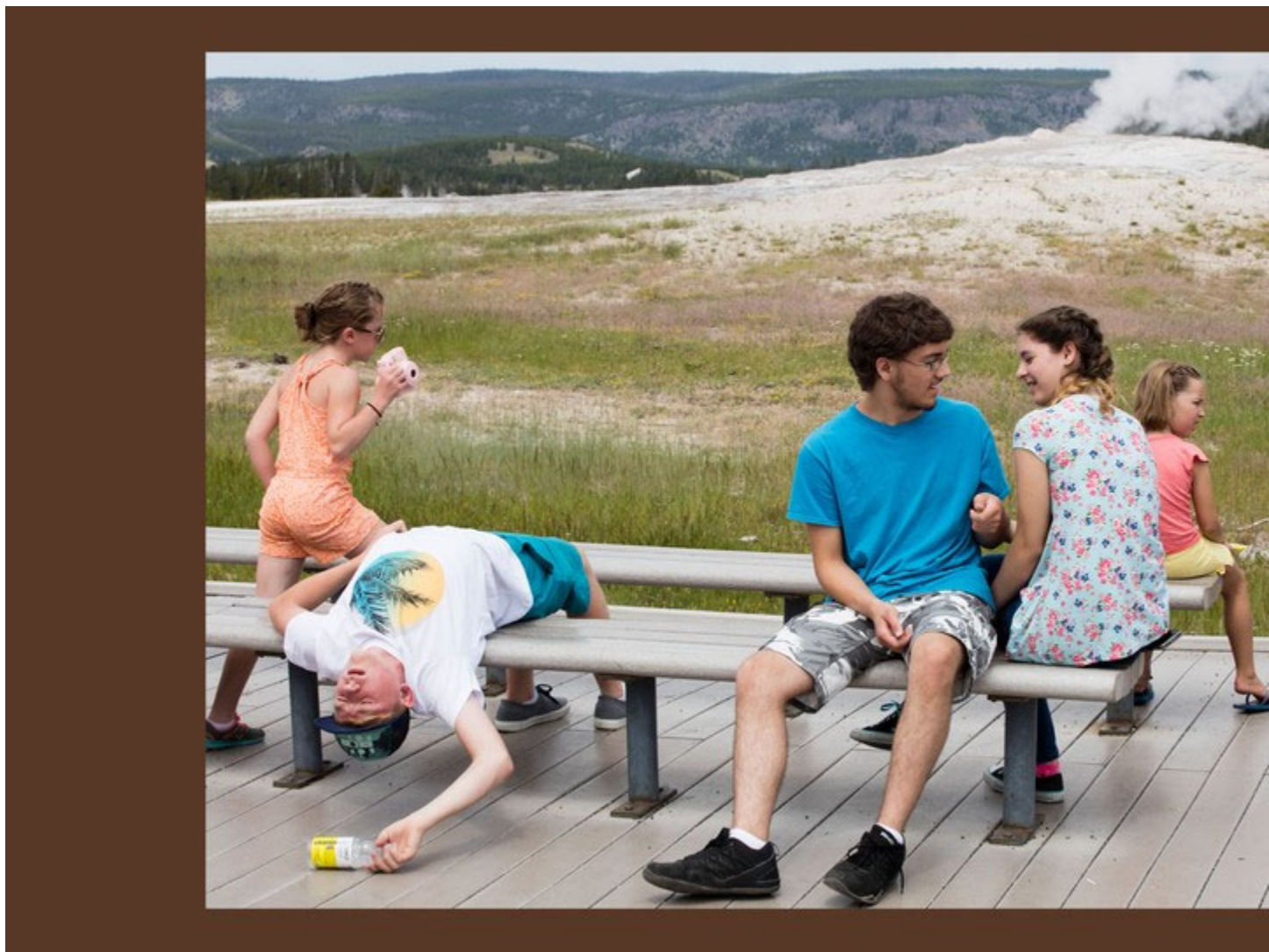


IDEAS

A National Tantrum at a National Park

“You’re in such a gorgeous place. Why are you complaining about stupid stuff?”

By Tiya Miles



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THE FIRST TIME I saw Yellowstone National Park, that otherworldly American place, I was in the mood to celebrate. My husband and I had just had our 1-and-a-half-year-old twins baptized on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Montana, where he's from, and decided to drive the five hours to Yellowstone. It was a happy end to a trying first year as new parents to premature and sometimes sickly twins. We bathed the kids in the cabin sink, ate cheap meals of cereal and sandwiches, and pushed the double stroller along the easiest trails. The land flashed with sublime light, even if the human history of the park's formation—the expulsion of Indigenous peoples and poor white trappers to make way for environmental conservation and commercial tourism—cast flickering shadows. Those days stand out in technicolor in my memory: our toddling daughters in their watermelon-pink and tangerine-orange short sets, the blue pools and hot rainbow-hued mists, the green-winged hummingbirds so small that we at first mistook them for insects, the bison in their rugged coats.

We've been going back to Yellowstone ever since, eventually adding a third child to the cacophonous, long-distance car rides. Now we always stay at the Old Faithful Inn, the historic lodge near the Old Faithful geyser. We missed a year during the first phase of the coronavirus pandemic, and when we returned last summer with three teenagers, we were met by a surprising sight. In the lobby were posted large signs begging guests to be nice. GOOD NATURE. WE'RE ALL ABOUT IT. AND SO ARE OUR LOYAL EMPLOYEES. In bold letters: **PLEASE BE KIND TO THEM.**

Yellowstone had always been a place where our family found an unspoken camaraderie in the pleasant company of those who were, like us, delighted to be in that stunning surround, which somehow put human problems into planetary perspective. Had the tone at the park—the first of its kind in our nation's history—changed so much that visitors had to be told to treat others with respect?

Since the pandemic, there have been reports of increased road rage, of people throwing tantrums in stores and on airplanes. America's grandest natural spaces have not been immune to the contagion of anger. In this sense, the national parks may be more national than we realized.

Mike Keller, the general manager of Yellowstone National Park Lodges at Xanterra, a private company that operates all public lodgings and most concessions in Yellowstone, told me he sees far more good interactions than bad. But lately "when it goes sideways," he said, "it goes really aggressively really quickly." Keller recounted a shocking range of rude and abusive behaviors displayed by park visitors at the expense of employees, from the use of profanity, to calling them "morons," to one instance of a guest shoving a worker. "I don't want to make it sound like we're in a killing zone here," he told me. But he believes Americans have "lost our civility."

This year was Yellowstone's 150th anniversary. Celebrations coincided with all the stresses of the pandemic—mask-mandate politicization, supply-chain disruptions, staffing shortages, and ballooning numbers of visitors. And, oh yes, in June there was a 500-year flood that necessitated an evacuation and shut the park down for nine days. Any one of these factors would have been challenging enough. Combined, they made for a punishing trial that left some employees at the park shaken and tearful. As it turns out, Yellowstone's sesquicentennial is highlighting not only the park's physical majesty and cultural history, but also the present-day frailties of the nation that brought it into being.

RICK HOENINGHAUSEN, the director of sales and marketing for Xanterra's Yellowstone Park Lodges, has worked at the park for 30 years. He met his wife there in the '80s. He, too, told me that the atmosphere has changed since the pandemic began. He knows park employees who have been cursed at and spit on. Guests "became very ugly," he said. "Some of our agents were in tears because of what people were saying to them." The abuse extended to communication online.

When one of his colleagues offered to read and respond to complaint emails in order to buffer her co-workers, she lasted only a week. The task of wading through the foul feedback took too much of an emotional toll.

Grace McCray, a sunny college student, and one of the few people of color outside our own family we encountered at Yellowstone, was working as the greeter at Old Faithful Inn when we arrived in June. “I love this place,” she told me. Yet, while working the front desk and the front door, she was responsible for asking people to put on a mask before entering the building, in order to comply with the National Park Service policy that required masks throughout the winter of 2021–22 and, sporadically, for part of the summer of 2022. She had been yelled and cursed at by “really furious” people. “That’s not cool,” she said. “Stop yelling at this girl behind the desk. Like, what kind of person do you have to be to scream at service people?”

One visitor responded to McCray’s request that he put on a mask by pointing his camcorder at her and saying, “How about you take down that mask and shake a little something for me?” McCray, who is, in her own words, “a little woman,” felt intimidated. “Big men yelling at me is something I have a problem with,” she said, after telling the story of another man who addressed her in language so rude that she would not repeat it. At the time we visited, masks were not mandatory inside, and interactions at the entryway were less strained. But, she said, “it was pretty wild for a while.”

McCray tried, at first, to prepare herself by anticipating who among the guests streaming in might yell at her. But it was hard to guess. Although she noticed people wearing political paraphernalia (she did not say, but I assumed that she meant MAGA hats and the like), she said that incivility could be traced to no particular “type” of visitor. Instead, the animosity seemed generalized. Almost anyone, from the low-budget backpacker to the high-brow sightseer, seemed capable of boiling over.

MANNERS ARE BEING ABANDONED at other Montana havens. In Glacier National Park, about 400 miles to the northwest, rude visitors have left employees crying too. Similar signs have had to be posted, pleading for civility. When we visited Eddie's Cafe, a historic, family-owned park concession in Apgar Village along glistening Lake McDonald, in August, a sign read: THE WHOLE WORLD IS SHORT STAFFED. BE PATIENT & KIND TO THOSE WHO ARE WORKING HARD AND SHOWING UP. The manager there, Catie McLaughlin, told me the sign had been posted in the summer of 2021 and then taken down, until a park visitor made a staff member cry in 2022. The sign went back up again. "People are just so mean," McLaughlin said. Then she smiled and drew my attention to a chubby marmot hustling past us in the grass.

McLaughlin has worked in hospitality for years but she said that, since the pandemic, "everyone was on edge, will snap at you for literally nothing." People are more impatient now and prepared to complain about minor and even entirely predictable inconveniences, such as unstable Wi-Fi connections in the remote mountains. "You're on the deck, with a view of Lake McDonald, screaming at your 19-year-old server about your French fries not being crispy enough. You're in such a gorgeous place. Why are you complaining about stupid stuff?"

Keller, the general manager of Yellowstone's lodges and cabins, has thought a lot about that "why." The masking requirement was especially emotional, bringing a blistering political fight into park borders. The last thing guests who were already resentful of mandates and suspicious of federal authorities wanted to hear while on their get-away-from-it-all wilderness vacation was that they had to mask up. "I've had some guests be brutally rude to our employees," he said. "To this kid making \$13 an hour. They're the face. They're the person that gets this vitriol thrown at them. They accuse them of being liberal, which they aren't ... some of them aren't."

Many guests had to delay or rebook their vacations because of the pandemic. They were already logistically and financially strained by the time they arrived. Staffing shortages led to longer wait times; supply-chain shortages meant my kids' favorite ice-cream flavors could no longer be found at the soda fountain. Many employees mentioned how the lack of reliable internet access enraged travelers during the pandemic. Guests quickly lost patience with some of the quirky features that had once been, arguably, among the charms of Yellowstone and Glacier.

The crowds exacerbated the tension. The traffic slowdowns around wildlife sightings, known as "bear jams" and "bison jams," have gotten much longer. Naaman Horn, a National Park Service spokesperson, told me that Yellowstone's busiest year on record was 2021, with more than 4.8 million visits recorded.

Bozeman, the largest city near Yellowstone, is also booming. Our family has lived there on and off since 2014, when my husband accepted a visiting professorship in the Native American–studies program at Montana State University. As remote work became more common for a privileged subset of the population, pretty, friendly college towns like Bozeman drew thousands of new residents. Many newcomers came from urban and coastal areas and had more racially plural backgrounds than Bozeman's longer-standing residents. Other newcomers were white and more conservative, drawn to the area, many locals speculate, by the popularity of the hit show *Yellowstone*.

While perusing the local magazine *Bozeman City Lifestyle* earlier this year, I realized there was trouble in this paradise too. I came across a story about an initiative called Outside Kind that reminded me of the "be nice" signs popping up at the parks. The initiative is sponsored by One Montana, an organization that focuses on bridging urban-rural divides, and several partner organizations. Sarah Davies Tilt, the executive director of One Montana, told me that the goal is to educate about outdoor-space use and decrease conflict between newcomers and

longtime residents, which has been on the rise as more people elbow past one another on crowded trails. The group tries to promote a “sense of place and a sense of tradition and history” that it calls the “Montana Way.”

Judith Heilman shares Tilt’s concerns. A Black woman with short salt-and-pepper natural hair and a hearty hug, she founded the Montana Racial Equity Project in 2015 and was the director until her retirement this summer. On a clear afternoon in July, I visited Heilman at her Bozeman home. We sat in her kitchen looking out over her acreage as the breeze made the aspens sing, and she told me about how the influx of people from larger cities leads to communication misfires. “A lot of people come in from the larger cities ... With that sort of population density comes a feeling that you need to be on internet time.” She snapped her fingers in staccato fashion to illustrate. “Everything has to just be done now, or yesterday, or two hours ago ... And people don’t have time for one another. And they don’t have time for just the general niceties of politeness.”

Heilman believes that by slowing down and working to connect with others, you can build a better community. She’s friends with Bozeman’s chief of police, who is white, and the two of them read books about contemporary social issues together in a cozy book group that could serve as a model for law-enforcement and racial-justice leaders nationwide. They read new books such as Heather McGhee’s *The Sum of Us*, and older hits such as Ibram X. Kendi’s *Stamped From the Beginning*, which was, Heilman said, “the first book the chief read” with her. Heilman enjoyed watching her friend discover this complex history. “For me, *Stamped* was affirming,” she said. “For the chief, it was revelatory.”

Two days later, I met with Tilt at a café across from the public library on Bozeman’s Main Street, ringed by mountain views. She was wearing a cheerful T-shirt that read: YOU CAN’T MAKE EVERYONE HAPPY. YOU’RE NOT AN AVOCADO, and jokingly called the part of the town

most reflective of urban growth “Boze-Angeles.” It’s hard, she said, to integrate these new community members. “Changing behaviors takes time.” The Outside Kind alliance has produced specific encouragements and instructions for people to Ski Kind, Hike Kind, Wag Kind, and so on. Tilt, who is a bird hunter, says they also have a Hunt Kind program, to encourage hunters to exude friendliness on the trail, where they may encounter people who are intimidated by the sight of firearms. Transplants to the city and trails need to understand that “these aren’t assault weapons,” she said. Outside Kind starts with the basics, encouraging people to smile and say hello.

I DIDN’T KNOW whether to be happy that such a program existed, or sad that it had come to this. Americans who have survived all manner of turmoil over the past six years are drawn to this Western landscape to escape urban congestion, coldness, and COVID, but we are bringing these maladies with us. Because in the end, there is no escaping our national culture. Our country is frayed and frazzled, cynical and suspicious, and raring for a fight. Even our so-called best idea, our breathtaking national parks, can’t save us from ourselves.

And yet. Everyone I spoke with about the horror stories of the past few years wanted to end the conversation on a different note: They all insisted on telling one last story that emphasized the positive. Grace McCray was on door duty the day of the terrifying flood, and was put in charge of evacuating the Old Faithful Inn. When the inn was empty for the next several days, McCray experienced the natural magic of a nearly peopleless Yellowstone Park. The beauty and peace restored her spirit. Rick Hoeninghausen told me about watching the 2017 solar eclipse from a boat on Yellowstone Lake, and we realized with quiet delight that we had been proximate strangers in that moment, as my family and I had watched the eclipse from the shore.

Mike Keller told what he called a “bad-to-good story,” in which he was recently summoned to the Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel where a

“belligerent guest” was “screaming at the top of his lungs” at employees. When Keller coaxed the man into a private office and urged him to take a seat, he was stunned to see the man burst into tears, “crying, sobbing, and shaking.” Keller handed the man a tissue, let him cry, and then asked how he could help. Apologetic and embarrassed, the man admitted, “I can’t go back to my car, to my wife and kids, and tell them I booked the wrong night.”

While too many Americans have been making park employees cry, the guests are breaking down too. In the end, Keller found that family a room. In turn, the staff received a heartfelt letter of gratitude. After all, as Grace McCray told me, “it’s still Yellowstone.”

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