

THE ELEMENTS BRING THRILLS TO YELLOWSTONE AND BOZEMAN

# WINTER PLAYGROUND

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# Journey

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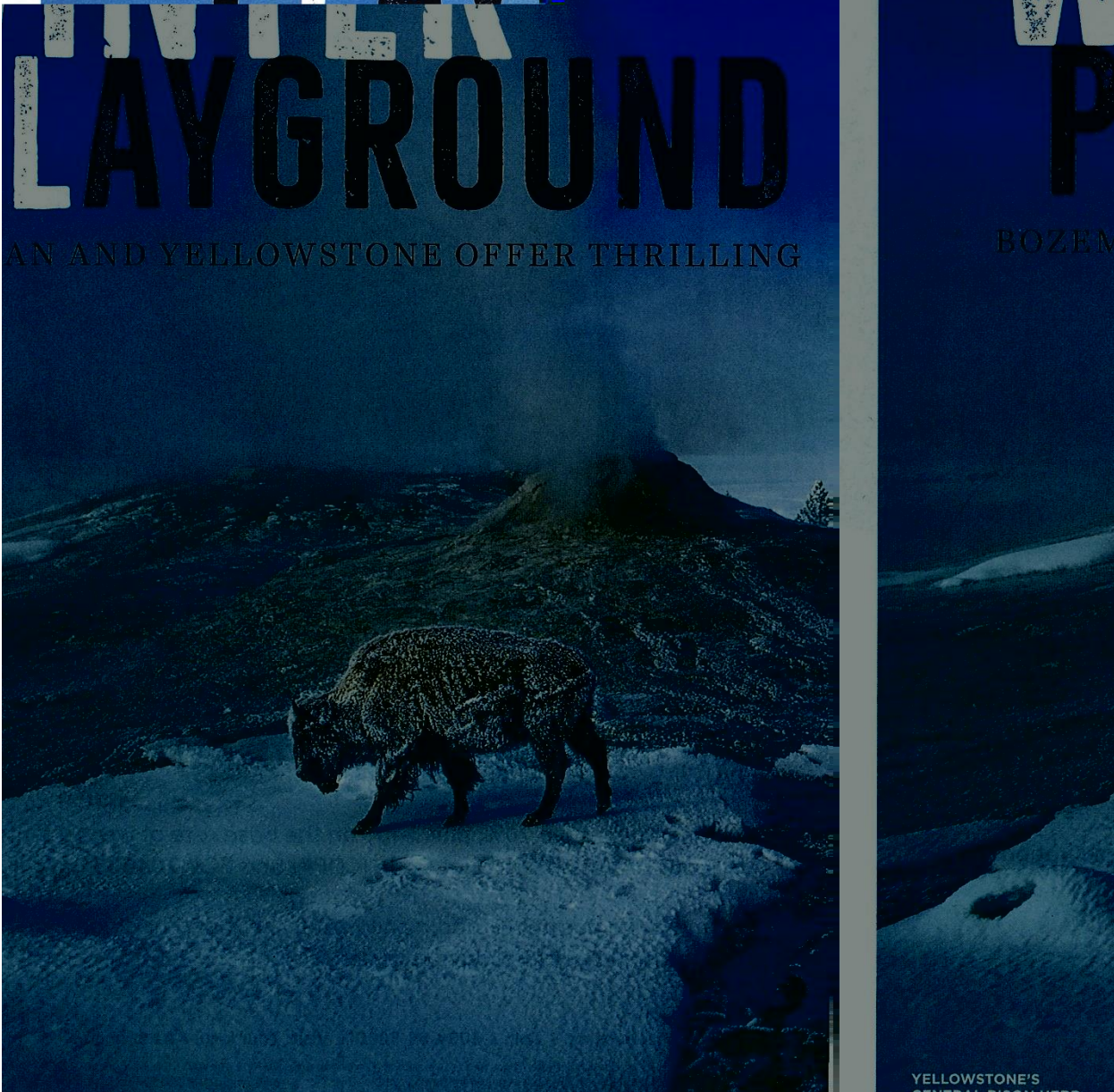
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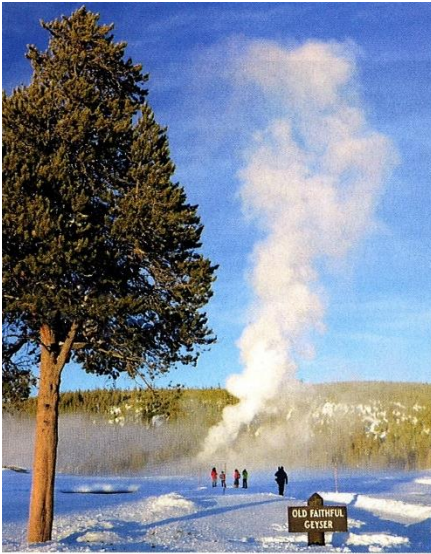
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REASONS TO EMBRACE THE ELEMENTS BY JEFF LAYTON

**D**riving snow and steam billowing from a geothermal spring have given the famously scenic landscapes of Yellowstone National Park an unfamiliar, surreal look. I stare into the foggy blizzard in vain until the wind eases, and the darkened muzzle of a solitary wolf fills the frame of my binoculars. He lifts his head, as if to watch me, for a few seconds, before the wind picks up again, and he vanishes behind an impenetrable veil of snow. Much about the scene seems pulled from an episode of *Game of Thrones*, but in reality, I am inside a heated snow coach, on a day trip to the park during a winter visit to Bozeman, Montana. >> There are some places where you travel to escape cold weather. Then, there are places where you go to experience the sensations that only winter can provide. Bozeman and its surroundings, which include Yellowstone, are exactly that: places where winter-lovers can find quintessential experiences and unexpected thrills, such as making eye contact with a wild wolf.





**HOT STEAM AT OLD FAITHFUL (LEFT) AND COLD SMOKE AT BRIDGER BOWL.**

## SERENE INTENSITY

Yellowstone in winter can be intense. Thermal sites emit prolific clouds of steam. Bitter-cold temperatures are accompanied by powerful winds that cause the snow to fall sideways. And survival is determined by strength and fortitude.

Before our wolf sighting, our group had spent hours scanning the terrain for elk, otters, moose and bobcat from one of the snow coaches operated by SeeYellowstone.com. The vehicle itself—picture a shuttle bus whose tires have been replaced by caterpillar tracks in the rear and heavy-duty skis up front—was a sight to behold, but not as impressive as the bison we saw clearing deep snow with their heads to find buried grasses.

During our stop at Old Faithful, we watched the famous geyser erupt from boardwalks buried under 2 feet of snow, while cross-country skiers glided past nearby steamy geothermal fields, on terrain they had all to themselves.

## SNOWSHOES AND CHAKRAS

On a crisp morning, I am hoofing it up snow-dusted Drinking Horse Mountain Trail, about 5 miles northeast of downtown Bozeman, trying to keep up with Bailey Evans, a swift-footed yoga instructor.

“People in Bozeman know how to do winter not only because it lasts so long,” she says, as we pause to catch our breath, “but also because there are so many opportunities to play outside.” Case in point: “snoga,” a wellness-inspired mashup of yoga and snowshoeing catching on in cold-weather locales.

Yoga on snowshoes takes some getting used to. The small platforms attached to my feet make it easier to keep my balance, but I’m also wearing several inches of clothing and giant spiky shoes, which makes it hard to hold a pose. As I acclimate to the conditions under Evans’ guidance,

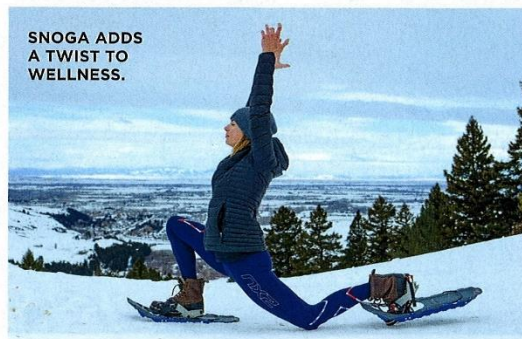
I take time to soak in the sights of the Gallatin Valley below and the distant mountain ranges that give the horizon a toothy appearance in every direction. No indoor yoga studio can offer a view like this.

## THE SNOW OF DREAMS

As I reach the entrance to Bridger Bowl Ski Area, about 17 miles northwest of downtown Bozeman, I notice a sign inviting me to “Ski the Cold Smoke.” Montana’s legendary snow forms when temperatures drop into the teens and there’s very little humidity. As I glide through 7-inch-deep powder on a bluebird day, I gain an appreciation for the local obsession with dry conditions. “The classic image of a Montana skier is someone over their head in powder, with only their goggles showing through a cloud,” says Briggs Ganser, a local ski enthusiast I meet on the slopes. “When you hit a big pocket, it goes ‘whup,’ like hitting your face with the lightest pillow.”

Late in the day, the skied-out runs are covered with a mishmash of globs and mounds that would form a gauntlet of obstacles to avoid back home in the Cascades. But Briggs shows me how easy it is to turn on cold smoke at full speed, blasting the chunks into smooth, fine contrails.

The following morning, I discover a cross-country skier’s playground next to Bridger Bowl at Crosscut Mountain



**SNOGA ADDS A TWIST TO WELLNESS.**

TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF BRIDGER BOWL SKI AREA; SNOGA: JEFF LAYTON

Sports Center, the training center for the U.S. Paralympic biathlon team. Wide, groomed trails zigzag over 500 acres, but it's the narrow single-track trails for classic skiers that I find most appealing. The snow is so light that I sink to my ankles, but the packed layers below allow me to bob and weave through a fairy tale–like aspen forest. As I glide past the slender trees, I can't help but howl hysterically, thrilled by the sensation of floating over untracked, wind-blown powder that feels as light as ash.

### FROM BRRRR TO AHHHH!

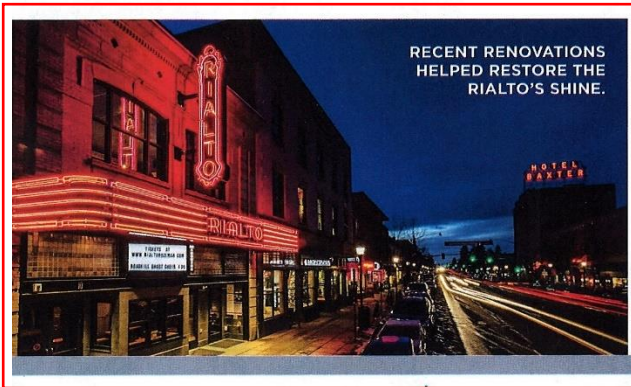
It's only 15 degrees outside, so I brace myself for the walk from the changing room to the first pool at Bozeman Hot Springs. As I step in, the 102-degree water stings at first, but my muscles quickly uncoil. Colored landscaping lights reflecting off rising steam produce a dreamy setting. I can't see the far end of the largest pool, but I can hear snippets of conversation between skiers describing their epic days

on the slopes. The therapeutic springs at the edge of town, which date back to the 19th century, offer priceless relaxation at affordable prices (admission to the pools is \$8.50 per person, less for children and seniors). The 12 pools, including four outdoors, are sourced from an underground well and are naturally heated, ranging in temperature from 57 to 106 degrees. For an extra fee, day visitors can use the facility's fitness center.

For a more-polished spa experience, visit downtown's full-service Loft Spa, where the choices include a revitalizing therapy treatment in hot and cool pools.

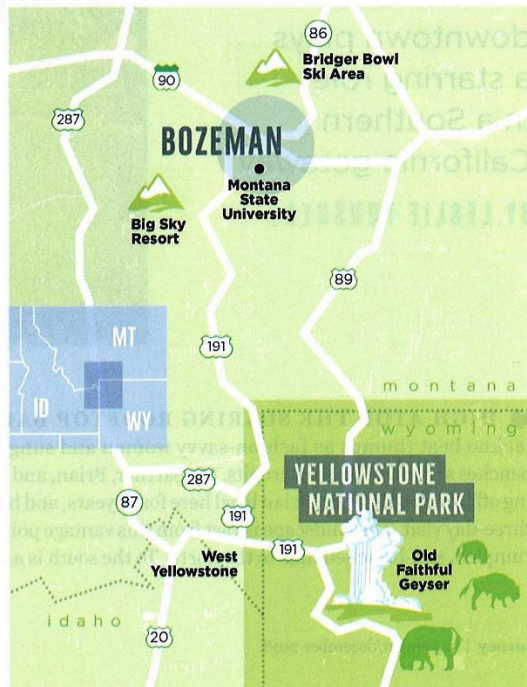
### COLLEGE-TOWN CHARM

As home to Montana State University, Bozeman possesses college-town qualities that add to the fun of a winter visit, with plenty of casual and lively options for dining and nightlife. Almond croissants and big sticky buns at Wild Crumb are a delectable way to fuel up for a day of snow play, while the all-day breakfast menu at Little Star Diner includes a delicious version of eggs Benedict, prepared with sage hollandaise sauce and winter squash. For dinner, the eclectic selection at Bisl includes fancy ramen, chicken-skin tacos, and beignets served with ice cream and parsley sauce, while Montana Ale Works satisfies with artfully crafted comfort foods, including naturally raised beef and bison burgers. For evening entertainment, look no farther than the recently remodeled Rialto Bozeman. Tricked out with modern acoustics and lighting, the art deco–inspired theater hosts everything from rock concerts to movie nights. **i**



### [ THE ESSENTIALS ]

Bozeman is approximately 400 miles east of Spokane, via Interstate 90, and approximately 90 miles north of West Yellowstone, Montana, via U.S. Hwy. 191. Locals advise extra caution on the latter highway in winter, particularly during inclement weather. > Alaska Airlines serves Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport (BZN) with direct flights from Seattle and Portland; Delta passengers can reach Bozeman via connecting flights in Salt Lake City, Utah. > **Bridger Bowl Ski Area** is approximately 17 miles northeast of Bozeman, and **Big Sky Resort** is about 50 miles southwest of town. > The roads in **Yellowstone National Park** are closed from November to mid-April, with the exception of the road between the North Entrance and Northeast Entrance. During this time, the park's "over-snow" roads are open to snowmobiles, snow coaches, skis and snowshoes. Most winter tours depart from West Yellowstone. Call or visit your nearest AAA store (see page 2 for locations) or go to [AAA.com](http://AAA.com) for more on lodging, dining and transportation.



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