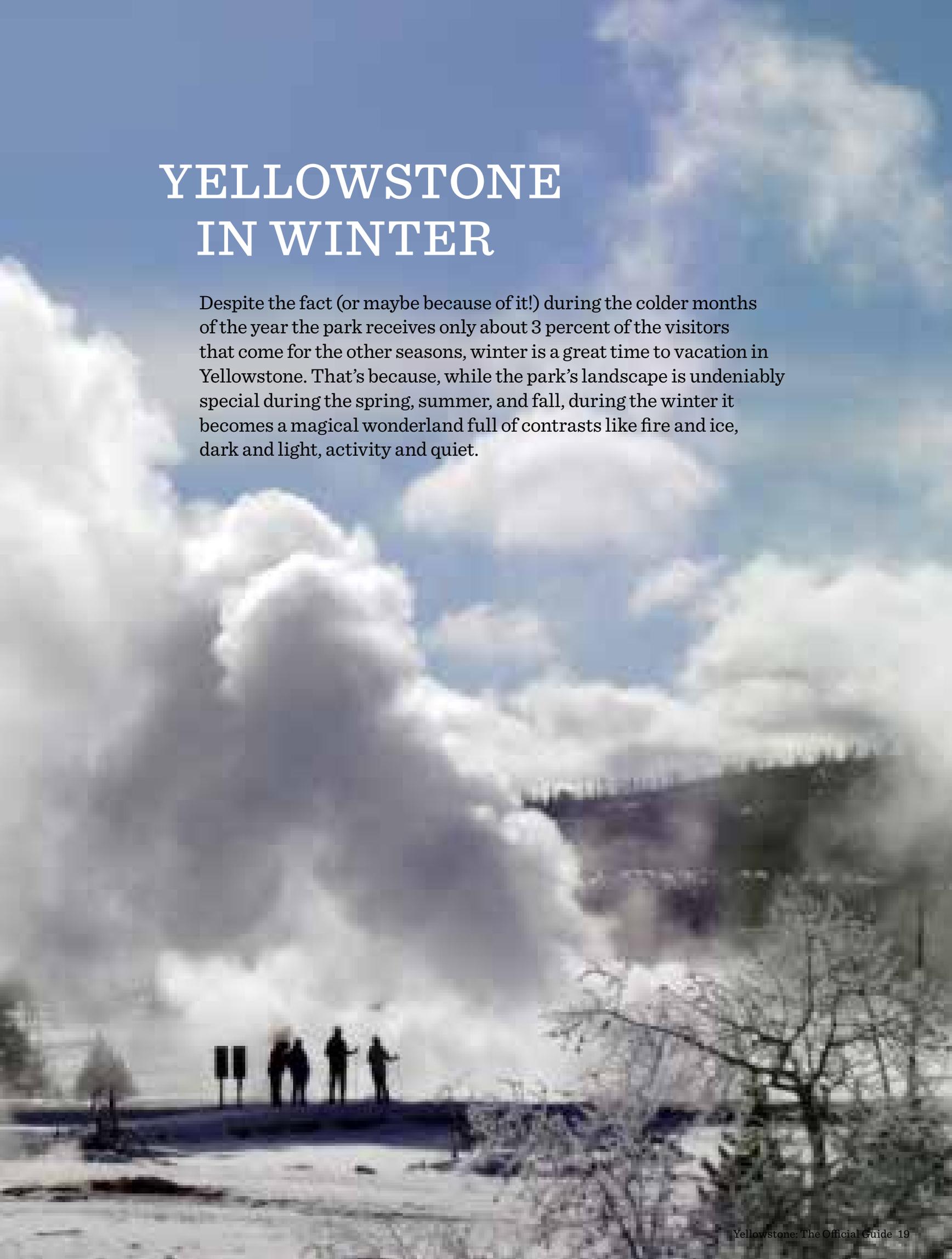


YELLOWSTONE IN WINTER

Despite the fact (or maybe because of it!) during the colder months of the year the park receives only about 3 percent of the visitors that come for the other seasons, winter is a great time to vacation in Yellowstone. That's because, while the park's landscape is undeniably special during the spring, summer, and fall, during the winter it becomes a magical wonderland full of contrasts like fire and ice, dark and light, activity and quiet.





From as early as November to as late as May, snow can cover almost all of Yellowstone, creating a stunning white canvas that is as perfect a backdrop for photographers as it is for the indomitable bison that still roam despite temperatures that generally stay below freezing and can reach 40-below (the record low of -66 degrees Fahrenheit was recorded in 1933).

In this weather, thermal features become even more dramatic as their billowing steam hangs suspended in the cold air and coats nearby plants, creating stunning “ghost trees.” In the valleys, hoar frost, or frozen dew, covers sage, trees, grass, and even bison, to create natural ice sculptures that shimmer and shine in the winter sun.

And while there is a lot to see in Yellowstone in the winter, there is even more to do. Just as the white landscape is a great canvas for those looking to get the perfect picture, it also provides great contrast for wildlife watching. Moose, bison, elk, coyotes, and wolves all stand out making them easier to spot during the winter months. In fact, thanks to their thick coats and long legs, and the fact that it is their mating season, wolves are extremely active in winter, making it an especially good time to see these elusive animals. Warmth also plays an important part in winter wildlife watching in Yellowstone as thermal-heated waters keep rivers like the Firehole from freezing, thereby attracting otters, bald eagles, and wintering trumpeter swans.

Because snow closes the majority of roads in the park to cars from late fall to early spring, Lamar Valley in the park’s Northern Range is the best and most accessible place to watch wildlife in Yellowstone. The park’s North Entrance in Gardiner, Montana is the only entrance to stay open year-round to automobile traffic, allowing visitors to drive—weather permitting—the Northeast Entrance Road from Mammoth Hot Springs to Tower-Roosevelt and on to Cooke City, where the plowing stops.

Due to the closure of other roads in the park, the only way to access the interior of Yellowstone during the winter is by snowmobile or snowcoaches. Commercially-guided trips enter the park from Mammoth Hot Springs, West Yellowstone, and the South Entrance via Flagg Ranch, and provide sightseeing, wildlife watching, photography expeditions and ski trips or shuttles to areas of the park inaccessible to wheeled vehicles. They also provide transportation to and from the Old Faithful Snow Lodge, the only overnight accommodation open in the park’s interior during the winter season.

For those looking to provide their own mode of transportation into the Yellowstone backcountry, there are over 100 miles of cross-country skiing/snowshoeing trails in the park. With ratings ranging from easiest to most difficult, these paths offer a variety of challenges to outdoor enthusiasts of all levels. Because of the extreme temperatures, unpredictable weather, changing snow conditions and possible avalanche dangers, both these pursuits—as well as any outdoor activity attended during the winter season—can be dangerous and should not be undertaken without preparation or before acquiring current trail information from a visitor center, backcountry office, or ski shop.

PHOTOS FROM TOP Whether self-propelled or machine-powered, winter activities are a great way to experience Yellowstone during the coldest months of the year. **KAREN WITHROW; MARIA BISSO; COUTESARY OF NPS; MARIA BISSO**

RIGHT Though winter provides many challenges to wildlife in Yellowstone, the park’s bison, with their thick coat and ability to plow snow with their massive shoulders so that the animals can feed on underlying grasses, are well suited to Yellowstone’s coldest season. **DON ANDREWS**