



A Great American West Road Trip Through Idaho, Montana & Wyoming National Parks



More's Creek, outside of Boise, Idaho. Photo by Diana Li

A few days before I was scheduled to fly to [Sweden](#) on a scouting trip in March, the U.S. officially suspended travel with the EU. At the time, I thought surely I would be able to travel by the end of April and most certainly by June. Holding out hope, I waited until the last second to cancel each of my flights and hotel reservations, until I had nothing left on the horizon this year. I'm fortunate to say that I can't remember the last time I didn't have an upcoming trip to look forward to, even if it was just a weekend getaway. Like most of my team, travel is not just a hobby we love or part of our jobs; it is core to our identity. To lose what I value the most in life (freedom) and what I am most passionate about (travel) shook me. Grounded for the foreseeable future, I started a new relationship with [Brooklyn](#), finally fully committed to my home. In fact, from mid-March to mid-May, while working remotely, I didn't step foot in another borough, not even Manhattan. I charted new running paths in [Williamsburg](#) and biked to Red Hook and beyond, feeling like a tourist in my own backyard. I've been grateful for lockdown and quarantine to rediscover and fall in love all over again with [New York](#), but no matter how much I love the city, I couldn't shake the itch to get out.

When I dream of travel, new, far-flung destinations are always top of mind. I have always ranked domestic travel second to international and reserved the U.S. for long weekends, weddings and bachelorette parties. But in this pandemic, traveling to upstate [New York](#) now felt exotic. While I was supposed to be in [Peru](#) the second week of June for my birthday, I began plotting my next adventure. As an avid hiker and nature lover, I decided on a three-week national parks road trip across Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, especially after the reopening of most [U.S. national parks](#) for the summer. Everything fell into place, as three of my best friends would accompany me for each of the three legs (Liz in Idaho, Ali in Montana, and Sarah in Wyoming).

On Wednesday, June 24, I arrived at JFK and eagerly boarded my Delta flight, finally feeling again like my traveling self. TSA PreCheck made absolutely no difference; I was the lone traveler at security in Terminal 4. As soon as I stepped on the plane, a flight attendant handed me a Purell sanitizer pack. No middle seats were occupied per Delta's new protocol, and every passenger was required to wear a mask during the entire flight, except while eating or drinking. All snacks and water bottles were sealed in plastic bags. I was pleasantly relieved to feel extremely safe, which gave me hope, if this was any indication of the future of air travel.

My national parks [road trip](#) was one to remember (see my itinerary below): I discovered new destinations like Sun Valley and rediscovered two of my favorite parks—[Yellowstone](#) and the Grand Tetons—with a newfound awe and appreciation. Driving a total of nearly 3,000 miles on the open road, especially after months of lockdown, was wildly freeing. We slept in a yurt, the definition of social distance, as we were at least a half mile away from the closest campers ([Galena Lodge](#)). We hiked one of the most challenging day hikes I've ever done (Pioneer Cabin Trail, [Sun Valley](#)), with a 2,500-foot elevation gain in 90 minutes. I fell in love with lupine wildflowers in peak bloom now across Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. Although our trek with llamas was canceled because our guide came down with flu-like symptoms and was awaiting his [COVID](#) test results in Bozeman, we learned the basics of fly-fishing from an expert Montanan ([Sage Lodge](#)). We saw black bears, moose, elk, bison, foxes, sheep, bald eagles, pica, marmots and so much more wildlife. We drank local Montana gin and craft beers from Beehive Basin Brewery in Big Sky and ate the best "Follow Yer Nose" barbecue in Paradise Valley. We rafted whitewater rapids on the stunning Gallatin River. I drove solo down the entirety of Beartooth Highway, which lived up to its reputation as "the most beautiful road in America." We wrote for hours tucked into the wilderness along the shores of Jenny Lake, with the Grand Tetons peaking beyond the pages of our journals.

[Contact Us](#) The Indagare team can help arrange the [American West](#) itinerary, accommodations, restaurants activities and experiences that suits your needs

and comfort level.



Indagare's Diana Li on the Elephant Back Trail in Yellowstone National Park. Courtesy Diana Li

My National Parks Road Trip Tips

You can travel safely in the U.S. with care and caution. Here's how I kept myself feeling safe:

Masks: I wore my mask at all times indoors and when I was in proximity to others outdoors. On most hikes, I kept my neck gaiter/buff down and only lifted it up to cover my nose and mouth while passing others. While wearing masks is mandated and strictly enforced by some cities, like [Jackson Hole](#), most cities and towns in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming do not mandate masks. Some servers at restaurants will ask you what your preference is, but expect many to default to not wearing a mask. It is your prerogative, if you choose, however, to ask servers or hotel staff members to wear a mask. As recently reported by Skift, the U.S. Travel Association is also currently advocating that travel business follow the recommendations of the CDC with regard to the use of masks. (My favorite masks, from New York-based textiles company [Eskayel](#), help me stay stylish and safe while traveling.)

COVID Safety Kit: In my purse and backpack at all times, I carried a toiletry bag

containing an ample supply of hand sanitizer (my favorite is [Piper Wai Cleansing Hand Gel](#)), extra clean masks and gloves (which are a must when pumping gas) and alcohol wipes. I also took 1000mg of Vitamin C each day to help boost my immune system. Plus, don't forget to pack a moisturizing hand lotion, as applying hand sanitizer regularly dries out your hands.

Go Private: For our hiking or boating/rafting trip excursions, we booked private, even though options for group experiences are still available. For accommodations, consider the [private villas, lodges and residences](#) offered by many hotels, perfect for a family that can enjoy the use of their own kitchen and private common spaces.

Stay outdoors and socially distant: Whenever possible, opt or make advance reservations for outdoor seating. Properties like [Amangani](#) will serve meals to your suite's private outdoor terrace, if you feel uncomfortable dining in the restaurant (half of the tables have already been removed for socially distant eating). If you're in [Yellowstone National Park](#), avoid peak hours at top attractions like Old Faithful. Better yet, opt for the more remote and less-trafficked Lamar Valley or Hayden Valley for the best wildlife viewing or hike Elephant Peak Trail by Fishing Bridge to avoid crowds or traffic.

Related [Our Favorite U.S. Hotels with Private Cottages or Villas](#)

How Some Hotels Are Working to Keep You Safe

Reducing Occupancy: Most top hotels are capping their reservations and running at about 80 to 85 percent capacity each night to limit the number of guests on-property.

Temperature Checks: [Four Seasons Jackson Hole](#), and Four Seasons properties around the world, are at the forefront of devising new safety measures in their Lead with Care Program, designed in partnership with Johns Hopkins Medicine International. Guests can only enter from the main entrance, and each guest's temperature is checked once a day.

Mandatory Masks by Staff: Hotels in [Jackson Hole](#) require staff to wear masks at all times, which avoids confusion and any awkwardness. In states like Montana or Idaho, the standard is more relaxed, so check with the hotel's latest [COVID](#) safety procedures before you book.

Optional Housekeeping: Housekeeping staff will not enter your room without your permission. Make sure to request new towels and toiletries, as needed.

Reservations/Limits for the Gym or Pool: Restrictions are now put in place across all hotels, but you'll find that some are stricter than others at enforcing them. At the [Four Seasons Jackson Hole](#), only one party (one room) is allowed in one of the three hot tubs at a time. At [Amangani](#), only two guests are allowed in the gym at the same time. To reserve the gym at [Caldera House](#), you must make an appointment.

Spa: Most spas are still not offering facials, but all massage treatments are available with staggered times.

Other Sanitizing Practices: Valet staff also fully sanitize all contact points on your car. If room service is delivered, the food is wrapped, dated and signed by the person who prepared it.

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Restaurant Protocols in the American West

Contactless Menus: QR-code menus are found in about a third of the restaurants I ate at across Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

Contact Tracing: Only one restaurant during my whole trip asked for my phone number so that they could contact me in case of a COVID breakout.

Takeout: On my second night at [Lone Mountain Ranch](#), their restaurant Horn & Cattle had to close due to a recent guest testing positive for COVID. The restaurant immediately closed and pivoted to offer take-out for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Lessons Learned on the Road

You don't have to leave the U.S. to witness some of the world's most incredible beauty.

As I was standing along the shore of Jenny Lake in the [Grand Tetons](#), I was reminded of the mountains of [South Island, New Zealand](#). There is a reason why [Sun Valley](#) is nicknamed "the alps of Idaho." The turquoise-colored Shoshone River and sandy mountains along the Buffalo Bill Scenic Byway transported me back to the otherworldly landscapes of southern [Bolivia](#). Throughout my road trip, I was reminded of the amount of natural beauty we have within our own borders. It is a blessing, in a way, that this lockdown has allowed us to spend more time outside (with precautions) and to take the time to slowly explore and rediscover our own country.

You can still make meaningful connections and learn from fellow Americans while you're socially distant.

I love travel mainly because I love to meet people who aren't like me. An anthropologist at heart, I am curious about what it's like to walk in someone else's shoes and to understand people on their own terms without judgment. This trip, for me, was so special because instead of foreigners, I met fellow Americans from Utah to Florida, all sharing diverse opinions and perspectives on the current landscape. We are all American, and yet we are very different. I loved learning from fellow hikers or hotel guests, even if they didn't necessarily share my point of view about mask-wearing. I am grateful to have had these eye-opening, engaging dialogues with new friends outside of the New York bubble.

Your patience and sympathy will go a long way as we're all navigating the new travel norm together.

At the start of lockdown, many hotels and restaurants unfortunately had to layoff a large portion of their staffs. As businesses reopen, practice patience and understand that the level of service we were once accustomed to may not be the same for quite some time. Hotel Directors of Sales/Marketing are also folding towels, and it's all-hands-on-deck in many cases. New staff members are in the process of being trained. Don't be surprised when you hear "it's my first day" from staffers you meet. Take it easy and give those in service a break, as most are trying their best to adjust to the new practices and new demands: At the Bozeman Budget Rental Car office, they were overbooked by 156 cars for the second weekend in July and are doing what they can to accommodate the ebbs and flows of new travelers and protocols.

In one of my new favorite books that I read during quarantine, *The Art of Travel*, philosopher Alain de Botton writes: "There are concerns that seem indecent when one is in the company of a cliff, and others to which cliffs naturally lend their assistance, their majesty encouraging the steady and high-minded in ourselves, their size teaching us to respect with good grace and an awesome humility that surpasses us." His words inspired me to get into nature and gain perspective amidst the anxiety and all that is happening in this world.

I wrote this piece, with my mask on, from my United Airlines seat, which I sanitized with copious alcohol wipes. The vivid, vast mountain landscapes, lush valleys and lodgepole pine forests that I experienced for three weeks this summer will continue to ground me long after I have landed back in [Brooklyn](#). While we may not experience the same freedom as before, and travel will not be quite the same as pre-COVID, I am resolved to continue exploring as long as I can do so safely. This pandemic has taught

us that our lives are unpredictable. We are uncertain what is to come in 2021. So for me, for now, I will continue to dream of my next escape (most likely to Badlands National Park) and relearn and redefine what travel means to me.

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Sunset at Sage Lodge, Paradise Valley, Montana

American West Road Trip Itinerary: Idaho, Montana & Wyoming

Note: Any portion of this itinerary can be adapted for a road trip in the American West.

Days 1-4: Idaho

- [Sun Valley](#)
- Stanley & Redfish Lake
- Boise

Top Hike: Pioneer Cabin Trail, Sun Valley

Highlights:

- Off-road driving in Galena
- River Run Gondola ride up to the Roundhouse for drinks overlooking all of Sun Valley
- Dinner in the garden at Cookbook in Ketchum
- Live outdoor music supporting local artists at [Limelight Hotel](#)
- Sourdough pancakes at Stanley Baking Company
- Redfish Lake
- Boise National Forest

Days 5-14: Montana

- Paradise Valley
- Yellowstone National Park
- Big Sky

Top Hike: Beehive Basin Trail, Big Sky

Highlights:

- Private luxury scenic float in a limited edition, custom wooden dory on the Yellowstone River, the longest freestone river in the Lower 48.
- Wildlife-viewing at dusk in Lamar Valley, Yellowstone
- Whitewater-rafting down the Gallatin River
- BBQ at Riverhouse Grill

Days 15-19: Wyoming

- Cody
- [Jackson Hole](#)
- Grand Teton National Park

Top Hike: Avalanche Peak Trail, Yellowstone

Highlights:

- Beartooth Highway (from Red Lodge to Cooke City)
- Buffalo Bill Scenic Byway
- Sunlight Basin

- Jenny Lake, Grand Tetons

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- Diana Li on July 15, 2020

