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Idaho/Montana/Wyoming

'Wild' West

by Carolyn Blackburn

Idaho, Montana and Wyoming are three spectacularly scenic Western destinations that remove groups from the daily grind so they can take care of whatever business is at hand. And during the "pleasure" half of the itinerary, state representatives challenge visiting delegates to disconnect from their computers, smart phones (and Facebook addictions) in order to truly connect. Howling coyotes, starry nights, galloping horses, campfires and the occasional harmonica-playing cowboy are among the back-to-basics alternatives awaiting them.

If you're a planner who has lassoed one of these three states for your next meeting, read on for eight must-experience off-session attractions and activities that'll give attendees something to Tweet about when they get home.

1. Journey to Jackson Hole

The Jackson Hole area of Wyoming, including the town of Jackson, epitomizes all a Western destination should be. This year-round playground, which is much more than a favored ski area, offers a little bit of everything. Perhaps most impressive is its position as a gateway to two of America's national parks, Grand Teton and Yellowstone.

"Many people use it as a base point," says Justin Bird, corporate director of sales and strategy for Terra Resort Group. "This is one of the few places that in a day you might see elk, osprey, coyotes and bald eagles."

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A group's chances of enjoying wildlife viewings increase if they take a tour in Grand Teton via the [Teton Science School's Wildlife Expedition](#) (888.945.3567), Bird says. Led by a professional wildlife biologist, the operator offers year-round half-day and full-day tours for groups of varying sizes. For a little added adrenaline, a handful of outfitters offer seasonal snowmobile tours into Grand Teton.

Established in 1912 to provide a winter habitat to preserve the Jackson elk herd, groups might also enjoy horse-drawn sleigh rides at the [National Elk Refuge](#) (307.733.9212).

According to Lori Hogan, spokesperson for Wyoming Travel and Tourism, scenic float trips on the Snake River with [Grand Teton Lodge Company](#) (307.543.2811) or more thrilling white-water rafting outings on the Snake with any of a number of local outfitters are always a hit with groups during the warmer months.

And for horseback riding with cowboys alongside cattle, planners should call on [Teton Village Trail Rides](#) (307.733.2674).

2. Yellowstone Over Yonder

Geysers, waterfalls, hot springs and wildlife galore places Yellowstone National Park among the most vibrant national parks in the country. The place is a must-visit for groups convening in places like Jackson Hole and Cody, Wyo.

One of the best ways to get up close and personal with the park's majesty is to book a tour with [Xanterra Parks & Resorts](#) (307.344.7901).

"We offer a variety of experiences for groups in the park," says Rick Hoeninghausen, director of sales and marketing for the company's Yellowstone branch, explaining there are a number of vehicles for groups of different sizes, from vintage yellow buses with rollback tops for about a dozen people to 40-seat buses.

Depending on the makeup of the group, Xanterra will arrange anything from relaxed sightseeing tours to outings that include an activity.

"If it's a particularly active group, for example, they can go on a hike," he says, adding that in the winter, snow coaches are available to transport the group, and sightseeing tours can include cross-country skiing or snowshoeing.

While there are packages in place via Xanterra, such as the Trail of the Wolf tour, Hoeninghausen says group outings are also customizable.

"We have everything from horseback riding to a fly-fishing guide service to boat tours," he adds, citing the 47-person *Lake Queen* passenger boat that explores Yellowstone Lake for an hour tour.

3. Glorious Glacier National Park

On a lucky day, sightings of moose, bald eagles, big horn sheep and black bears might be in the cards at Montana's

Glacier National Park, another renowned natural wonder of the U.S.

[Glacier Park Inc.](#) (406.892.2525) is a good place for planners to start. This concessioner has a dedicated group tour department that works with companies and organizations requiring multiple rooms, meals, activities and buses, according to Alicia Thompson, director of marketing and business relations for Glacier Park Inc.

"We will provide personal service from start to finish, allowing you to plan a truly memorable event for your attendees," she says, adding that taking a scenic and interpretive Red Jammer Bus Tour has been called the "most relaxing and enjoyable way to experience Glacier National Park."

From one of these 17-passenger, convertible touring sedans, which are restored vintage classics from the 1930s, attendees will marvel at the park's views for either a half-day or full-day tour.

Other opportunities available in the park, Thompson says, include taking a boat cruise on one of three lakes, horseback riding, rafting in West Glacier, fly-fishing and enjoying a private cowboy cookout at Glacier Park Lodge.

4. Take Me to the River

Another memorable option for groups meeting in one of these Western states is a river rafting trip.

"Guests say they appreciate being outside and rediscovering natural surroundings," says Kristi Reif, spokesperson for [O.A.R.S.](#) (209.736.4677), a rafting outfitter that arranges multiday outings on various portions of Idaho's Salmon River: the lower, main and middle fork. "The ultimate trip combines all three for up to 17 days."

When planners book trips with O.A.R.S., Reif says the sky's the limit. Gourmet trips feature a professional chef who prepares high-end cuisine and a sommelier for wine pairings, and fishing trips could include a professional instructor to help with fly-fishing. While rafting is inherently a team-building event, planners could also bring along a facilitator for workshops and beach activities like volleyball and tug-of-war.

[Geyser Whitewater Expeditions](#) (800.914.9031) is a great way to experience Montana's rivers. From May through September, a five-hour rafting adventure on Montana's Gallatin River—where the film *A River Runs Through It* was shot—accommodates up to 150 people and includes a barbecue and transportation to and from Big Sky.

"We have several sections of river we can run, from mild to wild," says Eric Becker, the company's owner. "We do many team-building trips, with activities including raft races."

Geyser Whitewater Expeditions was the company chosen to take first lady Michelle Obama and her family rafting last August.

"The whole family loved it and talked about it for days," Becker says.

5. Home on the Range

For an authentic cowboy experience complete with cattle-herding, horseback riding, barbecues and cooking s'mores over a campfire, planners should check out the region's dude and guest ranches (www.idahodra.com; www.montanadra.com; www.wyomingdra.com).

One, located right outside Billings, Mont., is called the [Western Romance Company](#) (406.348.2048), which doesn't offer overnight accommodations but welcomes groups of up to 50 people from nearby hotels for daytime events.

"We sell time, which is the smells, people, horses, campfires and sagebrush, and God sells the space, where you'll find passion in life," says owner Happy Pappy, explaining the ranch's name isn't about traditional romance but rather marrying people to their hidden passions.

Here, groups will get off the fast track and work together as a team, he says. Activities include learning how to ride horses, cattle herding, horseshoe throwing and covered-wagon driving.

In Laramie, Wyo., the [Vee Bar Guest Ranch](#) (307.745.7036) is a year-round retreat for groups of 18 to 30 people. According to Manager Kari Kilmer, most corporate groups book the ranch between September and May.

"Activities available throughout the year are dependent on the weather," she says, citing horseback riding from May 1 to Sept. 30; fishing, river tubing, trap shooting, hiking and cattle work during the summer; and snowmobiling, snowshoeing, and downhill and cross-country skiing during the winter.

"Some of the evening entertainment includes a wagon ride, a campout, music and dancing," Kilmer says.

6. Winter Wonderland

There are a number of meetings-friendly ski areas throughout the West that serve as perfect spots for both business and incentive groups during the winter months.

Created in 1936, Idaho's Sun Valley Resort is the country's first destination ski resort. It accommodates groups of up to 2,000 people, according to Ramona Duke, spokesperson for the Sun Valley/Ketchum CVB.

Aside from the expected skiing, snowboarding, snowshoeing, snowmobiling and ice-skating, area activities include

snowman-building and downhill tubing, which make for great team-building events; an outdoor winter concert series in downtown Ketchum; and fly-fishing in Big Wood River via [Silver Creek Outfitters](#) (208.726.5282) or [Ketchum On the Fly](#) (208.726.7572).

"People don't think to fish during the winter, but it's becoming increasingly popular," Duke says.

Another unique opportunity for smaller groups is back-country skiing or snowshoeing with [Sun Valley Trekking](#) (208.788.1966).

"Guides will take the group to a yurt, where they'll have a meal and spend the night," Duke says.

[Montana's Big Sky Resort](#) (800.548.4487) is another premier ski destination that caters to groups year-round.

While the resort offers special opportunities like dog-sledding and zip lining, for active skiers in the group, says Dax Schieffer, spokesperson for Big Sky Resort, there really isn't a better way to network and work together than exploring the mountain.

"Just as work can be done on the golf course in the summer, the high-speed quads promote conversation and ideas while enjoying the outdoors," he says, adding that Big Sky's ski school can customize an easy race course that gives groups the opportunity to challenge one another in a fun atmosphere.

Big Sky's sleigh ride experience can be wonderful for midsize groups, Schieffer adds.

"In essence, a group of between 12 and 20 people is taken to a remote location by horse-drawn sleds, then experiences a private dinner that is very unique," he says.

7. Up, up and away

Zip lining, hang gliding and hot-air ballooning are some of the exhilarating ways groups can take flight in the West.

In Big Sky, groups can fly above their surroundings for an exhilarating and memorable zip line team-building adventure year-round.

"It is suited for all levels of fitness; after all, it is the gravity doing most of the work," Schieffer says. "It's an amazing experience to fly over the treetops and a great time to work on skills such as communication and trust within the team."

In the summer, Big Sky Resort also has a high ropes course that incorporates team skills such as strategy, planning and communication.

Near Sheridan, Wyo., according to Penny Becker, executive director at Sheridan Travel and Tourism, groups can either watch hang gliders jump off the Sand Turn area halfway up Big Horn Mountain or get in the game by booking professional instructor Johann Nield for a lesson.

"It's a wonderful option to work with this man," she says. "He does lessons all summer long for two to five people at a time, and you can fly solo or with him in tandem."

Lewiston, Idaho-based Adventurist Air (208.413.1324) provides hot-air ballooning packages for groups in the Historic Lewis and Clark Valley and Hells Canyon, the deepest gorge in North America.

According to James Knight, president and founder of the outfitter, gourmet catering and photography are available.

"One of the most entertaining parts of the morning is balloon setup," he says. "Members will be taught how to effectively prepare a balloon for inflation and will work together to help inflate a balloon envelope large enough to hold 300 million triple-A batteries."

8. Hit the Links

Sheridan Travel and Tourism's Becker says although golf isn't top of mind when considering holding a meeting in Western states such as Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, they do boast some terrific courses.

Sheridan, with 72 holes, is Wyoming's golf capital, and it is home to the award-winning [Powder Horn Golf Club](#) (307.674.9545). The course features a lovely on-site clubhouse for events and a staff professional for group lessons.

The celebrated [Idaho Golf Trail](#) (208.334.2470) includes popular links such as Coeur d'Alene Resort Golf Course and Osprey Meadows Golf Course at Tamarack Resort.

In Anaconda, Mont., is the Jack Nicklaus-designed [Old Works Golf Course](#) (406.563.5989). According to Daniel Kane, director of golf, the course features great playing surfaces, a 30-acre practice facility for group instruction and a clubhouse for events.

Freelancer Carolyn Blackburn has visited dozens of our national parks. While she doesn't like to play favorites, Yellowstone and Glacier are in her top 10.