Wyoming’s Cultural Geology Guide Takes Visitors Back in Time

Wyoming is a state with tremendous and varied geological resources. These resources have also contributed to our cultural identity, dating back to the days of early human occupation, about 12,000 years ago. Rock formations served as canyons for spiritual railroads to travel along, cradling sediments, and minerals have led to the establishment of historic mining towns.

The Origin of Landscape: A Guide in Wyoming’s Cultural Geology allows us to see and virtually explore the nexus between geological phenomena, landscapes, and cultural beginnings.

This intelligent travel program includes a Wyoming State Geosociety website with a interactive map, human stories, photos, and videos that each site appears on the map. The trail includes scientific experts discussing the cultural and geologic significance of each site featured on the tour.

Funding for this program was provided by the Wyoming Cultural Trust Fund.

www.wsgs.wyo.gov

The Bearsoot Scenic Byway

Straddling the border between Wyoming and Montana is the Bearsoot Scenic Byway, an auto route over one of the most formidable obstacles to modern transportation in North America. The Bearsoot Pass is the route of the mountain highway, 70½ miles long, and of the Pompey glaciation. In 1882, Gen. Sheridan crossed the plains where the highway follows fully.

American Indians of Yellowstone

The volcanic resources of Yellowstone have influenced American Indian cultures for thousands of years. Elders have described the geothermal hot springs as spiritually significant, and the use of obsidian derived from aca is a symbol of the origins of the Native American tradition. Recent discoveries also suggest that people may have lived year-round in elevated areas. Whitewater pine trees, along with mountain sheep and deer, may have been an important high elevation food resource for early peoples.

Pumpkin Buttes and Uranium

These buttes contain uranium created from the ash of volcanic eruptions, some 50 million years ago. This is the site where in 1881, the first discovery of uranium was made in a Wyoming sedimentary deposit. Uranium deposits in Wyoming have much economic potential, but are not currently mined. Uranium has been identified at many sites around the United States, and the resource is still considered to be an important for the national energy needs. Looking out at the mountains, one can see the volcanic resources of Yellowstone have influenced American Indian cultures for thousands of years.

The Beartooth Scenic Byway

Rising from the Wyoming plains is a rocky oasis of giant mountains, a destination hot spot by visitors and tourists. Geologist Nelson Darton in 1910 named the granite complex “the Beartooth Scenic Byway.” The Beartooth Scenic Byway is one of the most rugged obstacles to modern transportation in North America.

The Oregon/California Trail

The Oregon/California Trail, an over 2,000-mile long route from Missouri to Oregon, was the migration of nearly 400,000 early pioneers and farmers, as well as gold miners, traders, and businesses to the West Coast in the 1840s and 1850s. The trail followed many natural travel corridors, including river valleys and mountain passes. The route was graded with #6 ax handles and wooden timbers, and the Oregon Trail was considered to be the most important trade route in the country.

White Mountain Petroglyphs

Evidence of native people who inhabited the Green River Basin from about 1,200 to 1,500 years ago to the historic era, can be seen in the soft sandstone of the Wind River Mountains. Petroglyphs were deposited by hundreds of animals and people, from horse and bear to human and war. This site was of great spiritual significance to early peoples who created the rock art.

Beartopper Point

Beartopper Point was named for its location near the 19th century for Beartopper, a wandering wild horse that moved among the mountains to trade goods. The narrow ridge on which an observatory is situated also forms a bottleneck on the route of the largest large mammal migration corridor in the lower 48 states. Archaeological evidence indicates that prehistoric peoples have used this route for at least 7,000 years. Today, near Beartopper, the route includes a wildlife corridor or bridge over the highway. A project designed and constructed by the Wyoming Department of Transportation.

The Oregon-California Truth

The Oregon-California Trail is an over 2,000-mile long route from Missouri to Oregon, which passed through most of Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, and Wyoming, covering a total of 755 miles. The trail was used by nearly 400,000 people who migrated west during the mid-19th century. The route was graded with #6 ax handles and wooden timbers, and the Oregon Trail was considered to be the most important trade route in the country.

Pincushion Antilocone

The Pincushion Antilocone and Jenaus field are truly important for the nation’s energy needs. Looking out at the upland landscapes, where sand glistens in the sun, it is hard to believe that this geologic area included one of the largest gas fields in the world. When drilling began in the late 1990s, this area had provided nearly 40 million barrels of crude oil and natural gas to the nation.

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Yellowstone

• Next Stop! • Bearsoot Scenic Byway • American Indians/ Yellowstone Places

Visits by phone are scheduled to access the video vignettes featured on the map and listed below.

Videograms

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1847 – Around 12,000 to 11,000 years ago, evidence indicates American Indians inhabited the area known today as Wyoming. A fire hearth dating to 2,950 B.C. was found at Rigler near Laramie, suggesting early human presence in the area.

1851 – The first recorded sale of oil. Oil Mountain Springs, 20 miles southeast of Laramie, was used (12,000 years ago) for stone quarrying by the Fremont people. The presence of tools made from Spanish Diggings quartzites and cherts identified in Yellowstone, including several in Norris Geyser Basin—the location of the most prolific coal fields in the nation—suggests the area was used for stone quarrying by early human inhabitants.

1852 – The Robert Stuart expedition, returning from the Pacific Coast, became the first known overland party to cross the Continental Divide. The discovery led to the formal migration use of the Southern Overland Trail. The Big Horn Expedition of 1851 led by Dr. M. E. McCallum.

1854 – The Southern Overland Trail was named. The trail began moving to the west in 1856 and, by 1860, it was the main route to the Pacific Coast. The trail was also used by prospectors seeking gold and silver.

1857 – The first security bank in Wyoming opened in Laramie. The bank was established by William B. Bales, a former gold miner from California.

1858 – The Union Pacific Railroad began construction on the first Transcontinental Railroad in 1865. It was designed to use for their annual migrations (Sublette County).

1867 – The first Transcontinental Railroad was completed, linking the East and West Coasts of the United States.

1868 – The first documented gold strike in Wyoming was near the Bighorn Mountains. This discovery led to the formal migration use of the Northern Overland Trail.

1871 – The first gold rush in Wyoming occurred in the Bighorn Mountains. The discovery led to the formal migration use of the Northern Overland Trail.

1872 – The first oil well in Wyoming was drilled at Oil Mountain Springs near Laramie.

1877 – The first transcontinental railroad reached Cheyenne.

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1879 – The first transcontinental railroad reached Cheyenne.

1903 – The first transcontinental railroad reached Cheyenne.

1937 – A large collection of local fossils. The exhibit includes artifacts on the early culture of Jackson Hole, Grand Teton National Park, and Guernsey. The museum also offers dioramas of dinosaurs in their prehistoric environment. (1116 Big Horn Dr., Cheyenne, WY, 307-754-9481)

1957 – A large collection of local fossils. The exhibit includes artifacts on the early culture of Jackson Hole, Grand Teton National Park, and Guernsey. The museum also offers dioramas of dinosaurs in their prehistoric environment. (1116 Big Horn Dr., Cheyenne, WY, 307-754-9481)

1981 – The first transcontinental railroad reached Cheyenne.

1987 – The first transcontinental railroad reached Cheyenne.

1995 – The first transcontinental railroad reached Cheyenne.

2002 – The first transcontinental railroad reached Cheyenne.

2012 – The first transcontinental railroad reached Cheyenne.

2016 – The first transcontinental railroad reached Cheyenne.

2017 – The first transcontinental railroad reached Cheyenne.

2018 – The first transcontinental railroad reached Cheyenne.

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