

Center wows Teton's visitors

Exhibits explain park's history, habitat while highlighting great views

By Gazette News Services

JACKSON - This is not your typical visitor center.

Grand Teton National Park's Craig Thomas Discovery and Visitor Center is a 22,000-square-foot building with a jagged roof line mimicking the peaks rising above it. It opened in August 2007 and is, two years later, an attraction all by itself.

"We like to stop here when we have guests. It gives a broad overview of the history and the beauty of the park," said Tamara Harmon of Jackson. She brought her 7-year-old son, Pace, and his grandparents, visiting from Utah, to the center early this month after the park's road had opened but when much of its trails were still muddy and covered with snow.

"It was far more than we expected: the architecture, the beauty of the exhibits, let alone everything it encompasses. I think it's its own little center of attraction," Harmon said.

The former visitor center was built in 1961 to accommodate an average of 1.5 million visitors per year. Now, the park averages nearly 4 million. Officials wanted something that showed people's inherent connection to nature and that highlighted the importance of protecting it. The result was the \$21.6 million center, funded by an \$8 million congressional appropriation and \$13.6 million in private gifts. The model has become an example for other centers across the country.

As a public affairs officer for the park, Jackie Skaggs often leads foreign dignitaries or groups through the center's exhibits.

"They are awestruck when they walk through that door. They become almost childlike," Skaggs said. "They mutter things in their native tongue that you don't know what they are saying."

Exhibits focus on themes of people, place and preservation.

Visitors learn about the Native Americans who already lived on the land, the pioneers who came to settle on it and the mountaineers who first looked upward and decided they had to climb.

"Came up the south side, or the side with the thousand thicknesses of hell. My knees are still shaking," reads an excerpt from the climbing register of July 9, 1931, after Glenn Exum and Paul Petzot made the first ascent up the Exum Ridge.

An entire wall, all 30 feet of it, is devoted to the history of mountaineering. Who was the first to scale the Grand Teton? You won't find out here, but you will learn about the two men who each made the claim.

Inside, it's impossible to forget where you are. There's a topographical map of the entire valley. Wide beams of Douglas fir seem to bring in the outside forest.

And of course there is the view: an entire glass wall devoted to the skyline, the Tetons rising straight up from the ground in front of you.



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if you go

The Craig Thomas Discovery and Visitor Center is open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. through May 31 and 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. June 1 to Sept. 7. It is 12 miles north of Jackson on Teton Park Road and is free. Call 307-739-3399 for information.

"The grand lift of the Tetons is more than a mechanistic fold and faulting of the earth's crust; It becomes a primal gesture of the earth beneath a greater sky," said Ansel Adams in 1950. You can sit beneath this inscription in the center and see for yourself that it is true.

Each exhibit focuses on appreciating all that natural parks were created to protect. Here, you can touch the fur of all of the park's biggest animals. You can walk on a burning forest floor. You can hear the songs of birds and the whispers of a running river.

Visitors can do as 10-year-old Piper Fajardo-Anstine did and track a grizzly bear with paw prints the size of basketballs.

"It's cool. I didn't know all these animals were native to Wyoming," said Piper of Denver. "I never really paid attention to Wyoming before."

Piper came to Jackson with her mother and a gaggle of her cousins to compete in a powwow. With a couple of hours to kill, Renee Fajardo-Anstine brought the kids to the center.

She loves to take the kids to national-park visitor centers across the country because of their mix of education and wonder. This center is among the best she's seen.

"It's beautiful. The only one I've seen this cool is the Lewis and Clark one in Nebraska."

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