

Teacher in chief

Obama uses Yellowstone visit as a teachable moment for daughters.



President Obama and his wife, Michelle, and daughters Malia, 11, and Sasha, 8, watch the Old Faithful geyser Saturday in Yellowstone National Park. AP PHOTO / ALEX BRANDON

*By Cory Hatch and the Associated Press
August 19, 2009*

The splendor of America's first national park served as more than a backdrop for photographs of the first family Saturday, as President Obama used a brief tour to Yellowstone to educate his children about geysers, lodgepole pine trees and bison chips.

The visit was part of a three-day, four-state swing through the West that included a town hall meeting in Belgrade, Mont., a whitewater rafting trip in Big Sky, Mont., fly-fishing lessons on the Gallatin River and visits to Grand Junction, Colo., Grand Canyon National Park and Phoenix.

The Obama family spent about an hour touring Black Sand Basin and Old Faithful with Park Superintendent Suzanne Lewis and the park's West District interpretive ranger, Katy Duffy.

"We walked as a big group," said Duffy. "Sometimes I was right next to him; sometimes I was with Mrs. Obama and the kids."

According to Duffy, Obama's reputation for inquisitiveness is well-earned.

"He was curious about every aspect," she said. "He was excited about how beautiful thermal features were."

At one point, Obama asked Lewis if the area around the geyser had experienced a forest fire. Lewis told the President about the Yellowstone fires of 1988, which burned up to the developed area around Old Faithful.

Obama then asked Duffy if the park had replanted lodgepole pine trees in the area.

"I explained about serotinous cones [cones that open and disperse their seeds when exposed to high temperatures], and he was really jazzed about it," she said. "He was excited about learning. ... that adaptation to fire."

Obama then stopped and relayed the information to Sasha and Malia.

"He explained it perfectly," Duffy said. "He wanted the kids to learn as well as learning himself."

At Black Sand Basin, Duffy explained to the president how people can get a rough idea of the temperatures of the thermal features by looking at the color of the microbes at the edges.

"If it's really hot, you won't see any microbes with color," she said. "Chlorophyll can't tolerate heat higher than 167 degrees Fahrenheit."

"I said the tiny bubbles [in the water] are super heated," Duffy continued. "He really picked up on that.

The president said to Sasha and Malia, "Did you hear that? That's how hot it is. It's really hot," Duffy reported.

Duffy also pointed out how bison droppings gradually turn into little tussocks of grass around the geyser basin.

"You could see the light go on when he saw that too," she said.

As for Sasha and Malia, "they were very, very polite and interested the whole time," Duffy said. "I think it was Malia who said, 'Oh, it stinks.' I explained that the hot water leaches sulfur from rock, and the microbes can work on the sulfur and release hydrogen sulfide, which smells like rotten eggs."

During the geyser tour, Obama recalled a trip to Yellowstone with his mother and his grandmother when he was 11 years old.

"He told about trying to get a picture of a bison and he got closer than he should be," Duffy said. "His mother and his grandmother were not happy. Somebody else got closer and almost got charged. That left a lasting impression on his mind. You could see it coming back in his mind, the fun of that visit."

Duffy, who has also given tours to such dignitaries as former first lady Laura Bush, and former Interior Secretaries Gale Norton and Dirk Kempthorne, called the opportunity to act as tour guide for the first family "an honor."

"The whole experience was an incredible privilege," she said. "I was pretty nervous. The moment he got out of the limo with that big smile, I felt much more comfortable. I was impressed with how caring and kind and curious they all were. They were curious about everything and very comfortable to be with."

The previous day, Duffy accompanied Lewis and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar on a 2.5-mile evening bike ride from Old Faithful to Morning Glory Pool and back.

"Mr. Salazar was obviously taking it all in," she said. "He was asking very carefully thought-out questions. They weren't casual questions. They were thoughtful, analytical questions."

Obama's helicopter entourage started leaving Big Sky between 9 and 10 a.m. Saturday, arriving at Old Faithful with his family just before noon. National Park Service and Secret Service personnel closed off the northern portion of the geyser basin.

There was a significant security presence, including snipers on the roof of the Old Faithful Inn. Earlier in the day, witnesses saw Secret Service agents checking under the boardwalk with mirrors, then pausing to take pictures of the erupting geyser with their cell phones.

The crowd contained at least one protester who booed the president during his 25-minute visit to the geyser. Obama's supporters in the crowd drowned out the man's jeers with cheering.

After the geyser erupted, the president and his family spent roughly an hour at the park, including a stop for ice cream, before taking Marine One to the airport in West Yellowstone, Mont., where they departed in Air Force One.

James Harris, who was in the Old Faithful crowd during the president's visit, didn't know Obama was coming to the park. "It was a nice surprise," he said. "It was a unique experience to see him that close."

Stuermer Werner, a visitor from Aschaffenburg, Germany, waited three hours to see Obama and his family.

"It was really exciting to see him," Werner said. "The Germans are very fond of the president."

Patricia Dowd, Yellowstone program manager for the National Parks Conservation Association, said having Obama visit Yellowstone so early in his first term is a good sign that the president will take the problems of national parks seriously.

“Overall, we’re really pleased that Obama and his family decided to visit Yellowstone National Park,” she said. “We hope it allowed him to learn the importance that national parks play in their local communities and the educational opportunities that national parks provide.”