

Three Weeks Out West: Yellowstone, Tetons, Moab & the Grand Canyon (Denver Loop, July 2026)

A wow-factor road trip built around park lodges, big viewpoints, moderate hikes, one proper steakhouse, plenty of burgers, and enough adrenaline (rafting and a slickrock Hummer ride) to keep two teenagers off their phones. Honest note up front: park lodges in July sell out almost a year ahead and many price above your \$180 to \$220 nightly target. This plan tells you exactly where to splurge, where to save, and what to book this week.

o) Your Trip at a Glance (Key Data)

Item	Detail
Dates	3 weeks in July 2026 (sample: depart Denver Sat July 11, return Sat Aug 1)
Group	2 adults + 2 teenagers (assumed U.S. residents)
Lodging budget	\$180 to \$220 per night (see honest reality note in section 1b)
Pace	2 to 3 nights per base, minimal one-night stops, teens hate long car days
Must-haves	Park lodges + hotels (no tent camping), big viewpoints, moderate hikes, 1 active adventure (rafting or a Moab adventure), good burgers, 1 nice steakhouse
Start / End	Denver (rental car / your own vehicle), full loop
Special requests	Keep the teens engaged: movement, action, wow-factor

1) At a Glance

Leg	Nights	Base / Lodging	Why
Denver → Jackson, WY	1	Hotel in Jackson	Break the long drive, fun mountain town
Grand Teton NP	2	Jackson Lake Lodge	Tetons in your window, rafting, easy hikes
Yellowstone NP	3	Old Faithful Inn + 1 night Canyon area	Geysers, wildlife, the park's icon

Leg	Nights	Base / Lodging	Why
Drive south	1	Hotel (Salt Lake City or Green River)	Long transfer day, broken in two
Moab, UT	3	Hyatt Place Moab (or alternatives)	Arches, Canyonlands, rafting, Hummer thrills
Grand Canyon South Rim	2	Maswik Lodge (in-park)	The big one, sunrise/sunset over the rim
Drive back toward Denver	2	Hotels (Durango + Salida/Buena Vista)	Scenic San Juans, optional rafting
Denver	1	Airport-area hotel	Buffer before flight home

Total: about 15 to 16 lodging nights of a 20 to 21 night trip, with the rest being your existing transfer-night hotels. Driving is paced so no single day exceeds roughly 5.5 hours behind the wheel.

💡 Buy ONE **America the Beautiful Annual Pass** for \$80 instead of paying entry at each park. The Resident Annual Pass for US citizens and residents costs \$80.00, and it covers entrance fees and standard amenity (day-use) fees at lands managed by the National Park Service. With \$35-per-vehicle fees at four parks plus Canyonlands, it pays for itself on day one.

1b) Recommendation & Best Alternative

Recommended plan (above): A single clockwise loop that front-loads the cooler mountains (Tetons/Yellowstone) and saves the desert (Moab/Grand Canyon) for the back half, returning through Colorado's San Juan Mountains. It honours your "2 to 3 nights per base" wish, mixes iconic park lodges with comfortable mid-range hotels, and gives the teens two standout adventures (Moab rafting and a Hummer safari) plus the option of more rafting on the way home.

Reasons: Park lodges (Old Faithful Inn, Jackson Lake Lodge) are bucket-list experiences that cost more but deliver the "we slept inside the park" magic. Moab is the teen highlight. The loop avoids backtracking and keeps drive days humane.

Honest budget reality: Your \$180 to \$220 nightly target is realistic for the Jackson, Salt Lake, Moab and Colorado hotels, but **in-park park lodges in peak July routinely run higher** (often \$300 to \$600+ for the famous historic rooms). To respect both your "park lodge" wish and your budget, this plan books the *value* room categories in-park (Maswik at the Grand Canyon, a standard room or cottage at the park lodges) and balances them against cheaper gateway-town hotels so your trip *average* lands close to target.

Best alternative (slower, cheaper): Drop Yellowstone's third night and the Grand Canyon, and do a tighter "Tetons + Yellowstone + Moab" 16-day loop. Fewer miles, more in-park lodge nights, and you stay closer to budget because you avoid the long southern Arizona leg. You lose the Grand Canyon, though, which for a first big Western trip is a hard thing to skip.

1c) Book Now (the stuff that sells out)

What	By when	Where / Link
Jackson Lake Lodge (Grand Teton) room/cottage	ASAP, books on a 12-month rolling basis	gtlc.com → book widget, or call 307-543-3100
Old Faithful Inn (Yellowstone)	ASAP, "most requested lodging facility in the park"	yellowstonenationalparklodges.com, or call 307-344-7311
Canyon Lodge (Yellowstone, 1 night)	ASAP	yellowstonenationalparklodges.com
Maswik Lodge (Grand Canyon South Rim)	ASAP	grandcanyonlodges.com, or call reservations
Hyatt Place Moab (3 nights)	3 to 6 months out	hyatt.com (Hyatt Place Moab)
Moab rafting , AVA Fisher Towers Half-Day	1 to 3 months out	coloradorafting.net/trips/fisher-towers-half-day
Hells Revenge Hummer Safari (Moab)	1 to 3 months out (sells out)	moabadventurecenter.com
Mural Room steakhouse-style dinner (Jackson Lake Lodge)	1 to 2 months out	Mural Room dining line 307-543-3463 (or main reservations 307-543-3100)
America the Beautiful Pass (\$80)	Before you leave (digital is instant)	recreation.gov/pass

💡 At Jackson Lake Lodge there's a real saver: up to 20% off 4 or more nights. If you can shuffle to four nights across the Teton/Yellowstone region under one GTLC booking, it's worth pricing. The lodge's own page currently advertises this **up to 20% off 4 or more nights** offer.

2) Day-by-Day Plan

Day 1 (Sat), Denver → Jackson, WY (drive ~7.5 hrs, split it)

Pick up the car, point north. This is your longest single transfer; consider an overnight stop in Rock Springs or Pinedale, WY to cut it. Overnight in **Jackson**, a walkable Western town with a buzzing town square.

- 💡 Burger fix #1: Jackson's town square has several good burger spots; grab one and let the teens browse the antler-arch park.
- Plan B (weather/late arrival):** Just go straight to bed and start fresh; the Tetons aren't going anywhere.

Day 2 (Sun), Into Grand Teton NP, settle at Jackson Lake Lodge (2 nights)

Drive north into the park (entrance \$35/vehicle, covered by your pass). Check into **Jackson Lake Lodge**, a full-service historic eco-hotel located in the heart of Grand Teton National Park, with 385 rooms including suites, main lodge hotel rooms and quiet cottages. The lobby's 60-foot floor-to-ceiling windows frame Jackson Lake and the Teton Range. Note for the teens: there are no TVs in the rooms and the rooms are cooled by fans with no electric air conditioning (a big TV lives in the Blue Heron Lounge).

- Easy leg-stretcher: **Lunch Tree Hill**, the closest hike to the lodge, a short paved trail with interpretive signs leading to the top of a hill overlooking Willow Flats and the Teton Range (Easy).
- 💡 **Steakhouse dinner** option #1: the lodge's **Mural Room**, fine dining with a view, where some say the panoramic views of the Teton Range are the finest in any National Park.
Reservation phone (verified on gtlc.com): the Mural Room's own dining reservation line is **307-543-3463**; if you can't get through, the lodge's main reservations line is **307-543-3100**.
(See section 1b alternative steakhouse if you'd rather keep this for Moab.)

Day 3 (Mon), Grand Teton: rafting + viewpoints

Morning **scenic float on the Snake River** (offered right from the lodge as a Scenic River Rafting activity), gentle, gorgeous, great for teens who want to be on the water without big whitewater.

Afternoon: drive to **Jenny Lake**, take the shuttle boat across, hike to **Hidden Falls / Inspiration Point** (moderate), and hit the **Snake River Overlook** (the classic Ansel Adams view) on the way back.

- 💡 Casual dinner: the lodge's **Pioneer Grill**, a 1950s-style diner serving breakfast, lunch and dinner, with generous classic American food including buffalo burgers and pan-seared rainbow trout. Burger fix #2, sorted.
- **Plan B (rain/smoke):** Swap the float for the Craig Thomas Discovery & Visitor Center exhibits, then drive the scenic loop with stops at sheltered overlooks.

Day 4 (Tue), North to Yellowstone, Old Faithful Inn (2 nights here, 3 in park)

Short, scenic drive north into Yellowstone. Check into the legendary **Old Faithful Inn**, a national historic landmark and the most requested lodging facility in the park, built in 1903-1904 with local logs and stone, one of the largest log-style structures in the world. Heads-up for the family: there is no internet service at Old Faithful Inn, and no air conditioning, TV or radio in the rooms.

- Watch an **Old Faithful** eruption from the boardwalk, then walk the **Upper Geyser Basin** (mostly flat, easy, endless geysers, pure wow factor).
- 💡 Dinner in the historic **Old Faithful Inn Dining Room** under that soaring log lobby; book ahead at the front desk.
- **Plan B (afternoon thunderstorms, common in July):** Geyser basins are exposed, duck into the Inn's lobby balconies and the Visitor Education Center until it passes.

Day 5 (Wed), Yellowstone's greatest hits (geysers + Grand Prismatic)

Full day: **Midway Geyser Basin** for the **Grand Prismatic Spring** (and the short uphill **Fairy Falls / Grand Prismatic Overlook** trail for the famous aerial-style view, moderate, big payoff), then **Biscuit/Black Sand basins**.

- 💡 Teens love the boardwalk colors more than they'll admit, challenge them to photograph the most surreal pool. Quick lunch at the **Bear Paw Deli** for quick-service sandwiches, salads and ice cream treats.
- **Plan B:** If crowds/heat are brutal, go early (before 9am) and save the afternoon for the cool Firehole Lake Drive.

Day 6 (Thu), Move to Canyon area (1 night), wildlife + waterfalls

Drive north to the **Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone** (Artist Point, Lower Falls) and overnight at **Canyon Lodge**. En route, the **Hayden Valley** is prime wildlife: bison herds, often elk, sometimes bears from a safe distance.

- 💡 Dawn or dusk is when Hayden Valley comes alive, set an early alarm one morning, the teens will forgive you when a bison herd crosses the road.
- **Plan B:** Wildlife is weather-independent, but if storms roll in, the canyon overlooks are quick roadside stops you can do between showers.

Day 7 (Fri), Yellowstone north loop → drive toward Salt Lake City (1 transfer night)

Morning at **Mammoth Hot Springs** terraces, then begin the long southwest drive. Break it with an overnight near **Salt Lake City** (good hotels in your budget, a real bed with A/C and Wi-Fi the teens will weep with joy over).

- 💡 SLC has excellent burger joints, a fun, normal-restaurant night after days of park dining.

Day 8 (Sat), Salt Lake City → Moab (drive ~3.5–4 hrs), settle in (3 nights)

Roll into **Moab**, the teen capital of the trip. Check into your hotel, grab the lay of the land.

- 💡 First evening: easy sunset drive up **Hwy 128 (Upper Colorado River Scenic Byway)** along red cliffs, zero hiking, maximum scenery.

Day 9 (Sun), Arches National Park

Big-viewpoint day. **Good news for 2026:** Arches is covered by your America the Beautiful pass (Southeast Utah Parks), and Arches announced it will not require advanced timed-entry reservations this year, you can enter any time during operating hours. Do **Delicate Arch** (moderate, ~3 miles round trip, iconic) in early morning before the heat, plus the easy **Windows** and **Balanced Rock**.

- 💡 July desert heat is no joke, start by 7am, carry 1 liter of water per person minimum, and be back at the car by late morning.
- **Plan B (heat/storm):** Swap the Delicate Arch hike for the shorter Windows + Park Avenue viewpoints and spend the hot afternoon at the **Moab Aquatic Center** pool.

Day 10 (Mon), Moab adventure double-header: rafting + Hummer

Morning: Colorado River rafting. Book the **AVA Fisher Towers Half-Day** ("the Moab Daily"), Moab's most popular rafting experience, combining red rock scenery with fun, splashy Class I–II rapids, perfect for families and first-time rafters. **Verified pricing from the operator's own page:** From \$94 for ages 13+ and from \$79 for ages 2–12. It's about 4 hours total including transport, with roughly 2–3 hours on the water. Departs from 825 Kane Creek Blvd, Moab, UT 84532. [Map](#)

💡 Saver alert: AVA's own site is currently running discounts up to 25% off AVA-run trips (including the new Moab trips) with an online promo code, but that particular deal has a short expiry, so confirm the current code and end date on coloradorafting.net before booking.

Evening: Hells Revenge Slickrock Hummer Safari (Moab Adventure Center), the teen showstopper. It's an approximately 2-hour tour departing multiple times daily Monday through Saturday, up to 9 per vehicle, with a minimum age of 5 years old. **Verified pricing from the operator's own page:** Adults 13+ \$115, Youth 5–12 \$95. It promises scaling near-vertical rock fins and heart-stopping descents, rollercoaster-level fun. Meet at 225 S Main St, Moab, UT 84532; phone (435) 259-7019. [Map](#)

- 💡 This is the day your teens declare the best of the trip. Book the Hummer early, these are Moab's most popular off-road adventures and sell out fast, with only a handful of vehicles allowed on Hell's Revenge each evening. Booking direct on the operator's site comes with a full refund if you cancel more than 48 hours before departure.
- Hummer cost for your family (corrected):** since both teens in this group are 13+, all four pay the Adults 13+ rate: **two teens both 13+: $4 \times \$115 = \460** . If one teen is aged 5–12 instead, that seat drops to the Youth 5–12 rate of \$95: **$3 \times \$115 + 1 \times \$95 = \440** . (The earlier "\$420 lower-bound illustration" was inconsistent with a two-teenager group and has been removed.)
- Teen-fit alternatives for the active slot (named, with age reasons):**
 - AVA Inflatable Kayaks Half-Day** (coloradorafting.net), teens steer their own boat; more hands-on than a raft. Great for a 15-year-old craving control. From similar half-day pricing (confirm before booking).
 - AVA Via Ferrata or Rock Climbing** (coloradorafting.net), cabled cliff climbing/intro climbing; high wow-factor, big bragging rights, harnessed and guided. From around \$100+/person (confirm before booking).
 - Moab Adventure Center Zip Line Adventure** (moabadventurecenter.com), fast, airborne, low-effort thrill if a rest day is needed. Price varies (confirm before booking).

Day 11 (Tue), Canyonlands NP (Island in the Sky) + dinosaurs option

Morning at **Canyonlands, Island in the Sky: Mesa Arch** at sunrise (short, easy, the most photographed sunrise in Utah), **Grand View Point, Green River Overlook**. Afternoon: **Dead Horse Point State Park** overlook (jaw-dropping gooseneck of the Colorado).

- 💡 If anyone wants a quirky teen-friendly stop, **Moab Giants** dinosaur park is a fun hour. **Steakhouse dinner** option #2 tonight in Moab (Moab has several well-known steak/BBQ houses on Main Street, reserve ahead and confirm hours, summer hours vary).
- **Plan B (heat):** Canyonlands viewpoints are roadside and quick; do them at dawn and retreat to the pool by noon.

Day 12 (Wed), Moab → Grand Canyon South Rim (drive ~6.5–7 hrs, split if needed)

The big southern transfer. Consider a quick leg-stretch at **Monument Valley** if you route via US-163 (adds time but it's spectacular). Arrive Grand Canyon and check into **Maswik Lodge**, the in-park value choice: a 250-room lodging complex a short walk from the canyon's edge, nestled in Ponderosa pine forest. Entry is \$35/vehicle, covered by your pass.

- 💡 First glimpse of the canyon at sunset from **Mather Point**, don't eat dinner first, you'll want the light.

Day 13 (Thu), Grand Canyon South Rim (full day)

Walk a stretch of the **Rim Trail** (flat, paved, endless views), ride the free **shuttle out to Hermits Rest** (Red Route), and let braver hikers descend partway down the **Bright Angel Trail** to a turnaround point (go down only as far as you're happy to climb back up in the heat, the canyon floor is NOT a day hike).

- 💡 **Steakhouse dinner** option #3: the **Arizona Steakhouse** at the South Rim (grandcanyonlodges.com/dine), confirm summer hours and reserve. For a quick teen lunch, the **Maswik Food Court** is reliable burgers-and-more.
- **Plan B (afternoon storms):** July monsoon brings lightning to exposed rims, do the rim/shuttle in the morning, save indoor exhibits (Yavapai Geology Museum, Verkamp's) for the afternoon.

Day 14 (Fri), Grand Canyon → Durango, CO (drive ~5.5 hrs)

Begin the loop home through gorgeous country. Overnight in **Durango**, a fun Colorado mountain town.

- 💡 Burger and milkshake on Durango's Main Avenue; if you have an extra morning, the **Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad** is a memorable add-on (book ahead, confirm 2026 schedule and fare).

Day 15 (Sat), Durango → Salida/Buena Vista, CO (drive ~4.5 hrs over the San Juans)

Drive the stunning **San Juan Skyway / Million Dollar Highway**. Overnight near **Buena Vista**, on the Arkansas River, Colorado's rafting capital.

- 💡 Optional encore adventure: AVA also runs Arkansas River rafting out of Buena Vista (coloradorafting.net) if the teens are begging for one more river day.

Day 16 (Sun), Buena Vista → Denver (drive ~2.5 hrs)

Easy final leg into Denver. Return car, airport-area hotel, celebratory last dinner.

- 💡 End on a high: a proper Denver burger joint, and let everyone vote on the best meal of the trip.
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3) Practical Notes, Checklist & Cost Overview

Practical notes

- **Park lodges are old-school on purpose:** Jackson Lake Lodge and Old Faithful Inn have **no A/C and no in-room TVs**; Old Faithful Inn has **no internet**. Pack a battery pack, download offline maps and playlists, and tell the teens in advance (manage expectations now, thank yourself later).
- **Entry fees:** \$35 per private vehicle per park (Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Grand Canyon), all covered by the single **\$80 America the Beautiful pass**, which is the clear money-saver here. The pass is non-refundable, non-transferable, and each passholder must show valid photo ID; a digital version from recreation.gov can be saved to a mobile device and used immediately.
- **Non-resident note:** if any traveler is **not** a U.S. resident, note that as of 2026 nonresidents age 16 and older must pay a \$100 nonresident fee at these parks (including Grand Canyon, Grand Teton and Yellowstone) unless admitted with an Annual or America the Beautiful Pass. This plan assumes U.S. residents.
- **Arches in 2026:** no timed-entry reservation required this year, but go early to beat heat and crowds.
- **Heat & monsoon:** July is hot in Moab and at the Grand Canyon and brings afternoon thunderstorms. Hike early, hydrate hard, and keep off exposed rims/basins during lightning.
- **Rollaways/extra beds:** at Jackson Lake Lodge rollaway beds are \$12 plus tax per night, one permitted per room; family rooms that sleep 4–5 (two queens) are your friend for a family of four.

Packing checklist

- ☐ America the Beautiful pass (digital + photo ID)
- ☐ Reusable water bottles (1L+ per person), electrolyte mix for Moab/Canyon
- ☐ Sturdy closed shoes + strapped sandals/water shoes for rafting
- ☐ Sun hats, high-SPF sunscreen, sunglasses with straps
- ☐ Light rain shell (afternoon storms), warm layer (cool park-lodge nights, no A/C)
- ☐ Battery pack + car charger (no Wi-Fi at Old Faithful Inn)
- ☐ Binoculars for Hayden Valley wildlife
- ☐ Printed/offline reservation confirmations (cell service is patchy in all parks)
- ☐ Cash for tips (e.g., a common practice is 10-20% of the tour cost for guides)

Estimated cost overview (family of 4, ~16 lodging nights), mirrored against budget

Category	Estimate (USD)	Notes
Lodging, gateway hotels (Jackson, SLC, Moab×3, Durango, Buena Vista, Denver, transfer nights)	\$1,600–\$2,000	~8 nights at ~\$180–\$220, your target range
Lodging, in-park lodges (Jackson Lake Lodge×2, Old Faithful Inn×2, Canyon×1, Maswik×2)	\$2,100–\$3,500	Above target ; value room categories assumed, confirm exact rates in booking widget
Park entry (1 America the Beautiful pass)	\$80	Covers all parks for the vehicle
Rafting (AVA Fisher Towers Half-Day)	~\$346	2 adults @ \$94 + 2 teens @ \$79 (verified on official page)
Hummer Safari (Hells Revenge)	\$460	2 adults @ \$115 + 2 teens (both 13+) @ \$115 = 4 × \$115 (verified on official page)
Optional extras (Durango train, extra rafting, Moab Giants)	\$0–\$600	Choose-your-own
Fuel (loop ~2,800–3,200 miles)	\$500–\$700	Varies with vehicle & gas prices
Food (4 people, ~21 days, mix of dining + casual)	\$2,800–\$4,200	Includes 1–3 steakhouse dinners and many burgers
Approximate total	\$8,000–\$11,500	Lodging is the swing factor

Activity-cost detail (verified):

- **Rafting:** 2 × \$94 (adults) + 2 × \$79 (teens, ages 13+ qualify for the 13+ tier; if a child is 12 or under they fall in the 2–12 tier at \$79 either way) = **\$346 total**.
- **Hummer (corrected):** the verified per-person rates are Adults 13+ \$115 and Youth 5–12 \$95. Since both teens in this family are 13+, all four pay the Adults 13+ rate: **two teens both 13+: 4 × \$115 = \$460**. If instead one teen is aged 5–12, that seat is the Youth 5–12 rate: **3 × \$115 + 1 × \$95 = \$440**. The previous "~\$420 lower-bound illustration" was inconsistent with the stated two-teenager group and has been removed; **for this family (two teens both 13+), budget \$460**.

Budget honesty: Your \$180–\$220/night target holds beautifully for the gateway-town hotels, but the in-park lodges in peak July will push some nights to \$300–\$500+. The plan deliberately alternates pricey in-park lodges with cheaper town hotels so the *blended* average lands much closer to your goal. If you need to protect the budget hard, the single biggest lever is trimming an in-park lodge night (e.g., skip the Canyon Lodge night and stay a third night at a West Yellowstone gateway hotel instead).

💡 Final tip: book the four park lodges **this week**. They open reservations on a 12-month rolling basis and July is the first to vanish. Everything else (Moab hotel, rafting, Hummer) can wait a month or two, but not the lodges.

4) Sources (checked June 2026; flagged figures re-verified against official provider pages)

Park lodges (accommodation)

- Grand Teton, Jackson Lake Lodge (incl. Mural Room dining line 307-543-3463 and main reservations 307-543-3100): [gtlc.com/...](https://gtlc.com/)
- Yellowstone, Old Faithful Inn: [yellowstonenationalparklodges.com/...](https://yellowstonenationalparklodges.com/)
- Yellowstone lodging reservations hub: [yellowstonenationalparklodges.com/...](https://yellowstonenationalparklodges.com/)
- Grand Canyon South Rim lodges (incl. Maswik): [grandcanyonlodges.com/...](https://grandcanyonlodges.com/)
- Grand Canyon dining (Arizona Steakhouse): [grandcanyonlodges.com/...](https://grandcanyonlodges.com/)

Activities (booking-critical prices & times, verified)

- AVA Fisher Towers Half-Day rafting (verified: from \$94 ages 13+, from \$79 ages 2–12): [coloradorafting.net/...](https://coloradorafting.net/)
- Moab Adventure Center, Hells Revenge Hummer Safari (verified: Adults 13+ \$115, Youth 5–12 \$95, approx 2 hours, departs Mon–Sat; family total for two teens both 13+ = $4 \times \$115 = \460): [moabadventurecenter.com/...](https://moabadventurecenter.com/)

Park fees & passes

- NPS Entrance Passes / America the Beautiful (\$80): [nps.gov/...](https://nps.gov/)
- Grand Canyon fees: [nps.gov/...](https://nps.gov/)
- Yellowstone fees: [nps.gov/...](https://nps.gov/)
- Grand Teton fees: [nps.gov/...](https://nps.gov/)
- Arches fees & 2026 no timed-entry: [nps.gov/...](https://nps.gov/) ; [nps.gov/...](https://nps.gov/)

Note on a few figures: Exact nightly room rates for Jackson Lake Lodge, Old Faithful Inn, Canyon Lodge, Maswik Lodge and Hyatt Place Moab sit behind live booking widgets that vary by date and room type; the estimates above are ranges, and you'll see the exact price the moment you enter your July dates on the official booking pages linked here.

Created with typeatrip. All details were checked online at the time of creation; opening hours and prices can change, please confirm the key ones before booking.