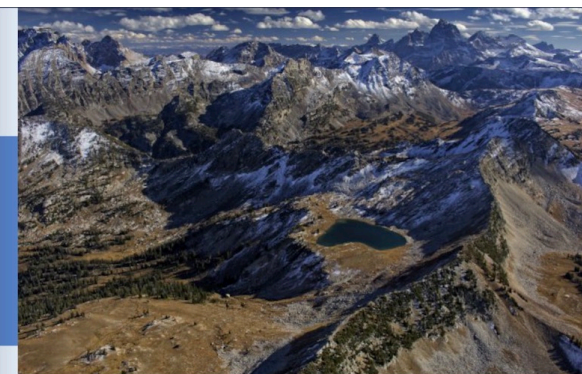


THE TETON

Factor

Text and Images by
Garrett Fisher

To understand what makes the Tetons so special, a bit of ancient geological history goes a long way. For those that travel around the West, one will note a regular feature: north-south mountain ranges with basins in between. In many ways, that makes America unique, as one can often cruise an open road, looking at majestic snowcapped peaks in the distance, enjoying a near spiritual beauty over a tremendous area. In certain locales, these ranges reach notable height providing abundant snow, thick green trees, and tall summits, much like the Colorado Rockies.



The thing about these places is that, while they are beautiful, the tallest peak in Colorado, which tops out at 14,440, isn't overly noteworthy in passing, despite being 600 feet higher than the Tetons. One has to wonder what makes this mountain range so special compared to the rest of the Intermountain West.

There is one factor, which I happened to notice while flying around Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming. The Tetons are a "fault block range," which means that a fault line causes the mountains to rise and the valley to sink. I happened to take a special liking to the Sangre de Cristo Range in Colorado and Wasatch Range in Utah, later finding out that these rather steep mountain ranges share a characteristic with the Tetons.

There is something else going on in Wyoming that is one of a kind. The Yellowstone hot spot basically

sits in one place, and the earth's crust moves over time. Over a rather extended period of time, the earth's crust slid from roughly Boise, Idaho to where Yellowstone is today, along with its supervolcano having conveniently blown its top a number of times creating the Snake River Plain in Idaho. That, in turn, allows for Pacific moisture to come in to the Tetons, uninterrupted by those north-south mountain ranges I previously mentioned, and now the ingredients exist for tons of lovely powder at Grand Targhee and Jackson Hole, along with the formation of glaciers.

Grand Teton National Park contains a number of named and unnamed glaciers. All of them are in retreat, and many are not the easiest to spot while taking a day trip along the highway in Jackson Hole. Nonetheless, they are a remnant of more powerful forces in the past that mixed with all of this lovely

volcanic and tectonic activities to aid in making already large mountains even steeper. One may note that while there are glaciers in the Tetons even today, the nearest glaciers are in the Wind River Range, and a few tiny ones in the Absarokas and Big Horns. All other mountain ranges around the Tetons are presently devoid of glacial activity, which is an indication of the snowfall that the Tetons receive.

To help frame the magnitude of the Tetons, I took a German pilot up in my antique aircraft, first around Alpine, Wyoming, where he noted that it looked like "Lake Constance in Switzerland," which is a large, yet low elevation lake bordering Germany. Later, we overflew the gnarliest sections of the Tetons, and he casually noted: "If you like flying here, you'd like the Swiss Alps." These mountains are the closest I have found in the Lower 48 to what exists in Switzerland.



The project of flying over Grand Teton was something that turned out to be both a surprise and a learning experience. Like most humans, I understood steeper terrain to be more threatening, and accordingly approached aviation there with some added caution. It was only after extended experience did I come to understand that the east-facing sharp descent into Jackson Hole coupled with the protective wind barrier afforded by the Gros Ventre Range meant that the Tetons were not as windy and therefore dangerous as one may expect. Local variations push high speed winds north into Yellowstone and out to the Bighorn Basin via Dubois. The Tetons themselves had a mesmerizing tranquility to them for the most part, as the small size of the peaks at their highest point meant that they did little to disrupt prevailing winds. It is terrain-induced disruption that creates mountain waves, rotors, and turbulence, all things that can exceed the ability for an aircraft to handle. As my little 800-pound machine was powered by a carbureted 100 horsepower engine, it meant that effective output, at full throttle at the height of Grand Teton, was less than 60 horsepower. If the Tetons wished to throw anything formidable at me, there would be little I could do except get away as

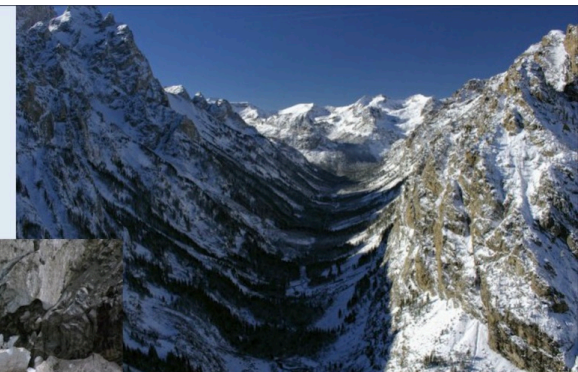
fast as I possibly could and hope for the best.

Despite the seeming dangers, I ended up with a love affair with the Tetons, going back over and over again in new conditions and seasons, learning more about them each time, and having my attraction to them only increase. Out of everywhere I have flown in America, these are absolutely my favorite mountains, and I decided to toss my previous approach to the wind and let my fixation take hold. Flight after flight I looked for new things all over the Park, in lower elevations and especially in hard-to-explore backcountry areas away from the highway. To share my findings of this amazing place, I recently packaged the results of this spiritual adventure into a photography book, *"Around the Summit: Flying Grand Teton."* WLM

The book is available on Amazon.com, at Jackson Hole Book Trader, Corner Drug in Driggs, Idaho, and on the author's site www.garrettfisher.me.



Garrett Fisher is the author of fifteen books, twelve of which relate to aerial photography. He is in the process of publishing a long list of aerial photography books focused on the Rockies as seen from his antique airplane. Garrett blogs regularly about his aviation adventures at www.garrettfisher.me.



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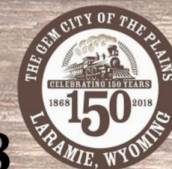


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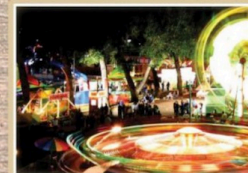
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