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Grinnell Glacier, the quintessential Glacier experience

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Jacob Doran/for the West Shore News Hikers stop to enjoy the view at Grinnell Lake in Glacier National Park last week. The hike to Grinnell Lake is one of the Park's finest.

What began as a fairly dreary day, accented by grey skies that seemed to warn of a coming rain, slowly transformed into a sunny trek up the side of Mt. Grinnell.

I had already seen Grinnell Glacier from above, more than a year earlier, when I hiked up the spur trail to the Grinnell Glacier Overlook from the Highline Trail. That view alone immediately climbed to the top of my list of favorites. And, while I normally hold to the view that everything looks more impressive from above, the hike to Grinnell

Glacier Lake from the trailhead at the Many Glacier Hotel was about to prove me wrong.

The large stone steps at this point in the hike made a relatively easy climb seem much more challenging than it should have, but the constant sound of the falls was somehow comforting, making it perfectly enjoyable all the way to the top.

To be honest, the Grinnell Glacier Trail only changes 1,590 feet in elevation between the parking lot at Many Glacier Hotel and the glacial water at the terminus of the journey, cresting at 6,560 feet — still only a 1,630 foot gain — at the top of the moraine just minutes before it descends to Grinnell Glacier Lake.

The total elevation gain for the hike rounds out at about 1,800 feet, which is doable for most hikers — even those who visit Glacier Park from the coast or other points of origin with elevations near sea level.

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The hike starts out along Swiftcurrent Lake, over which towers the impressive Grinnell Point. Hiking around Grinnell Point Mountain, the trail leaves the mirror-like waters of Swiftcurrent Lake, traversing through light forest and coming out alongside Lake Josephine on the northern shoreline — it is possible to travel along the south shoreline as well, but most people prefer the northerly route to prevent any backtracking.

From there on, the trail begins to gradually gain elevation, and the views become more and more majestic as Mt. Gould and Grinnell Lake come into view. Allen Mountain stands sentinel to the south and Angel Wing Peak, along with Mt. Gould stare down into the valley from the west. Grinnell and Gem glaciers hang from the continental divide and Grinnell Falls tumbles down into the otherworldly water of Grinnell Lake — sometimes referred to as Lower Grinnell Lake to distinguish it from (Upper) Grinnell Glacier Lake.

Mountain goats and bighorn sheep frequently graze along the cliffs and meadows, closer to the upper lake. This area is also a known bear habitat, but encounters are rare and rangers also travel the route daily to warn of any potential danger.

It is possible to bypass Josephine and (Lower) Grinnell Lake by boat, but the two miles of hiking that can be saved by doing so are also the easiest to hike, since the trail remains fairly flat. The final 3.8 miles is where the elevation changes, and that change becomes steadily more noticeable closer to the upper lake.

I could easily see why Grinnell Glacier Trail remains one of the most popular hikes in Glacier Park and is traveled by so many on any given day during the summer. Long before the upper lake ever came into view, I knew that if any of my friends had only one day to hike in Glacier Park while visiting, this would be the one I would encourage them to do to truly experience the grandeur of one of the most amazing areas on the North American continent.

This trail has it all: a full spectrum of landscapes characterized by rugged peaks and jagged cliffs set against a skyline of razor sharp crags and the magnificent expanse of the continental divide, not to mention the waterfalls, the wildlife and — of course — the glaciers.

Then, it happened. After making the final climb up the rocky pathway to the crest of the glacial moraine, the full scope of Grinnell Glacier lay before me — a lake filled with icebergs, from one side to the other, over which hung three major glaciers and a few snow fields that sloped down from the continental divide, in the glacier cirque between Mt. Grinnell and Mt. Gould.

The moment I saw the icebergs floating so majestically in the milky aquamarine water of the high alpine lake formed by the melting glacier, I knew the scene that lay before me would be a challenge to capture in print.

It took about two hours and forty minutes to reach the upper lake. Another two hours down provided ample opportunity to take more pictures in a different lighting, but that doesn't account for the more the two and half hours that I spent exploring and photographing the glaciers and icebergs within the idealic cirque, high above the Grinnell valley and three lower lakes that remained in view from the crest of the moraine.

To my surprise, there were groups of hikers who reached the upper lake before me, who left at the same time I did. Resting in the sun on the rocks on the shore of the glacier-

formed lake, none of us could bring ourselves to leave before exploring every inch of the wonderland we had discovered.

Another third of a mile brings you to the very foot of Grinnell Glacier, but one could easily put on another mile of exploration before returning to the trail and making the descent into the valley. At no location in Glacier Park have I been guilty of taking as many pictures as I did along the Grinnell Glacier Trail and lake, and I can only describe it as the quintessential Glacier Park experience that every visitor should see at least once in their lifetime.

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