



The advertisement for Evergreen Lodge features a photograph of a rustic lodge building on the left. To the right of the photo, the text reads "Evergreen Lodge" in a large, bold, dark red font, followed by "Yosemite's Classic Resort" in a smaller, green font. On the far right, there is a green rectangular box containing a small logo of evergreen trees and the text "Evergreen Lodge" above a red button that says "Reserve Now!". The text "Ads t" is visible in the bottom right corner of the advertisement area.

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Breathe in all the natural beauty of Glacier National Park in Montana

By Janet K. Keeler, Times Lifestyles Editor

Crisp air and natural marvels await at Glacier National Park in Montana.

GLACIER NATIONAL PARK, Mont.

There is a moment on every grand tour that you'd like to stuff into a bottle, its cap shut tight, only to open and experience again in some distant instance when things aren't going so well. Instead, the smell of the air, the panorama before you, even the feel of a cool breeze can settle into memory to be recalled days, months or years later as the best souvenir ever.

Such are my hopes for the glorious scene at Pray Lake on the east side of Glacier National Park. We have just walked down the hill from the Two Medicine Campground's amphitheater and a session with Ernie Heavy Runner of the Blackfeet tribe. His talk on what animals taught native people about survival in this rugged land has us thinking about bears. Then again, so do the signs all around that remind us we are in Grizzly Country.

It is nearly 9:30 p.m. and not quite dusk some 3,300 miles north of the equator. The sun will not set for another 45 minutes. We amble to the edge of the slick-calm lake. The Blackfeet call the Two Medicine area "the Backbone of the World," and we are immersed in that universe as we gaze at 8,271-foot Sinopah Mountain, patches of snow still visible. As if on cue, the setting sun lights the mountain's wizard-cap top orange. The dramatic reflection and color burst reach a fisherman, who is dancing a lyrical ballet with fly, line and rod.

We watch for 30 minutes. He doesn't catch anything, but tells us he has to keep moving or his legs, protected from water by waders, will go numb. This is his favorite spot in the world, he says. The small lake is clear and cold. The air is that way, too. In late June, and at 4,000-plus feet above sea level, we need sweatshirts. And bug spray. We know bears can be ferocious, but right now the mosquitoes threaten. Suddenly, they are gone. Our fisherman whips one last cast. We can't remember ever breathing air so pristine.

In that perfectly peaceful moment, we know Ken Burns got it right. We are experiencing America's best idea.

Crown of the Continent

We are at the start of a June-July tour of four national parks that will take us along the Rocky Mountains from Glacier to Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons, then veer southwest to the Grand Canyon. Though the calendar says otherwise, it is spring in Glacier. Red, yellow and purple-blue wildflowers dot the roadsides and gentle slopes. Melting snow gushes down mountains, and the rivers madly rip with white foam. There is stubborn snow on the highest peaks, and the famed 52-mile Going-to-the-Sun Road is a few days away from being completely open to traffic.

That's good and bad news. The lousy thing is that we won't be able to experience the entire white-knuckle drive over 6,600-foot Logan Pass, but the upside is that the park isn't crawling with tourists yet. People flock to Glacier once the Sun Road opens. Lots of folks want to experience one of America's most scenic (and challenging) drives, and it's open only about 12 weeks a year. We negotiate most of it and marvel at the engineering feat, and our survival.

We aren't alone on the road. Many of the national parks are seeing more visitors, thanks to Burns' 2009 PBS series and because the shaky economy has kept travelers closer to home. The parking lots in Glacier are crammed with cars boasting license plates from all Western states, plus Minnesota and Michigan, and a fair amount from faraway Florida.

Glacier, which is celebrating its centennial this year, reports that 500,000 people have visited the park through June, the largest number since 2005. To put that in perspective, more than 9 million people go to the most-visited national park, the Great Smoky Mountains, each year. The Smokies' popularity is cemented by its proximity to major population centers and its accessibility throughout the year.

Glacier doesn't even make the top 10 among visited parks, but it is one of the most stunning. A look up at its tall peaks has us thinking Switzerland rather than the United States. It is a destination park, not one that is likely visited on your way to somewhere else.

If you want to experience Glacier National Park fully, you've got from June to September to do it. Beyond those months, the park is open but only those well acquainted with snowshoes and roughing it will be comfortable. Most facilities, including hotels, are closed.

Glacier covers 1 million acres in the northwest corner of Montana, the country's fourth-largest state in landmass but only 44th in population. The park spreads north into Canada, where it's called Waterton Lakes National Park. (If you want to visit, don't forget your passport and be ready to answer questions at the border crossing. You can't transport fruits and vegetables across; peanut butter crackers are okay.) Glacier's rugged peaks, lush valleys and 200 lakes, only 100 with names, are the products of glacial movement. When Glacier was designated a national park on May 11, 1910, there were 150 glaciers within its boundaries. Today, there are about 25, and those are expected to disappear by 2025.

When the glaciers are gone, several park rangers tell us, the name will remain. After all, it's glaciers that cut the terrain. We learn this on Day 1 during a boat ride on the 10-mile-long Lake McDonald. Look north, says the young guide through the vintage wooden boat's raspy PA system. When I study the vista, I see how the mountains around the lake rise in a soft U-shape toward the Continental Divide. That shape, the guide says, rather than a V, signifies the slow march of a glacier. In this case, it's suspected that a glacier more than 2,000 feet thick carved Lake McDonald.

Time to head to the lodge to ponder that.

Historic digs

There are many types of accommodations at Glacier, including lodges, motor inns and cabins. Camping, of course, is one of the most popular ways to stay in the park, and we see people pitching tents and hooking up RVs, both humongous and vintage, in various locations. Glacier is back-country heaven with more than 65 campsites that can be reached only on foot.

We are neither backpackers nor campers, though the scene at Two Medicine almost converts us. Almost.

We have two nights in the nearby motor inn of the Lake McDonald Lodge, on the park's west side, and two nights at the Glacier Park Lodge, at the southeast corner. It was luck that got us those reservations in January. Most rooms are booked a year or more in advance.

The Lake McDonald Lodge was built in 1914, an example of Swiss chalet architecture set on the shores of the lake. The lobby sweeps us off our feet, though it hardly evokes anything that came from the country of yodeling. It is small and compact with dozens of mounted animals staring down. Inscriptions in Kootenai, a local American Indian dialect, are carved in the floors, and painted hanging lanterns celebrate more native heritage. A huge fireplace at one end is a popular place to hang out, and it's cold enough outside to warrant the heat.

We don't want to leave. Ever. We wonder if we can get a job stoking the fire. A young staffer routinely stops by with a giant poker that gets the sparks flying. Perhaps he needs assistants.

One day we drive to Many Glacier Lodge and then on to the Prince of Wales Hotel on the Canada side, just to see. We vow to come back and stay there, too. From the back of Many Glacier, we see Gem, Swiftcurrent and Grinnell glaciers rising above Swiftcurrent Lake. They are small, but the entire tableau is breathtaking. A boat ride gets visitors a little closer.

We sit and breathe deeply. Again, that air.

Back in the car, we head north to Canada. The Prince of Wales Hotel rises on a bluff, framed by a bowl of mountains. There are fewer people here. Late afternoon tea in the Prince of Wales lobby looks out on Waterton Lake and the sweet town nearby. A very cool place to eat cucumber sandwiches.

Glacier Park Lodge, at the southeast entrance of the park, was built about 100 years ago by the Great Northern Railway, and the train legacy remains. The Amtrak station, buzzing with tourists in the summer, is within walking distance. A flower garden rioting with color leads the way to the lodge.

The rooms are good-sized and the lobby is bracketed by enormous timbers that might have been 800 years old when cut for the project. The large trees that make the cathedral-like lobby were brought into the park from the Pacific Northwest. No local trees were big enough to fit the architect's vision.

Like many of the historic lodges, Glacier Park is more about the shared experience of nature than private plushness. Bathrooms are small and adequate, beds are comfortable. But the bigger emphasis is communal spaces. Great care has been taken to provide windows in public spaces to view the changing sky and light.

There are plenty of modern touches, though. We enjoy latte from the coffee bar, and it's a relief to get cell phone connections after a few days without.

Going-to-the-Sun, and then some

There are two ways to traverse the winding, mountain-hugging turns of the Going-to-the-Sun Road that crosses the wild interior of the park. You can travel on your own wheels (bicycle, motorcycle, car or motor home that's less than 21 feet long) or you can pay to be a passenger in a red touring "Jammer."

Make sure you do one or the other. We did both.

On a rainy Monday, we let Chelsea do the driving in the vintage bus, its name from the days when drivers had to "jam" the gears to get the manual-transmission vehicle over the challenging heights. Today, the jitneys have been restored and there's no jamming the automatic gears, just a smooth ride fueled by clean-burning propane.

With her do-you-want-fries-with-that headset, Chelsea narrates the sights, and only makes us slightly nervous when she says she is starting her second week of work. Not exactly what you want to hear when someone is steering you toward the Continental Divide on a ribbon of road. But she is more than competent, and on subsequent days, I experience the truth of her words.

"This place just sucks you in."

We consider canceling our reservations for the nearly eight-hour tour because it is supposed to rain. We don't and are rewarded by a nearly empty tour bus, which can hold 17 but only carries seven of us this day. It rains and it doesn't matter.

Going-to-the-Sun Road takes you past the most glorious scenery of the park, from gushing waterfalls to lush valleys below. The road is carved right out of the mountains, and there are numerous turnouts where you can stop and marvel. Or simply let someone speedier go by.

They won't get too far ahead, though, because roadwork slows drivers frequently. A multiyear, multimillion-dollar project funded by federal stimulus money brings the road to one lane occasionally. Take a deep breath and go with it.

We twice drive the road as far as it is open, and then traverse it from the east, too. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and we want to remember every scary turn and sheer dropoff.

The wild kingdom

We want to see a bear. Not up close and personal, but from the comfort of a car or through the window of a cozy lodge.

Bears are serious business here and the National Park Service wants us to be prepared. Clap or sing loudly while hiking; bears don't like to be surprised. Keep food locked up tight. Never approach a wild animal.

There are both black bears and grizzlies in the park, and it seems everyone but us has spied one or the other. We drive with camera ready, just in case. We go to the places where people have spotted them. We watch for bear jams, backed-up traffic that signals an animal sighting.

Still, I am a bit skittish about the prospects. We walk the easy Trail of the Cedars, and every leaf rustle has me looking over my shoulder. On a short hike to Baring Fall near Sunrift Gorge, I turn back when I see a grizzly bear warning sign. I know they are out there and am content to let others get close. My singing voice isn't that good.

Instead of bear, we see mountain goats of all ages cavorting high on a hill. There are plenty of deer and soaring birds. I think I spot an elk, its huge antlers disappearing into a forest.

I am happy with my mountain goat sighting. Honestly. Though it is a bit irritating when a young boy plops down beside us at a cafe in St. Mary, just outside the park, to tell the tale of the cute cub he just saw walking across the parking lot. Okay, kid, it's just not in the cards for us.

We accept the fly fisherman and the reflection of Sinopah Mountain in Pray Lake as our gift.

Such a good idea, this Glacier National Park.

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If you go

Planning ahead: If you are at all entertaining the idea of staying in lodges or camping in the national parks, call soon to make reservations. Reservations are being taken now through 2011, and you can always cancel if your plans change (deposits are refunded up until a few weeks before the date). Check those details when you make reservations.

The historic lodges fill up quickly. We called in mid January for a June trip, and there were no rooms available in the historic Lake McDonald Lodge's main building, so we booked the nearby motor inn. At Yellowstone, which you'll read about Aug. 15 in *Latitudes*, we could only get one night at the Old Faithful Inn and felt lucky at that.

At Glacier, hotel rates range from \$65 to about \$300 a night, though high rollers can pay nearly \$800 for a suite at the Prince of Wales Hotel on the Canada side of the park. If you want to stay in one of the historic lodges, expect to pay about \$200 a night.

For more information on park lodging, including camping, go to glacierparkinc.com or call (406) 892-2525.

We like where we stayed, but if we go again (and plan further in advance), we would try to get into the main lodge at Lake McDonald and the Many Glacier Lodge. They are at opposite ends of the Going-to-the-Sun Road.

There are also accommodations outside the park gates.

Getting to Glacier: Unless you're on a major road trip, you'll likely fly to Montana from Florida and then rent a car for the drive to Glacier, in the vast state's northwest corner. You can fly into Missoula, Great Falls or even Kalispell, depending on which part of the park you're entering first. We needed a car for what would eventually be a 4,000-mile road trip, so we flew to Spokane, Wash., because we got a better price for the three-week rental. The downside of that was that we had a 300-mile, five-hour drive to Glacier after a long flight.

What to do: The 52-mile Going-to-the-Sun Road cuts across the park from east to west. It is open from mid June to about mid September and is an engineering marvel that shouldn't be missed. Plan for about three hours if you drive it yourself or longer if you take a small bus tour. Other draws of Glacier, besides the stunning terrain, are hiking, backpacking, fishing and camping. There are many ranger-led programs for adults and children. Schedules and maps are available at visitor centers and as you enter the park.

About Glacier: Though the 100-year-old park is open year-round, most facilities only operate from mid May to late September. Beyond those times, the park attracts cross-country skiers and self-reliant souls. Summer entry to the park is \$25 per car for seven days. A year pass is \$35, and an annual pass for the national parks is \$80. Much more information is available at nps.gov/glac. We also found Fodor's most recent Montana guidebook helpful.

The downside: The food is so-so in the park and a bit pricey. There are camp stores where you can buy some essentials that will suffice as morning meals and snacks. Two restaurants that we found outside the park are worth a visit. Get the huckleberry pie and anything else on the menu at the Park Caf? in St. Mary, just outside the east entrance on U.S. 89. The cafe is open June through September. Eat lunch late or dinner early; otherwise plan on waiting. Go to parkcafe.us for a funky preview.

For breakfast on the west side of the park, stop by the old-school West Glacier Restaurant. It sort of feels like the 1960s in there, and the prices are good, even for giant pancakes. They also serve lunch and dinner. You'll pass it on the left as you make your way to the park's west entrance and Apgar Visitor Center.

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On the Web

Go to links.tampabay.com for a slide show of photographs by Scott Keeler and a video of driving the Going-to-the-Sun Road.

Our National Parks

A three-part series

Today: Glacier National Park in Montana.

Stunning vistas on and off the Going-to-the-Sun Road.

Aug. 15: Yellowstone and the Grand Teton national parks in Wyoming.

Geothermal wonders, buffalo and one historic lodge.

Aug. 22: Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona.

The results of erosion and a raging river seen from the south rim.

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