



# *In the Flathead*

## *A Montana State of Mind*

by Amanda Bjerke

*I*t's easy to talk about the glories of Montana's Flathead region, a place where mountain goats amble along ridges, golden eagles soar through flawless azure skies, and freakishly huge deer carrying antlers of outlandish proportions emerge from thickets. Here, amid a landscape that hasn't changed all that much since Lewis and Clark wrestled through the wilderness, the nominal human imprint creates a cultural goldmine. Small communities with romantic names—Big Fork, Whitefish, Kalispell—boast art galleries, Broadway-caliber theater, and all kinds of music. Accidental photo ops are commonplace.

*I can tell you about these things. I can even share pictures, but despite my prettiest efforts, you won't understand. To do that, you must meet the Flathead—on your own. When you do, expect to be forever changed.*

That's what happened to Bill Myers, a native Chicagoan who grew up on Lake Michigan with an appreciation for the natural world. Thirty years ago he decided to explore America's West. In Montana he found more than mountains, "there's clean air and an attitude of freedom. I liked that," he recently explained. And so he left his job as manager of a grocery warehouse serving five Midwestern states and moved.

Myers never looked back. Today he lives in Bigfork, and operates a charter boat carrying folks "anywhere they want to go" on Flathead Lake, the largest freshwater body west of the Mississippi. His usual destination: Wild Horse Island, one of the West's best-kept secrets. Accessible only by boat, it's a 2,000-acre primitive park offering an incredible wilderness experience.

The park service does little to encourage human visitors. Amenities are limited to one composting restroom. Overnight camping is prohibited. It's been 15 years since the state abandoned its ferry service to the island and spawned Myers' career. "I called for the shuttle times and they said the boat had broken down



Downtown Big Fork, Montana

and they weren't going to fix it. So, unless you had your own boat or a friend with a boat and one of you knew how to beach on rocks, there was no way to get there. Necessity is the mother of invention. I wanted to go and I figured others did too. I've been taking people there ever since."

Through the years, Myers has become something of an expert on his adopted home, eagerly answering questions and explaining the intricate wonders of the Triple Continental Divide ecosystem to his guests in measured doses. He is careful to gauge his clients' interest level before delving into details. His knowledge seems encyclopedic. "From one peak up in Glacier—Triple Divide Peak—waters can flow in three different directions," he explained, tracing the streams' progress as the mountain runoff feeds various North American rivers and watersheds before merging with the Atlantic at the Gulf of Mexico, the Pacific west of Portland and the Arctic in Hudson Bay.

He is also comfortable discussing the flora and fauna of Wild Horse Island, a place where golden eagles, osprey and an array of other birdlife are at home with mountain sheep, coyotes and mule deer. "It's amazing how many people have never seen an eagle in the wild," Myers marveled. "I do three cruises a day and I see up to 10 eagles every single day."

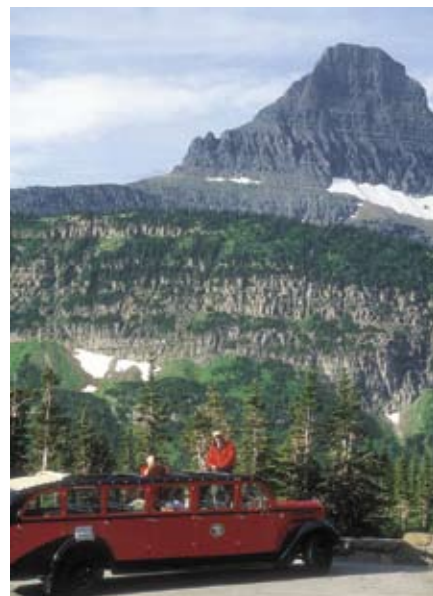
Getting a close-up look at Montana wildlife on one of Myers' cruises was the highlight of Billy Boesen's summer vacation last year. The 11-year-old from Glenview, Illinois and his family spent a week in the area. According to his mother, Susan, that wasn't enough time to see everything. "We spent a day on Wild Horse Island, where you can see so much nature. It's just an uninhabited gem. Throughout the stay

we were very comfortable. The town of Big Fork was small, quaint and very manageable in terms of getting around, but it was also pretty sophisticated. Excellent artisans live and work there and several art galleries show their work, and there's some really nice, more-upscale shopping.

"Besides Wild Horse Island, Glacier was impressive," she continued. "One minute you're in blazing sun with wildflowers everywhere and the next you're on top of snow. We saw a grizzly bear and cub and a mountain goat. But we tried to keep our distance. We stayed on the beaten path. There were so many different hikes. One day we were hiking next to rapids among the pines in a forested area and there were animals all along the way. Another day we were in mountain meadows. You could spend ten days just hiking. For families like ours with kids of different ages, it's ideal. The kids (Billy, and sisters Mary, 7, and Katie, 13) all loved it."

The family's adventure included traversing what Susan Boesen termed "The Road to the Sun" (officially Going to the Sun Road) a 50-mile narrow, series of switchbacks that bisects the center of Glacier National Park and crosses the Continental Divide. One of the toughest roads in North America, it provides awe-inspiring views and for many flatlanders white-knuckle terror. To mitigate the fear factor, Susan Boesen recommended taking a Red Bus Tour. "The whole top of the bus flips down like a big convertible so you can see the expanse of mountains straight up. I was happy we didn't have to drive it [the road]. It was a lot of fun. We'd been on family trips to Arizona and Colorado, so we are not newcomers to the West, but we'd never seen anything like this.

"We live in a prairie state and to see that endless skyline and that expanse of mountains, it was so impressive. The whole area truly is a national treasure," she said. ■



Red Bus Tour at Going to the Sun Road



Olympia Dukakis and Joanna Howard in *Another Side of the Island*, 2008

## A Montana State of Mind *Way West of Broadway*

### GLACIER PARK BY DAY, top-notch theater by night

Walrath, who like his wife and Ackroyd, wears many hats at the theater, is officially its executive director. He explained how it all came to be. "Once we got here, well, there's just something about this area I wish I could put it into words. It has to be felt rather than explained."

In 2002, when Broadway veterans Luke Walrath and Betsi Morrison decided to take a break from Manhattan's bustle, her native Whitefish, Montana seemed the ideal retreat. The couple had no definite plans to make the tiny town their permanent home. Nor, did they intend to start a theater.

Today they and fellow Great White Way alum David Ackroyd head the critically acclaimed Alpine Theatre Project. The enterprise's board of directors includes the likes of Olympia Dukakis and John Lithgow and, as Montana's only Equity Theater, the Alpine showcases exceptional talent each summer.

Part of the motivation is Whitefish itself, a former railroad town replete with historic structures in a jaw-dropping setting. It has long attracted well-heeled visitors with a ski resort and bevy of golf courses. Walrath said, "The town itself is this wonderful mix of cosmopolitan and down home. That's what makes the artists associated with the cultural organizations like ours and the symphony want to work here. The audiences are sophisticated enough to allow artists to be adventurous and fulfill their missions. However, they aren't so stuffy so as to create an adverse way of life. The actors and designers and other

IMAGES: JESSICA LOWRY / ALPINE THEATRE PROJECT

#### BUSINESS PROFILE

## OVERCOMING BUFFALOES at Work and in Life



**DR. VINCENT MULI WA KITUKU**, a native of Kenya and resident of Idaho established *Kituku & Associates* in 1995 to provide new approaches for dealing with workplace challenges. He likens the unpredictability of change/challenges to life with water buffaloes that invaded African villages without warning, devastating social structures, uprooting the

harmonious livelihood of villagers and leaving them feeling insecure and stressed out.

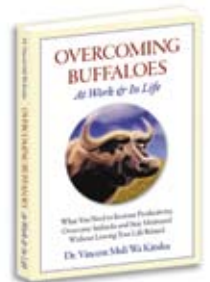
During chaotic times, people think that there is no solution for their perceptively overwhelming situation. They wonder, "Why do we have to change from what we are doing?" Some think they are not responsible for making change work. Vincent says, "When a buffalo invades your village, you cannot waste time blaming others, whining, or wishing it had not happened."

His high-energy, content-filled, entertaining keynote speeches and training programs challenge and inspire audiences for maximum impact mind shift. Participants learn to set themselves apart at work and in life,

rediscover talents and resources they need for growth, thrive by repeatedly providing exceptional services, be involved with something bigger than a career and move forward without leaving life behind.

R. Scott Johnson, Program Manager, Hewlett-Packard said his group was moved by Vincent's "powerful and encouraging message. The motivational style is very unique, pointing each of us to look inwardly and in conjunction with each other as a team."

Dr. Kituku holds the coveted National Speakers Association Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) designation. Fewer than 7% of motivational speakers earn this recognition. As a storyteller, he has won awards for both written and oral presentations. Since 1998, he has been the motivational speaker for the successful Boise State University Bronco football team. Vincent is a graduate of the University of Wyoming.



For more information call 208-376-8724 or 888-685-1621 or visit [www.overcomingbuffaloes.com](http://www.overcomingbuffaloes.com)



David Naughton and Elizabeth Ward  
Land in *Pete 'n' Keely*, 2008

professionals we bring in usually comment on the unique, really rather odd mix. We have people here from metro areas who want the best of that way of life. Yet they want it more laid back and relaxed, with the emphasis on the outdoors and recreation. At this point the place is creating its own gravity.”

The season runs through August, and this year Walrath promises to give Flathead audiences and visitors shows “that they are going to die for; shows that killed them on Broadway but haven’t made it out west yet.”

Plays making their regional debuts include the two-man comedy *Stones in His Pocket*. “Two actors playing 13 roles. They never leave the stage. It’s funny and poignant.” The Alpine is one of 10 American theaters granted the rights to perform the award-winning *Twenty-fifth Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. “When Betsi and I saw it on Broadway, I just laughed my head off for two


hours. It includes audience participation and improv’ and it is a riot. Rounding out the season is *And the World Goes Round: The Songs of Kander and Ebb*. It’s a review featuring the music of the creators of *Chicago* and *Cabaret* and includes pretty much everything Liza Minnelli ever sang. It’s traditional Broadway razzle-dazzle with incredible performers coming in from New York.

“The Flathead has been known for years as a recreational hub.” Walrath said, “We want people to realize that the cultural organizations in this area offer an incredible complement to the recreation that’s here. So after golfing or hanging out on the lake, you can round out the experience by seeing the same actors you’d see on Broadway.” ■


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