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Glacier National Park: The Crown of the Continent Turns 100

by Amanda Bjerke

The Crown of the Continent comes by its nickname honestly. Glacier National Park hugs the Canadian border and holds within its boundaries a royal trove of natural wonders. More than a million acres contain hundreds of lakes and waterfalls amid terrain ranging from arid plains to soaring mountains and arctic tundra. There are thousands of plant species, hundreds of animal types and, of course, glaciers. While flora and fauna are much as they were when President Taft created the park in 1910, the glaciers are diminishing. The opportunity to observe those remaining is a good enough cause to visit Glacier during its centennial year. The myriad other reasons include spectacular and rare wildlife—mountain goats, grizzly bear, big-horn sheep, mountain lion; jaw-dropping scenery and outdoor experiences that are as educational as they are exhilarating. A trip to this Big Sky paradise is also an unfiltered encounter with history—the chance to take in a timeless landscape.

Pondering the past is inevitable when encountering vestiges of tourism's trailblazers. Railroad tycoons saw the commercial potential of this place when it was still a National Forest preserve. The railroad dubbed the area America's Switzerland, and within five years of the park's dedication, three Swiss-themed lodges opened in the Grand European style. The Glacier Park Hotel in East Glacier, The Many Glacier Hotel on the shores of Swiftcurrent Lake, and the Prince of Wales Hotel just across the Canadian line in Waterton Lakes National Park all continue to welcome guests. The small Granite Park chalet, another remnant of the railroad era, remains in Glacier's backcountry and is accessible only by trail.

In its earliest days, trails were Glacier's thoroughfares. A visit to the park often meant traveling by train and stagecoach. Access to some of



The Many Glacier Hotel opened in 1915 and still welcomes guests.

the more spectacular sights also required a boat ride, and visitors typically hiked or rode horseback around Glacier. America's nascent love affair with the automobile quickly changed all that. Motorists soon were forgoing the trains and instead bumping along game routes and cow paths to access the park. In 1921 construction began on a car-friendly road connecting the east and west portions of Glacier over the Continental Divide. Originally named the Transmountain Highway, it opened in 1933 and quickly adopted the name of the nearby Going to the Sun Mountain.

One flawless June morning my husband Jim and I made the scenic drive from Kalispell and were roaming around the West Entrance Visitor Center a tad overwhelmed with the enormity of



Mountain goats abound throughout the park.



Continental Divide



View Avalanche Creek Gorge from the Cedars Nature Trail off Going to the Sun Road.

Glacier possibilities. A park worker advised us to use our limited time by crossing Going to the Sun Road. Sounded good to me. There's romance and more than a hint of excitement in the name of Glacier's only east-west connector. Who wouldn't want to travel to the sun? (Besides Icarus, that is.)

The steep, narrow passageway lives up to its title. Climbing northeastward in the morning light feels like you're leaving our atmosphere behind. Sure there's traffic and the going is slow, but the wide open sky, soaring peaks and adrenaline rush that accompany the trek make you want to take it easy.

It's advisable to devote the better part of a day to this 50-mile one-way trip. You'll want to stop a lot, especially if you're the driver. My husband, our wheelman, had only a few white knuckle moments—once when he was craning his neck to see a mountain goat mamma and her babies, another time when a tottering cabover camper



Look closely! A Model T chugs along Going to the Sun Road circa 1933.

veered toward the center line. A few times the proximity of the drop-off made my stomach knot. I reminded myself that thousands of motorists have safely made the drive—some in Model Ts! With a nod to the Centennial and an awareness that not all drivers are comfortable navigating a summit of almost 7,000 feet, Glacier offers a jaunty alternative. Modernized 1930s convertible buses painted a spiffy red are a chance to sit back and let experienced drivers handle the road and explain the sites. My husband seemed a tad envious of those pampered passengers especially when we hit the intermittent road construction sites. I reminded him that there's a lot of flexibility built into the do-it-yourself route. Photo ops and informative markers line the way. You'll want to stop and read all about Jackson Glacier, one of the park's 20-or-so still-active glaciers. Lake McDonald is breathtaking, and the view from Logan's Pass makes it clear why the Continental Divide is known as the Backbone of America. The mountain ranges unfold infinitely.

There are several trailheads along the road. This is a place that begs to be explored up close and personal. From the Logan Pass Visitor's Center, we wandered through a meadow, dotted

with snow. Wildflowers poked through sweet, high mountain grass. Despite the throngs “going to the sun,” there was quiet, peace, and a sense that this place will always hold eternal treasures. ■



To commemorate Glacier Park’s Centennial C.W. Guthrie, a Missoula author and noted Montana historian has penned *Glacier National Park The First 100 Years*, a fast paced, definitive history of the park. Published by Missoula’s Farcountry Press, it also contains lavish photography worthy of any coffee table.



The Grinnell Lake Trail begins near the Many Glacier Hotel and gradually climbs more than 1,600 feet over the course of six miles. It offers many superb views.

DID YOU KNOW?

*Glacier and Watertown Lakes National Park in Canada became the world’s first joint, international peace park in 1932.

*It’s easy to access Glacier National Park with SkyWest Service to Kalispell 33 miles away.

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Montana's Flathead Valley



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