

Glacier Park's majesty slowly melting away



Many Glacier Valley
Photos/Robert S. Wood

By Robert S. Wood

GLACIER NATIONAL PARK – It was shocking to learn that the last of famous Glacier Park's hundreds of glaciers will be dead and gone in as little as seven years. With an extra month of summer on our hands, it seemed a good time to go up and have a look at the mere 25 moving ice fields that remain in the park. My wife Deanne and I were also curious to see how the northern Rockies stack up against our home mountain turf of Tahoe, Desolation and Yosemite.

Cruising the Web, then following up by phone, we discovered that would-be visitors customarily make Glacier reservations a

year in advance at the few big old lodges inside the park. All we could unearth on short (two week) notice were three nights at Lake McDonald on the southwestern side of the pass and five nights at Many Glaciers – now more aptly nicknamed “Few Glaciers”– on the northeastern side.

But we were warned that snowplows were still working on Logan Pass and it wasn't scheduled to open until the day we arrived.

It was a gamble, but nothing else was available this year. Basically, the short summer season up in northern Montana's high Rocky Mountains is just July and August, as snow returns in September. At least we'd see the peaks at their prettiest, under a full mantle of snow. So we booked the rooms starting June 21 and consulted our maps, wondering how best to sample and hike a million-acre park, called the “Crown of the Continent,” in just nine days – some of it still under snow.

Snowmelt on towering Triple Divide Peak, we learned, can drain to the Pacific, the Arctic and the Gulf of Mexico.

Further research revealed that four of Glacier's lakes offered inexpensive boat trips in ancient launches that ended at multiple wilderness trailheads on the lake's far shore – and all of them were just beginning operation – reminding us of boat access to Desolation Wilderness via the Echo Lakes water taxi.

So we pre-booked trips on three of these launches to form the core of our park explorations, hoping we could get over the snowy pass to reach them. Otherwise, we'd have to circle around outside the park. We also allotted half a day to visiting Glacier's adjoining sister park just across the Canadian border. Jointly the two comprise the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, the first of its kind.

Our next consideration was how to get to Glacier from Tahoe. Highway maps revealed that it looked like three days driving – each way. That would double the length of the trip, with all

the substantial attendant costs of gas, motels and food. But air connections on Delta turned out to be excellent, so we decided to spare the old Subaru and fly and rent a car, arriving fast and fresh. Using past accumulated air miles – even with a \$350 Dollar rental car bill – for us it was also cheaper.

After spending the night in Reno, we took a 6:30am flight to Salt Lake City, then transferred to a flying cigar that took us to Kalispell, Mont. There we got upgraded to a new Subaru and were driving into the park before noon, with the afternoon still before us. At the visitor center we learned that Logan pass had just opened and people were happily skiing and snowboarding on the high trails of the famous “Going to the Sun” pass road. Though the pass was a mere 6,600 feet in elevation, it commonly was buried under 50 feet of snowpack – quite a change from the central Sierra.

The detailed one-page park trail map, with good directions, revealed a nearby network of forest trails that looked inviting, part of it ascending the booming McDonald River above the misty lake, so we dropped our bags at our cabin and hit the trail, hoping to get in a walk before threatening clouds unloaded. The thick forest was primarily Englemann spruce and so mossy (and muddy from recent rain) that it reminded us more of Muir Woods in the coastal redwoods than the Sierra, with Spanish moss festooning conifers. The other Glacier forest trees are Arctic fir, quaking aspen and the familiar lodgepole pine. Spectacular wildflowers, featuring the white plume of native Bear Grass, emerged just days after the snow melted.

The thundering river, dwarfing most Sierra streams, was bank-to-bank white water. At every trailhead was a sign solemnly warning “You are entering Grizzly Bear country” mentioning danger, no guarantee of safety, and that hikers had been killed by bears, etc. Many of our fellow walkers wore little bells in hopes of warning wandering bears of their presence.

Startling or surprising Grizzlies was severely warned against. Other hikers made a practice of frequently yelling variations of "Hear bear, bear, bear" and loudly clapping their hands.

Returning to our cabin by the lakeshore just before it started raining, we found ourselves in one of six tiny cubicles with paper-thin walls and two single beds jammed against the walls. No radio, TV, WiFi, phone, frig or microwave, just a basin, toilet and steel stall shower. Primitive, but functional. Apparently we were lucky to have it on short notice. We spent the rainy evenings visiting in the lodge by the blazing fire.

The next day we took the No. 1 rated wilderness hike in our area – along with probably 100 other visitors. From a vast jammed parking lot we mounted a boardwalk leading through mossy groves and up a splashing creek past beautiful waterfalls to Avalanche Lake in a snowy cirque, where we ate our lunch on the beach, passing several tame deer on the way. Hikers on the beach with a spotting scope claimed to see a grizzly and bighorn sheep high on the distant snowfields, but we couldn't see them.

After completing the 5-mile roundtrip walk with 500-foot elevation gain, we decided it might be smart to drive up to Logan Pass on Going to the Sun road, since it was a fine afternoon with big cumulus clouds in baby blue sky. But there was a 90 percent chance of rain forecast for the day we were scheduled to drive it.

The drive was absolutely gorgeous on the narrow two-lane road with no shoulders, but numerous turnouts. We stopped often to take pictures and savor the dramatic alpine vistas before reaching the pass and its 8-foot deep drifts. The peaks of Glacier are not high, only six of them top 10,000 feet, but timberline is only 6,000 to 7000 feet, so the country looks like 12,000 to 14,000 feet in the Sierra.

Unlike the Sierra's long rounded ridgelines, the Glacier peaks

jut straight up in individual cliff-faced blocks of dark rock that soar steeply. Big cirques open between them, often containing as many as three glaciers. A distinctive cross-hatched pattern of snow etches the flat faces of these dark steep pyramids, anvils and glacially-carved aretes.

When the park opened a hundred years ago, there were more than 150 certified glaciers, often three or five on a single mountain. By 1967 the number had dropped to 50; and now only 25 remain active and alive. Living glaciers are moving bodies of ice that creep downhill due to their weight on steep rock and the forces of gravity. When more ice melts in the summer than is replaced by winter snow, the glacier loses needed weight and grinds to a halt, becoming a dead glacier, a mere motionless ice field.

Once we had moved to the many Glaciers Motor Lodge on the drier northeast side of the pass, we were ready for our three boat-assist hikes. We found our way to the docks at the end of the roads and climbed aboard ancient classic motor launches, not unlike the graceful historic varnished wooden yachts that plied Tahoe waters a century ago. On the northeast side of the park the country was much drier, as in the eastern Sierra. The boat trips, except on stormy days, were on serene narrow lakes that often yielded reflections of the surrounding peaks, unlike rarely reflective larger Tahoe.

Enclosed launches held 20 to 40 trippers, a majority of whom were prepared to hit the trail at the far end of the lake. Each trip offers several trail hikes, one of which is usually led by a boat captain or a park ranger. Mostly the trails lead to backcountry lakes, waterfalls, glaciers or glacier viewpoints. Walkers like us allergic to group hikes had other trails to choose from. Even on the dry side of the mountain, the country was wetter and more lush than on the west side of the Sierra crest, with little bare ground. We were well satisfied by our decision to take narrated boat trips to trailheads for hikes into more remote parkland, where the

country was wilder and the chances of seeing animals was greater.

While in Glacier we saw grizzly and black bear, bighorn sheep, mule deer, moose, mountain goats and marmots, but none of the elusive wolves, mountain lions and wolverines. Park Service scopes in the parking lot helped visitors spot wildlife high on the cliffs above. We joined others by driving slowly at dusk along the park roads, when big animal viewing was at its best. Campers were always ready with tall tales of the giant grizzly that just crashed through their camp. Though black bears were vastly far more common, the sightings reported were somehow always of massive threatening grizzlies.

One day we took an open-roofed, vintage 1936 Red Bus touring north through the prairie across the Canadian border into Waterton Peace Park to the stately Prince of Wales Hotel, on a half day amusingly narrated trip. I had to go to Canada to get Mexican beer, which went well with Canadian style featuring a fried egg on top. The dramatic view across the lake from the hotel was similar to the famous one at Lake Louise in the Canadian Rockies, less than two hours away to the north.

Accommodations in the park are nothing like those in the Sierra. Gigantic stately old hotels, not unlike the Ahwahnee in Yosemite Valley, built 80 to 100 years ago by the railroad, supply most of the park beds, with small spare basic rooms. Hotels are built around a huge cavernous lobby featuring a giant fireplace, with rustic, handsome old-fashioned dining rooms, where waiting in line was common. The menus seemed as old as the hotels, poor, dated and expensive, limited and identical. We soon grew sick of the park food and lack of choice, and were happy to drive east out of the park to eat our dinner at the cafes and roadhouses on the edges of the rolling green prairie. Park Café, Two Sisters and Luna's are recommended.

The dividing line between steep and forested mountains and

treeless rolling green prairie was sharp, distinct and delightful. On our return three-hour trip to the Kalispell airport, we were happy to circle east around the park through the Blackfoot reservation's empty prairie, where Indians once lived off the teeming buffalo, and down the booming Flathead River, instead of driving back over busy Logan Pass.

Overall, our Glacier visit was a huge success, despite rain on five consecutive days and some clouds and wind. We loved the sheer soaring snow-etched cliffs, deep slender lakes, the abundant wildlife, big rivers, historic hotels, launches and buses, the country quiet and lack of glitz, though it's clear that America is "loving its parks to death." And it was fun to compare beautiful Glacier to our familiar Sierra home and take a last look at the park's handsome, but dying glaciers before the last of them are gone.

Robert S. Wood and his wife spend half the year in Lake Tahoe and the other half in Sedona. He is the author of a dozen books, including the original trail guide to Desolation Wilderness.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder (Click on photos to enlarge.)