

Glacier National Park: An Amazing American Story

Published 11/12/24 in Easton Village HOA Newsletter (private group)



As we've done for the past few years, we embarked on a cross-country trip in our campervan in late summer to visit friends, family and see more of America the Beautiful. This time, we chose the northernmost highway, Route 2, as our main route and plotted our main stops along the way:

- Wisconsin Lake Superior port towns (reminded us of St. Michaels and Oxford)
- Voyageurs National Park, a [dark-sky park](#)—the Milky Way was so clear and detailed!
- Theodore Roosevelt National Park (a herd of bison walked through our campsite)
- Glacier National Park in Montana
- Olympic National Park (deep, dark forest meets Nova Scotia-type beaches)
- Crazy Horse Memorial (a work-in-progress)
- Mount Rushmore National Memorial (great walking path brings you up close and personal)
- Badlands National Park (amazing views; pictures just don't do it justice)

- “Dignity of Earth & Sky” sculpture, a 50-foot stainless steel statue overlooking the Missouri River that honors indigenous women

There were many other places we visited, but the stars were Glacier National Park and Theodore Roosevelt National Park. My focus here is Glacier National Park (GNP): how it formed, how it became a national park and tips for planning a visit based on our experiences.



Geographic Formation

First, let's cover some basic geography. A glacier is a body of ice so big that it moves under its own weight. Roughly 25 acres of ice are needed to achieve this type of movement.

At the end of 1850, there were about 80 glaciers in GNP. Now there are 26. Our tour guide indicated that the remaining glaciers will likely continue to melt and be gone by the end of this

century. But even with the glaciers gone, the beauty of what Mother Nature has created here will still be worth a visit for many centuries to come.

Around 1.6 billion years ago, ancient seas deposited sediment on the supercontinent Rodinia. The rocks that formed became known as the Belt Supergroup and are the oldest on Earth. Flash forward to 170 million years ago, and the tectonic plates began shifting and created the Rocky Mountains. A side effect of this process pushed ancient rock (1.4 billion years old) to the east into present day Glacier National Park. About 100 million years ago, an interior seaway formed bringing mud—and lots of it—that hardened into mudstone shale.

A mere 18,000 years ago, during the last ice age, the ice sheets carved out the mountains and valleys in the area. As the ice sheets retreated, they left behind lakes of melted glacier water.

The rock in Glacier National Park is quite frail. We also learned about the numerous “green” rocks, which age-wise, our guide said, are about half the lifespan of the Earth itself. We were happy to find a small green rock near a lake. Nothing like a rock to put the world in perspective!

The Birth of a National Park

The first humans to live in the area—members of the Blackfeet, Kootenai, Salish and Qlispe tribes—settled there 10,000 years ago. Later came the Shoshone and Cheyenne tribes. Modern-day people didn't discover the area until the late 1800s. Interestingly, in 1806, the Lewis and Clark Expedition came within 50 miles of Glacier and Yellowstone national parks but missed both!



Our tour guide weaved a wonderful story about how a naturalist, a philanthropist, a politician, the Great Northern Railway company and the White Motor Co. all played key roles in Glacier becoming a national park. And in the process, they helped shape the National Park Service we have today. Here's a brief timeline, as told by our guide:

- Naturalist [George Bird Grinnell](#) first visited the Glacier area in 1885 on a hunting trip with “mountain men” explorers. After many additional hunting trips, he started talking it up with a few corporate and government friends. He spent the next two decades working with other naturalists and corporate and government leaders to get the area protected as a national park along with the wildlife, including the American bison, which was all but extinct by the late 1800s.
- Philanthropist [Francis Marion Smith](#), the founder of U.S. Borax, had made his fortune and had some extra time on his hands. His wife insisted that they spend more time together, and away they went to Switzerland. While there, he remembered his hunting trip to Glacier with Grinnell and wondered why the Glacier area couldn't be marketed as “America's Switzerland.”
- Meanwhile, [Henry Stimson](#) and others were working on promoting Yellowstone, Sequoia, Yosemite, Mount Rainier and Crater Lake to be America's first five national parks. (Yellowstone became the first federally protected national park in 1872.)
- And here's where Great Northern Railway owner [James J. Hill](#) came into the picture. Smith told him all about the Switzerland trip and potential for creating the same experience in Glacier. What was missing was a way to transport people to this remote area. James already had planned to expand over the Rockies and appointed his son, [Louis Hill](#), to manage the northern extension. Louis worked closely with the Glacier team (those mentioned above) to promote the beauty of Glacier and helped lobby Congress to make it a park.
- In 1891, the Great Northern Railway crossed the Continental Divide along the south border of today's park.
- Congress finally designated Glacier a national park in 1910. To truly make the park an accessible great destination, the Switzerland of America, the park needed roads, lodging and infrastructure. The vision was that the park should be enjoyed by all Americans, not just those who could backpack and rough it as the hunting parties had done.

- In 1915, the Great Northern Railway started building hotels and Swiss-style chalets throughout the park. Louis Hill also sponsored numerous artists to come to Glacier to help promote “America’s Switzerland” as a travel destination.
- In 1921, construction began on the 53-mile “[Going-to-the-Sun](#)” road that weaves from the south entrance through key areas of the park, crosses the Continental Divide at Logan Pass (elevation 6,646 feet) and continues east to the entrance near St. Mary. The road was completed in 1932, and a grand opening was held the next year.
- Which brings us to the [Red Bus tours](#). Brainchild of [Roe Emery](#) and Walter White of the [White Motor Co.](#), the buses were designed specifically to allow tourists to have the



best (and safest) experience with a tour guide. Of the 100 Red Buses in service over the years, 33 are still on the road today, including the one we took, Bus #98, which the Ford Motor Co. modernized in 1999 for free. Ford then donated the additional funds needed to modernize the rest of the fleet. Although the engines and electronics are

modern, the wood-and-leather frame interiors remain.

Planning a Visit

A quick online search will provide you with great information on planning a trip to Glacier. Depending on what you like to do, there are lots of options and tours available. The following are tips from our first visit to the park. We’re happy to share more.

Get your bearings. Download the National Park app to get current road closures and other notices. The app has many detailed maps, but I found [this one](#) to be very helpful. The south entrance at West Glacier is the main entrance. We started at the east entrance at St. Mary. We did not have time to explore the Canadian side, but heard it is worth the visit.

Make reservations in advance. Car reservations are needed for the west entrance and may be needed for some others. If no reservations are available in advance, the National Park Service does release more every day. Tours, lunch/dinner reservations, and boat rides all can be, and should be, booked in advance.

Plan to take the Red Bus Tour. The experience is unique, and the tour guides provide so much more than just transportation. Our guide stopped frequently and took us on walking tours through waterfalls and across vistas. You will not be sitting in a car for the entire trip. Half-day and full-day trips from the west and east entrances are available. Learn more [here](#). If you drive the Going-to-the-Sun Road on your own, please note that there are vehicle restrictions—no longer than 21 feet or wider than 8 feet, including mirrors. Driving from the east, you’ll be

against the rock walls vs. starting on the west side, where you'll be on the road's edge. For a more relaxing, enjoyable experience take a Red Bus Tour.

Avoid the crowds. We arrived Labor Day weekend and were happy to see no crowds on the east side. As the week progressed and we arrived at the west side, it was much more crowded. The later you visit in the fall, the less crowded it is, but you risk snow/ice closures. I highly recommend taking the path less traveled. For example, the Two Medicine entrance didn't require car reservations and was easy to access. Yet when we visited just after Labor Day, the park was not crowded. You can take a boat tour on Two Medicine Lake, hike several trails (at right) and enjoy the quiet splendor of nature. Highly recommended!

Be Safe. Be bear aware. If you plan to hike, rent or buy bear spray and don't go off the marked trails. Never approach wildlife. The recommendation is to stay at least 100 yards away from bears, wolves and coyotes, and at least 25 yards away from other large mammals like bison, elk, moose and Bighorn sheep. Bison might look like big cows, but they can run three times faster than humans!

If you camp, be sure to keep all your food and garbage stored in bear-proof boxes. Don't leave pets outside and be careful while walking pets. Most park trails are off limits to pets for their protection and yours.

Take your time. We spent three days on the east side and two days on the west (south) side. I'd say that five days is the minimum you need. Expand to 7 to 10 days to add on the northern side and stay at a few of the lodges.

We found the half-day Red Bus Tour from St. Mary to the [Triple Divide Peak](#) was just the right amount of time.



Be sure to get out on the water at one of the lakes (McDonald, at left, Two Medicine or St. Mary). Or book a [rafting](#) trip.

Visit a lodge if you don't stay at one. Or better yet, make lunch or dinner reservations there. I recommend getting your supplies before you arrive in the park, where prices are much higher and supplies are limited.

I hope this brief introduction to Glacier National Park sparks your interest and gets you started on planning a future visit. Happy travels!

Photos: Diane Tinney