

LIFE & WORKTRAVELOFF DUTY TRAVEL

The Best Time to Visit Montana's Glacier National Park? Before the Cars Come Back.

For a few months a year, one of the most scenic roads in the country is only open for hikers and cyclists

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ONE SUNNY DAY in late May, my friend Sarah and I decided to spend a day biking through Montana's Glacier National Park. We pedaled leisurely for miles, following a thin ribbon of pavement set between a roiling creek, where icy, turquoise-green water crashed around huge boulders on one side and a steep cliff draped in emerald-green moss and speckled with wildflowers on the other. In the distance, the snow-capped peaks of the Lewis and Livingston ranges loomed. With scenery this distracting, you'd forgive me for dawdling. Every now and then I glanced over my shoulder—as a regular road biker, I've developed an almost obsessive habit of checking for oncoming cars—but I didn't see or even hear a single vehicle. Despite the fact that we were riding along Going-to-the-Sun Road, the park's most scenic and wildly popular thoroughfare, we hadn't seen a car since we passed Lake McDonald and Avalanche Campground an hour earlier.

Going-to-the-Sun Road is the only road in Glacier that traverses the park, running east to west over the Lewis Range's Logan Pass. It closes fully during winter and remains closed to motorized vehicles while park road crews take on the monumental task of clearing accumulated snow. Considering the upper road can see snow drifts of up to 60 or even 80 feet, it takes until June and often well into July to fully plow. Before then, typically starting in late April or May, hikers and cyclists are allowed on the cleared sections of the road. This year, the road won't fully open to cars until July 13, at the earliest. When the entire 50-mile stretch of pavement once again welcomes cars, buses and RVs, traffic jams are common. In other words, those few months in between the inhospitable winter and bumper-to-bumper summer present a rare chance to soak up the astounding beauty of Glacier's scenic road in relative solitude.



In 1910, Glacier was designated the 10th national park in the U.S., largely due to the efforts of conservationist and writer George Bird Grinnell. In 1911, 4,000 tourists were recorded. By 1915, a few Swiss-style mountain lodges had opened on both the east and west sides of the park to accommodate tourists. To equip visitors to see the park's rugged interior without spending days hoofing it through steep terrain, park planners conceived the Going-to-the-Sun Road. It was finished in 1932 after more than 20 years of planning and construction, and is still considered a marvel of engineering. The 6,646-foot-high Logan Pass summit makes for a maximum climb of 3,400 feet. And since the road's low-grade rise was designed to meet the capacity of a 1930s motor car, it's ideal for two-wheeled sightseeing excursions.

When Sarah, who lives nearby in Whitefish, Mont., invited me to join her on the spring ride, I jumped at the chance. We set out in the morning from the West Glacier side of the park, passing about a dozen or so other cyclists on all manner of bicycles, from pricey road bikes and mountain bikes to dusty clunkers seemingly fished out of the garage.

Soon into our ride, a few miles past McDonald Lake, I spied a few frighteningly large piles of grizzly bear scat on the pavement and thanked Sarah for insisting we attach cans of bear spray to our handlebars, along with the snacks and water we'd packed. Luckily, we never needed the spray.



As we pedaled upward, stands of cedars gave way to groves of budding aspens. On the other side of a tiny, 2-foot-high stone guardrail, the view opened up over the glacial valley. Cascading waterfalls echoed against the mountainsides as they rushed to join McDonald Creek. Under our tires, trickles of snowmelt ran down the road.

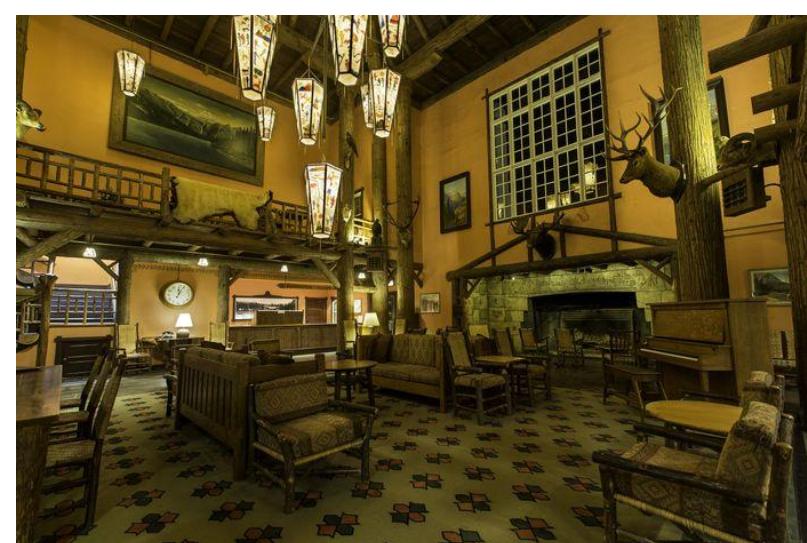
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We rode through the West Side Tunnel, nearly 200 feet long, as more melting snow rained down on either side. About a mile after the tunnel, we encountered the road's lone switchback, the precipitous Loop. We stopped briefly at the overlook to take in the dizzying view of the mountain-ringed glacial valley. We then hopped back on our bikes and slowly made our way up the 180-degree hairpin turn.

A few miles later, we rode skyward among alpine peaks, gawking at aptly named Heaven's Peak across the valley. We gushed about every new sight until we hit a literal roadblock—an array of "road closed" and avalanche signs. Just beyond, in the uppermost section, the road was still buried under snow and slush.

We turned around and headed back to the scenic overlook at the Loop for a consolation picnic, unpacking our snack of nuts, cheeses and Swiss chocolate, a suitably alpine repast.

Eventually, we put on windbreakers and sped down the descent. Although we'd already passed the same section of road, the same scenery, we found reasons to stop again. We left our bikes on the road shoulder for a long while to watch the Sacred Dancing Cascade, a rough, rippling section of McDonald Creek. Like much of the park, this was considered a holy place for the indigenous Blackfoot tribe. We still had 4 or 5 miles to cycle until we reached the parking lot, and the locally brewed beers we'd brought to celebrate our ride. But we rode slowly to make the remaining serene miles last as long as possible.



THE LOWDOWN // BIKING IN GLACIER NATIONAL PARK

Getting There: Glacier Park International Airport in Kalispell, Mont., is about 12 miles to the town of Whitefish, Mont., and about 26 miles to West Glacier, a small village at the entrance to the park.

Staying There: Inside the park, about 9 miles past the West Glacier entrance, Lake McDonald Lodge is a large, unassuming Swiss-chalet-style hotel dating back to 1914. It offers 82 modest guest rooms and an excellent location, right on the lakeshore. The lodge also offers evening programs with park rangers.

Biking There: You can rent regular or electric bikes at Glacier Guides. Visitors can pedal alone or hire one of the outfitter's guides for Going-to-the Sun Road and other Glacier Park roads. The exact timeframe for cycling on the car-free Going-to-the-Sun Road varies annually depending on conditions. The lower parts of the road are open to bicycles in May, and the upper road opens as conditions allow. Car-free conditions end in July most years. Check the park website for the latest information.