

## Travel - Escape to the Wild West... in Mighty Montana

Contributed by Kelly Gray

I'm having an affair.  
 It's been going on for a long time.  
 For years I've been cheating on Charlotte.  
 Every time I see the Uptown skyline in the distance, I fantasize about ranches.  
 When walking through Freedom Park, I visualize glaciers.  
 And every time I see one of Charlotte's 8.2 million BMW 7 series, I crave the feel of a muddy truck beneath my feet.  
 It's time to confess.  
 I may live in Charlotte, but I am in love with Montana.

It began, innocently enough, several years ago when I began my first novel about a Montana woman who revolutionizes the ranching industry. The book was to be full of cowboys and intrigue, betrayal and love, heroism and sprawling epic tales. I figured I'd write the great American novel, retire to Montana, and live happily ever after. Hey, Nicholas Sparks is worth millions thanks to his runaway hit "The Horse Whisperer," which he supposedly researched at a dude ranch not terribly far from Billings. Once when working for Bill Smith Ford in Southern Pines, North Carolina, I nearly decided to sell my belongings, buy a truck, and move to Montana cold turkey. Yes, the first time we met, Montana and me, I was already gone... lost deep within the heart of the Treasure State.

I loved Bozeman, Billings, and Terry, Miles City and all the places in between on previous stops in Montana. Each I proclaimed my favorite. Then I found a big little place called Whitefish. At every place in Montana I always say, "Now THIS is my favorite place in Montana; no, THIS is my favorite!" But as Lisa Jones, my guide and expert on all things Montana, pointed out, such statements are true only until you get to the next destination. The beauty of Montana is system overload; your breath catches and you know what people mean when they say their "cup runneth over." Everywhere you look, the eye is overwhelmed with animation as only nature can create. Winter covers the mountains in snow, while summer leaves them shrouded in green with only the snowy caps to glisten. Fall bursts through with shocking color.

Sure enough, the scenery, general vibe, and people of Whitefish earned my repetitive title as "all-time favorite place" in Montana. By the time I left after too short a visit, I was convinced of one of two things: either the townsfolk were aliens bent on assimilating me into a Whitefish Borg Collective, or the quintessential all-American western town still exists. You know the one I mean. It's the town you read about in distant stories, stories remembered with longing of an easier time that come to life again in places like Whitefish.

Take your boots off... sweet dreams await at The Duck Inn

When you travel as often as I do, you become all too accustomed to sleeping on the floor in airports. But on this trip, I was so excited about going back to Montana that I caught nary a wink on the outbound flights. I arrived under cover of darkness to Kalispell and made the short trek to the Duck Inn in downtown Whitefish, anxious to go to sleep. I love rustic lodging, so easily found in places like Montana, and the Duck didn't disappoint... it's cozy, and the colorful owner met me at the door even as the clock called for the midnight hour to come. There are just 15 guest rooms which can easily hold their own alongside many a luxury bed and breakfast. The honeymoon suites are for the seriously romantic; that mirror directly opposite the hot tub is no accident. High thread-count sheets. Massive wooden bed. A gazillion pillows and an elegant coverlet. A bottle of wine (and a good bottle to boot) in your room, courtesy of the owners. Massive flat-screen TV positioned above your very own fireplace. The whirlpool tub is more like a wading pool, and the Duck Inn sells Remedies Day Spa products in the lobby (which we'll talk more about later). When you wake up the next day with a wrinkled face and hair matted to the side of your head because you've slept so well, someone will have made batter for waffles in the lobby. Once you've pried yourself out of bed, finished your waffles and coffee and gotten a 'good morning' from owners Richard and Sandy Zielke, it's time to hit the road. Daylight is precious here, and there is much to see.

Go, see, do

The midsummer months are hot in Whitefish, but the loveliest of cool breezes is often blowing. A removable sweater or hoodie is imperative, depending on your day. The town is an alluring blend of mountain culture and physical activity. Shopping, cuisine, cycling, bars, and art galleries populate the main and surrounding streets, creating a bustling locale where everyone really does know each other's names. I began my first day at Great Northern Cycles, where we obtained leisure bikes for a ride around town. Whitefish is bike friendly and has blazed a path several miles in length that provides an up-close and personal look at the area. Art lovers abound here, and the galleries are home to works by serious artists of wide ranging disciplines and price points. In the mood for a giant statue of a bear and her cubs? Two Medicine Gallery has one on the market for around \$135,000 (a staff member said they were sure that was negotiable).

If gliding along the water in a sea kayak is more your speed, Whitefish Sea Kayaking will outfit you to paddle around

scenic Whitefish Lake. Practically everyone here is either on the way to do something outside or returning from it. From fly-fishing to kayaking, horseback riding to hiking, it's all about the outdoors here (and it shows).

Montana Coffee Traders has great coffee, but I was most impressed with their cuisine. Foodies know coffee shops aren't traditionally known for good food (anyone ever had the trademark cardboard and sugar Starbucks meal? Eek!) But Montana Coffee Traders has a gourmet kitchen that serves up fresh sandwiches like goat cheese, roasted red pepper, and spinach on fresh bread with a side of wild grain rice salad. It was D-I-V-I-N-E. Whether you're going out on the lake, hiking, or horseback riding, a full belly is a good thing to have in Montana. Many of the activities are physical and require stamina. The better shape you're in, the better time you'll have.

#### All aboard the train to Glacier National Park

There will never be enough time to see everything in Glacier National Park. It's just too vast. The best thing to do is decide how much time you can spend in Montana and divide that number by three. Spend at least one third of your trip in the park. There are many ways to get there, and many ways to see the park. My favorite is by train, then by car and foot. Train travel has always been a superb way to travel and it's still utterly fabulous. In fact, if you're in Montana there's practically no better way to experience the scenery than by train. Thanks to Amtrak, getting to and from Glacier National Park from Whitefish is easy and inexpensive. You can leave early in the morning, rent a car for the day and return that evening, or take the train and catch a ride back with a friend after a day of hiking. There are many ways to get to Glacier, but train is the most fun. Someone else does the driving, and the observation car provides panoramic views you just can't capture by car. Well, unless you're in a convertible. Lisa took me in her father's "windy car" on the Going to the Sun Road to Glacier, and the views were as amazing. By train or convertible, along the way you'll see why this national park is one of the most photographed, most talked about, and most written about in the country, and, indeed, the world. We hiked to a place called Avalanche Lake. It's quite a revelation. You're hiking through the most beautiful wooded areas on earth, wondering if at some point you'll hike right into another continent, and happen upon a majestic lake, lush new patch of forest, and one of hundreds of waterfalls. After leaving Avalanche Lake, we drove out to Two Medicine where we enjoyed yet another heart-stopping view of a spectacular lake against the backdrop of imperious mountains. It was at Two Medicine that I realized there would never truly be a favorite place in Montana, as they are all equally exceptional, and all my favorite places. If ever there was a sight to see before you die, it's Glacier National Park.

#### Giddy up

I have been to ranches, and have always ridden horses. But riding in an English saddle around a ring and riding up mountain trails with Montana scenery in the background is quite different. Horseback riding at Bar W Guest Ranch is, well, something special. Any place that has a pet goat who acts like the family dog gets my vote from the get go. At the Bar W, Carlos the goat is the welcome wagon. After giving Carlos a pat on the head, it's time to ride one of many horses at the ranch. If you're lucky and weather cooperates, you'll get to ride up to the lookout and see some incredible views. The ride is relaxing and easy and a lot of fun. Bar W has a lot more than just trail rides and is a full-service guest ranch. Ladies come from far and wide for their "Cowgirl Up" events each summer. Don't leave without a fabulous Bar W t-shirt and a tour of the ranch from one of the cowboys.

#### Eat, Drink and Be Merry

After a long day riding horses, biking, hiking, sea kayaking—I could go on and on—it's time for dinner. Attending a wine tasting dinner at The Boat Club is like what you'd find in any major city, but without the pretense. I enjoyed such delights as pepper crusted tuna, braised ribs with huckleberry, and seared bison tenderloin. Paired with appropriate wines from the incomparable Ridge Vineyards (the Zinfandel Paso Robles cannot be beat), the evening was a vintner dinner to remember. The Boat Club is located in the Lodge at Whitefish Lake, another beautiful property which boasts incredible views of Whitefish Lake.

You've got a few more stops before you leave Whitefish, Montana. No trip to Montana would be complete without a visit to Remedies Day Spa. No ordinary spa, Remedies Day Spa is all about, well, food. Masks, exfoliators and moisturizers, lotions and creams and bath products are all made from some sort of food. When I lived in Manhattan I spent thousands on my skin at Mario Badescu Spa. In Montana I spent less than a hundred dollars to achieve the same effect. The Remedies products smell so good, you really could just eat them. Made from scratch from local ingredients by local people, the best thing about the Remedies products is you'll learn how to use them yourself at home.

What could be better after a spa treatment than a meal at the local haute gourmet restaurant? Not much, unless you stop in at The Loft Wine Bar beforehand. I attended a reception for the National Parks Conservation Association at The Loft Wine Bar before enjoying dinner one evening.

This was one of highlights of the trip, for it was here we learned of the plight of Glacier National Park and what we can do as a nation to protect it. What we as travelers must constantly convey to lawmakers is that preservation of the beautiful lands of this country IS economic growth. Without the land, the people won't come to see it. The Crown of the Continent is part of the geo-tourism map guide. Geo-tourism is tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place. Even as I write this, mining companies are hard at work trying to put a mine near Glacier National Park, which would ruin the river system and make wretched its future and the future of Montana's entire eco-system. Never before has it been so urgent that travelers support initiatives which preserve and conserve our national parks.

Our final stops in Whitefish were culinary -- Tupelo Grille and Rising Sun Bistro. At Tupelo Grille I dined on decadent dishes of fresh fish and super rich crab and crawfish dip – ooh la la, how I miss New Orleans style cooking. At Rising Sun, the appetizers are the star of the show, and the “bistro blue cheese dressing” was one of the best blue cheese dressings I’ve ever tasted. Following dinner in Whitefish, don’t miss the dancing at the Great Northern.

All too soon, it was time to leave. Only a few short hours would see me on a plane back to the Queen City, and my Montana would again be far, far away. But a love this deep lasts forever... and when I start missing Montana, I'll just put on a great Robin Rogers blues song and know it won't be long before I am back there.

#### Resources

[www.duckinn.com](http://www.duckinn.com)

<http://www.visitmt.com/> (Whitefish Sea Kayaking)

<http://www.thedailyhabit.wordpress.com/> (Great Northern Cycles)

<http://www.barwguestranch.com/>

<http://www.lodgeatwhitefishlake.com/>

<http://www.tupelogrille.com/>

<http://www.twomedicinegallery.com/>

<http://www.whitefishwine.com/> (The Loft)

<http://www.nps.gov/> (Glacier National Park)

<http://www.npca.org/> (National Parks Conservation Association)

<http://www.ridgewine.com/> (Paso Robles Zinfandel)

<http://www.remediesdayspa.com/>

<http://www.coffeetraders.com/>

~ Kelly Gray