

Bicycling Glacier National Park

By Linda Kraus

Glacier National Park is so beautiful it looks fake, sort of like a Hollywood Movie set where everything is perfect and the colors are incredible. Glaciated lakes are blue-green and crystal clear. While cycling about 100 feet above the lakes and streams, you can pick out the large rounded rocks on the bottom. Waterfalls crash down the upside of the mountain and are routed under the grate-covered road to the downside.

We started our 6-day Backroads Bicycling trek on the West side of Glacier at Lake McDonald. Within the first 10 minutes of cycling, I spotted my first bear in the brush about 50 feet to my right. It was as if we were in Disney and someone pushed the bear out as a prop so as not to disappoint the crowd that wildlife could be spotted readily in the park. He was brown and was oblivious to the 10 cyclists who had just passed by on a paved bike path. I thought it was a grizzly based on the stuffed replica of one I had just seen at the Alberta Visitors Center. A few days later, a couple told me that the grizzly has a hump on its back. I told them that I did not inspect it that closely.

We wisely had the creme de la creme ride early in the trip and tackled Going to the Sun Road the following day. The road is only open for a short window of time from mid June to mid October due to the large amount of snowfall that it receives and must be snowplow removed for the tourist season. The map description says, **"The Going to the Sun Road is one of the world's most spectacular highways. Bisecting the heart of Glacier, this 50 mile long road follows the shore of the park's two largest lakes and hugs the cliffs below the Continental Divide as it traverses Logan Pass."** It was incredible beyond belief. There were waterfalls, wildflowers, streams, lakes, snow-capped mountains in the distance, and lush greenery. For 20 miles we cycled uphill to Logan Pass at elevation 6646 feet. It started out as a gradual climb along the lake but then the granny gear was pressed into service as the road grade became steeper. Cyclists had to be at the summit by 11 am by law so as not to compete with the motorized traffic from tourists that drive the route just to the summit and back the way they came. About a half a mile from the summit, I spotted a white mountain goat in a parking area licking the pavement. Someone later told me that they are attracted to antifreeze that has leaked from cars. Another prop, I thought.

Our route traversed the park from West to East where we spent the night at Many Glacier Hotel, which was on a lake. The last few miles to the hotel felt like the most windy place on earth! I had an eerie feeling pulling up to this old windy lodge as if I was entering the hotel from the movie "The Shining". With a fierce pull of the door to the hotel, it finally opened and slammed shut behind me. I told a fellow rider that it reminded me of "The Shining" and he began to chant, "REDRUM, REDRUM, REDRUM" The wind howled all night long and the lake had permanent white caps on it.

The following day, we biked further East to exit the park boundary before traveling North and going through border patrol to enter Canada. We cycled West again to enter Waterton Lakes National Park in Alberta, Canada. We stayed at the Prince of Wales Hotel for two nights, which sits on a high bluff above Waterton Lake. This hotel looked like a Swiss Chalet and had a much more graceful, refined feel and the staff was more attentive as well. "High tea" at \$29.95 per person was being served in the lobby as we arrived. Families were seated at white cloth-covered tables sampling biscuits and other tasty looking small bits of food from silver 3-tiered trays while sipping tea from fine pink floral patterned china cups. Our bike group was having "High Coca Cola" for \$1.25 per person purchased from the adjoining gift store as we sat on leather sofas in sweaty bike clothes near the front desk waiting for the keys to our rooms. The view from the lobby at the back of the hotel cathedral windows was of Waterton Lake and town of Waterton.

The following day was a "rest day" which included options of several different hikes in Waterton National Park. We chose to sit in the lodge to read, write postcards and visit the town of Waterton to shop and have lunch by the lake.

The following day offered a long option of 92 miles from Waterton to East Glacier peppered with too many hills to keep track. At the lunch stop, a fellow cyclist said that the next miles of the cue sheet had the word uphill listed 5 times. I said that the word downhill was in there too but it was minimized and sandwiched between other stuff so it looked like at after cycling 47 miles of hills that we had more climbing to do. By the time we reached 67 miles, I started to feel like the horse that knew the way back to the barn and was not sure if I'd add the 15 mi. out and back option to Two Medicine. A sugar kick from some cookies washed down with Gatorade gave me the carbs I needed to feel energized again. I could have gone either way at the junction to Two Medicine though and left the decision up to a fellow cyclist. He said he was turning right to Two Medicine so I rationalized that the 7.5 mi. one way to the lake was nothing in the scheme of things. A park service sign stating that we were entering the route to Two Medicine warned of entering an active bear area. A few miles later, a large black bear ambled across the road about 75 feet in front of me. The props keep coming on this trip. I immediately made a u-turn and said, "bear ahead" to my fellow cyclist. I guess that can be added to the lingo of "car back" or "walker up" which is bikespeak in other parts of the country where bears are not part of the landscape. We cycled slowly as the bear made his oblivious way across the road. We continued to the lake at Two Medicine. A slight drizzle of rain and shivering caused me to take cover in the Two Medicine log cabin style General Store for hot tea. The newspaper headlines there featured a cover depicting two grizzly bears with an article about the park closing of the famous hiker's Highline Trail which starts at the top of Logan Pass of Going to the Sun Road. Apparently two grizzlies approached two women on the trail and did not back off despite other hikers who congregated with shovels and cans of bear spray. It was deemed that the grizzlies were aggressive so the trail was closed to hikers. Of course that's all I could think of while having to cycle out of Two Medicine the 7.5 mi. back to the main road to bike the last 4 mi. to the Glacier Park Lodge located on the Blackfoot Indian reservation.

The last and final 6th day of the trek took us past the wild and scenic Flathead River past the Continental Divide and over Maria's Pass at 5220 feet which is the lowest point along the divide within the U.S. A short out and back road to a scenic overlook called Goat Lick led us to an area where sodium rich soil attracts white mountain goats. We spotted moms with the babies in tow frolicking along the high slopes of the dirt-covered mountain.

I highly recommend a trip to Montana's Glacier National Park. The cycling was very challenging and although I logged 280 miles, there are plenty of options to take the van shuttle to shorten the daily route or to shuttle you up to the top of hills only to have to cycle down the hills. If you are interested in bicycle touring without having to lug all of your gear, go to www.backroads.com or email me for advice on a trip. They offer many trips to Europe, Latin America and Asia as well as trips in the U.S. They also offer multi sport trips for those who would prefer to add some other daily activities like rafting or hiking to their daily itinerary. I can be reached at bikegirl227@aol.com. Happy cycling!