

# THE VANISHING JEWEL: Flying to and Touring Glacier National Park (Part 2)

by MATTHEW MCDANIEL

*In Part One of this article, we left off after completing the 53-mile drive across Glacier National Park (GNP) via the famous Going to the Sun Road. We pick up the story along the final stretch of that most picturesque of drives.*

**T**he final 10 miles of the Going to the Sun Road follows the north shore of St. Mary Lake (Glacier's second largest lake), ending at the community of St. Mary with a year-round population of less than 50. There, we checked in to our cabin at the St. Mary Lodge & Resort and picnicked on our porch, a few yards from Divide Creek, enjoying views of Otokomi and East Flattop Mountains. The St. Mary Visitor's Center provided tips for seeing the eastern park and we ventured out again for a quick hike to a historic ranger station. Afterward, we decided there was enough daylight left for more exploring and proceeded north to the Many Glacier area.

## American Alps

Several chalets and lodges are scattered throughout the park. Most were built in the park's earliest years, prior to the completion of the Going to the Sun Road by the Great Northern Railroad to boost tourism (and ticket sales) to the area. With so many of Glacier's peaks having the steep and jagged appearance of the Alps, the railroads made liberal use of European architectural styles and promoted the experience as an alternative to lengthy and costly vacationing across the Atlantic. The largest and oldest such lodge is the Many Glacier Hotel.

About 30 minutes north of St. Mary, Many Glacier Hotel offers incredible views of Swiftcurrent Lake and the steep, Swiss Alp-like peaks surrounding the Swiftcurrent Valley. While "Many Glacier" is a named glacier within sight of the hotel, its name was derived from the fact that so *many* glaciers could be viewed from its location. Ironically, only a few of those glaciers remain today, Many Glacier itself being one of them. Celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2015, it's hard to imagine the hardships encountered by workers battling brutal cold, wind, snow, and terrain to erect the grand Swiss-style lodge during the winter season a century ago.

A short drive west is the Swiftcurrent Campground and Trailhead. Taking advantage of the long hours of sunlight available this far north during late summer, we wrapped



*The Many Glacier Hotel as seen from the opposite shore of Swiftcurrent Lake.*

up our day with one more three-mile nature hike. While the Alp-esque spires were captivating, sighting a moose cow and her calf feeding in a glacier-fed lake was the highlight of the evening. Back at the cabin, my pedometer read nearly 35,000 steps for the day and sleep came easily to us all.

## Oh, Canada

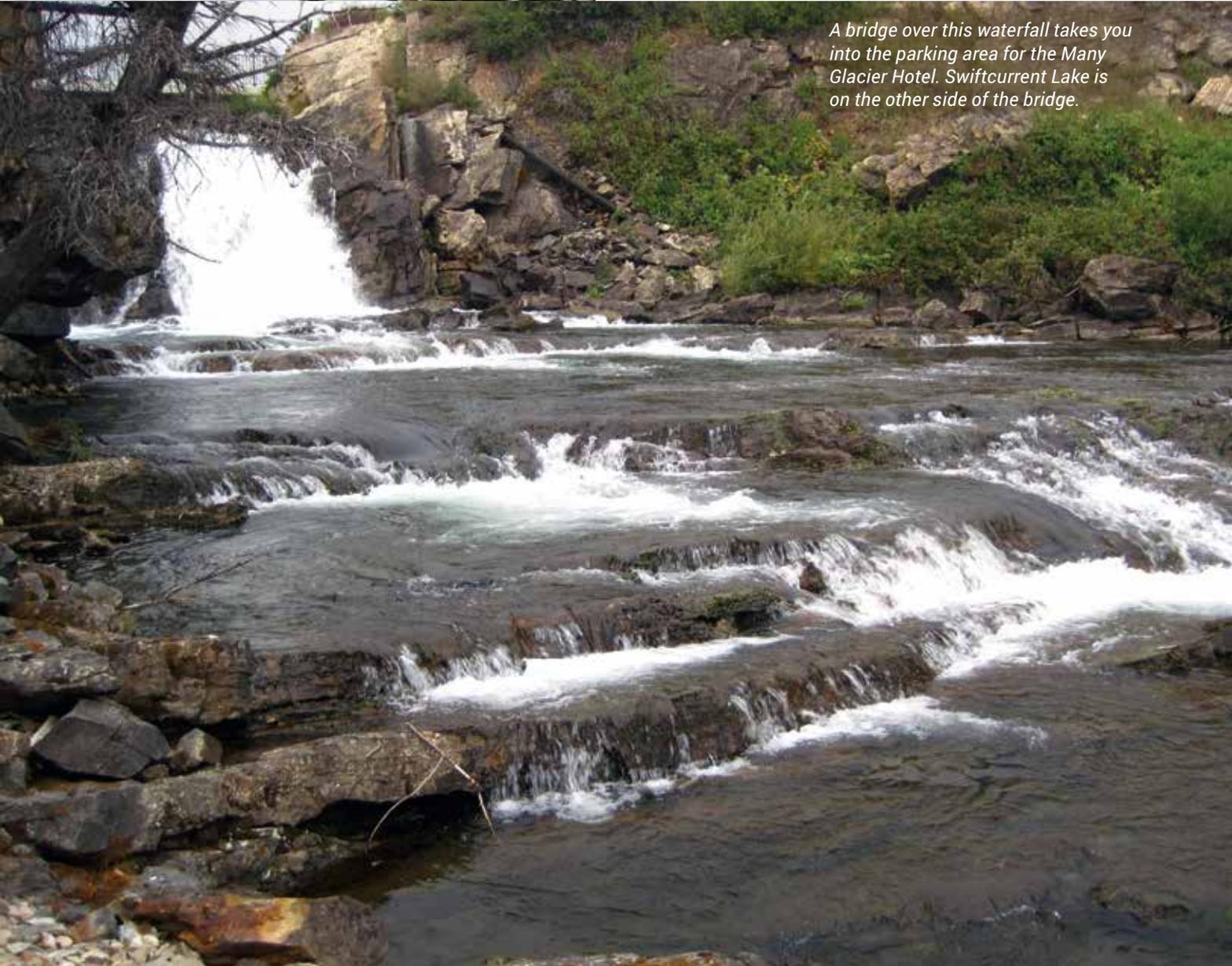
Due to the fire-induced closure of Highway 2 (which follows the perimeter of GNP's southern half), we had to bypass the areas south of St. Mary, which were the most frequently visited regions in the pre-Going to the Sun Road years (1910-32). We were most disappointed to have to skip Two Medicine, in particular, which remains popular today for its vivid rock and foliage colorations and numerous waterfalls. Our alternative was north to Canada and Waterton Lakes National Park.

Winding through the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, the mere 45-minute drive to the border crossing was desolate. The whole area is free-range cattle country and we met many cows on and alongside the road. We did not, however, see a single other vehicle between St. Mary and the border. Re-entering the park just prior to the border, clearing customs was a simple matter of presenting passports and answering a few friendly questions. The next 45-minutes were spent cruising to the Waterton Townsite in crystal clear (smoke-free) air, marveling at the panoramic views and endless visibilities. Unlike the tiny villages found in U.S. National Parks, Canadian parks can encompass towns with year-round populations and all sorts of commercial retailers and eateries. Such is the case at Waterton, where around 100 people reside



year-round in a village so quaint and friendly that it only enhances the experience of visiting the park.

Waterton's most predominate feature is the Prince of Wales Hotel. Also built by the Great Northern Railroad, it was done so with a slightly different motivation. Built during the 1920's-era of U.S. prohibition, the railroad hoped to lure travelers (and sell tickets) into Canada, where tourists could imbibe legally, while enjoying the superbly crafted hotel and its breathtaking views. Situated at the confluence of Upper and Middle Waterton Lakes atop a promontory, one must stroll around the front lawn to truly appreciate both the location and the weather it helps create. Ringed by miles of towering mountains and deep valleys, the hotel is routinely exposed to howling winds that funnel through the valleys and accelerate as they pass over the bluff. Half the experience of the view is taking it in while leaning steeply into the wind to avoid being toppled over. The hotel is welcoming to guests and gawkers alike, offering fine dining choices and high-tea by the huge picture windows. As with most lodging within Glacier-Waterton, the Prince of Wales Hotel's season is less than four months long from June to mid-September.



*A bridge over this waterfall takes you into the parking area for the Many Glacier Hotel. Swiftcurrent Lake is on the other side of the bridge.*



*The Prince of Wales Hotel, near the Village of Waterton, Canada.*

Waterton has two main scenic drives in the southern part of the park. The 16km (10-mile) Akamina Parkway, follows Cameron Creek southwest-bound and ends at the north shore of Lake Cameron. In the crisp morning air, Lake Cameron was as clear as bottled water and offered a variety of human-powered boating options



*The view looking south, from the front lawn of The Prince of Wales Hotel. The Lower Waterton Lake extends across the border into the U.S. and is nearly 500 feet deep in places.*

(motorized watercraft are prohibited). The south shore, which was actually back across the border in Montana, is prime Grizzly habitat and boaters and hikers are warned not to approach that area, but instead to observe from a safe distance with binoculars and telephoto lenses. Yet there are miles of safe, peaceful hiking to be had along Lake Cameron's western shore and in the adjacent forests. The 15km (9.3-mile) Red Rock Parkway ends at Red Rock Canyon, where trails to waterfalls and down into the canyon itself beckon. Rain shortened our hiking there, but didn't dampen our appreciation for the vibrantly colored canyon. After stopping back at the town site for warm drinks, we'd unknowingly saved the best for last. Approaching the park exit, we spotted a juvenile black bear snacking on wild berries. We were able to stop near it enough to watch easily, but without disturbing its meal, other than it giving us an occasional nonchalant glance. I'm sure its mother was probably watching warily from the thick brush or lakeshore nearby, but she did not make her position known. Nonetheless, it was a thrilling moment for us all. We retraced our route back to St. Mary, making two stops along the way. The tiny hamlet of Babb is near the only public-use airport near the northwest edge of

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Blankiston Falls is a short hike from the Red Rock Canyon, both situated at the end of the scenic Red Rock Parkway in Waterton Lakes National Park, Canada.

the park. Babb Airport's (49S) 3,800 feet x 110 feet turf runway is more than adequate for a Cirrus, but the airport notes mentioning tall grass and gopher holes would make it a no-go for me. Nonetheless, I couldn't resist checking it out when I noticed the wind sock while driving by. It was exactly as you would expect an isolated turf airport to be – appearing unkempt and all but abandoned! The Blackfeet Reservation and Glacier areas are known for their abundance of wild huckleberries and we stopped at a little cafe near Babb to pick up some dessert to go with dinner at the cabin. Turns out that huckleberry pie is double the price of more traditional berry pies, but when in Rome!

## Departure

During our final night in Glacier, the wind howled and the rain slapped the roof of our cabin relentlessly. Even our exhaustion from our day in Canada was not enough to allow us to sleep soundly through the calamity outside. But when we awoke with the sun, we were greeted by the season's first fresh snowfall on the mountaintops and they glimmered beautifully against the dawn's red sky.

We heard that Highway 2 had reopened and we briefly considered taking that route around the southern perimeter of the park, back to Kalispell. While it was far longer, it would have all been virgin territory to our eyes. We reconsidered when we discovered that much of the route was limited to one lane and that the two-way

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*A juvenile black bear was foraging for food between Lower Waterton Lake and the main road, approaching the park exit from Waterton Lakes National Park.*

traffic would be metered for long portions of the route. Instead, we bisected the park again, via the Going to the Sun Road. This time, the scenic overlooks on the eastern portion of the road had been reopened and we were able to partake of several views and paths that had been off limits two days before. This helped break up the drive back to Kalispell and made us wish we had more time to explore the scenery of Glacier.

Re-entering civilization and cellphone coverage, I made a quick call to Glacier Jet Center (GJC) less than an hour prior to our arrival there. As requested, they had the plane fueled

and awaiting our arrival a few steps outside the FBO's door. We were allowed to pull alongside it on the apron to transfer our belongings from the rental car. Inside, the Jet Center's modern flight planning facilities and other amenities made the process of heading out quick and painless; even for the kids, who had its great lobby and kid-friendly television to hold their attention. The GJC staff reclaimed the rental car, collected our payment, and we were on our way. Departing KGPI was not tricky or difficult, but attention should be given to the Departure Procedure (DP). Technically an Obstacle Departure Procedure (ODP) versus a Standard Instrument Departure (SID), the SKOTT TWO DEPARTURE should be referenced whether departing IFR or visually. As luck would have it, it was good VFR to about 10,000 feet MSL and we were able to remain visually clear of the surrounding mountain terrain, during the initial climb-out. ATC did assign us a turn that I refused, preferring to continue the climb out over the Kalispell VOR (FCA) and on towards SKOTT Intersection (per the ODP) to gain more altitude and terrain clearance before beginning the mountain crossing on the eastward route. This route also takes you over the sparkling Flathead Lake for one last memorable view of the area before turning for home – whether you're heading east or west. Near Glacier, the Rockies are quite narrow, west-to-east, making the crossing of the jagged peaks a relatively quick affair. Nonetheless, they are still the Rockies and all the requisite precautions are still in order. The most prevalent, even on VFR days with light ground winds, is



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*On our last morning in the Glacier area, we awoke to the first snowfall of the season. The mountaintops north of our St. Mary cabin glimmered in the sunrise, capped with a fresh coat of white.*

respecting the wind speed and direction while climbing across the peaks. Winds can shift and increase quickly in the climb, causing possible strong downdrafts, windshears and mountain turbulence that will make you wish you'd put a little more altitude between the aircraft's belly and the terrain before turning to cross the spires. Mountain wave downwind of the range can make for an uncomfortable ride, as well. Establishing the likelihood of mountain wave should be part of your flight planning, in order to choose routes and altitudes least likely to be affected by it.

## Proceed Direct

In 1910, President Taft signed the bill establishing Glacier National Park as the 10<sup>th</sup> park in the National Park System. At the time, its name was wholly appropriate. In the 1850s, when European settlers first began to take notice of the beauty and vast natural resources in the area, there were at least 150 glaciers still actively reshaping the landscape and providing vital resources to all manner of nature and wildlife downstream. Today, that number has dwindled to 25 active glaciers. If climate change trends continue, scientists believe that GNP's remaining glaciers will disappear within the next 15 years, by 2030. Waterways will shrink, once mighty waterfalls will become trickles or dry up completely, and all forms of plant and animal life will have to adjust. Many types will, undoubtedly, be unable to adapt fast enough and will become extinct within Glacier. Thereafter, the park may remain stunning in its rugged and secluded beauty, but it will never again be viewed in the same way. Its name will become a reminder of what once was, rather than a description of what is. So, file your flight plan with the most direct routing feasible and activate it before, like the glaciers, its valid time is allowed to expire and you miss the opportunity to see something that for the next generation will exist only in photos and author's musings. ☺

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*Matthew McDaniel is a Master & Gold Seal CFII, ATP, MEI, AGI, & IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 25 years of flying, he has logged over 15,000 hours total, over 5,500 hours of instruction-given, and over 5,000 hours in all models of the Cirrus. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services, LLC (www.progaviation.com), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001. Currently, he also flies the Airbus A-320 series for an international airline, holds six turbine aircraft type ratings, and has flown over 80 aircraft types. Matt is one of 25 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation for seven consecutive two-year terms. He can be reached at matt@progaviation.com or (414) 339-4990.*

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