



Traversing Glacier National Park

Description

Glacier National Park in northwest Montana is a sight to behold. Its 1.5 million square miles are largely untouched by human development – there's only ONE road that connects the east and west entrances of the park – and its dramatic mountain peaks and tree-lined valleys dominate the landscape.

It is a national park that has been on our list for the past year, and it caught our attention because of the beautiful photos we saw from friends who visited it in the past. As we planned our road trip through the 11 westernmost contiguous states in the U.S., we knew Glacier was a must-do. (Teaser: of all four national parks we visited on this trip – Zion, Glacier, Yellowstone, and Grand Tetons – Glacier was our favorite!)



The drive from Seattle to Glacier National Park



The drive to Glacier National Park was worth the trip alone. Our route had us coming in from the west (Spokane, WA, to be specific). On the drive to West Glacier, MT, we enjoyed twisting turns on highways that hugged mountainsides, panoramic lakeshore drives (Flathead Lake, MT, is MASSIVE), and sun-soaked yellow fields of the summer canola bloom.



As we were in the middle of a 5-week jam-packed road trip, we only had two nights and 1.5 days to spend in the park. We got lucky with last-minute lodging and stayed at the [West Glacier Motel](#) in West Glacier Village, the town closest to the park's west entrance. It is a tiny town with a campsite feel – a few restaurants, mini-golf, a bar (open late), a gas station, a grocery store, and a gift shop.

For campers, there are many options in the park. Click [here](#) for the camping page at Glacier National Park.



PSA

To control crowds, Glacier National Park instituted a ticketing system for visitors. We learned of this too late in the game and failed to buy tickets 60 days in advance. Long story short – the park has a fee to enter like any other National Park, and no reservation is required.

However, Glacier National Park requires a ticket to access Going-to-the-Sun Road (GTTSR), the only road that connects the east and west sides of the park and, practically speaking, the only road that gets you anywhere meaningful in the park (from the west side). FYI, you are automatically granted

access to GTTSR if you have lodging at one of the few options inside the park borders along the road (Village Inn at Apgar, Lake McDonald Lodge, Rising Sun Motor Inn, Many Glacier Hotel, Swiftcurrent Motor Inn), have a Red Bus Tour, or have a boat tour on Lake McDonald or St. Mary Lake (NOTE: these are only 2 of the four major lakes in the park).

UPDATE – This ticketing system ended on September 6, 2021. The lesson learned here is to keep on top of the current system, as it could change in the future again.

We have arrived



After a long drive from eastern Washington, we arrived at the [Apgar Visitor Center](#) in the early afternoon, just in time to explore for a few minutes before hopping on one of the park's famous [Red Bus Tours](#). It's a bit pricey (\$65), but we thought it was well worth it.

We took the Western Alpine route that brought us up to the top of the continental divide and made many stops along the way. It was a tremendous first-day activity that introduced us to the history and stories of the park while also crossing off some of the major sights.



The tour lasted from 3–7 PM, so we headed back to West Glacier after it ended to grab dinner. We decided to try the one real restaurant in town – [Glacier Highlands](#) – and sampled some of its good food options and great local beer selection.

We would've loved to mini-golf, but it was crowded and near closing time as we were walking back.

Our full day in Glacier National Park



We wanted to take advantage of our one full day in the park, so we set our alarms for (what we deemed) an early wake-up and nodded off for the night. At 7:00 AM the following morning, we were up and out the door.

What is Going to the Sun Road (GTTSR)?

GTTSR will be mentioned often in this article as it is the only road that allows you to traverse the entirety of the park from east to west (or vice versa). Besides granting you access to all the hiking trails, lakes, glaciers, and viewpoints along the way, it also provides a thrilling experience by car as you hug the side of the historic road and climb one of the most dramatic stretches of The Continental Divide.

To reserve an entry ticket for GTTSR, book early. Click [here](#) for the Recreation.gov website.



A few tips for these all-day adventures

1. The park is MASSIVE. Take into account how long it will take to drive from place to place as you're planning your day and make sure you fill up on gas before you enter the park!
2. Take advantage of the space in your car and pack it with food, water, a first aid kit, and extra clothing. Layers are extra crucial because there are significant temperature swings throughout the day (50-60 degrees in the morning and temps in the 90s in the afternoon). There are not too many options for food throughout the park (mainly because it's so big), so pick up snacks and groceries before you enter.
3. Do not plan on using your phone for anything requiring the internet because there is ZERO cell service inside the park. Even in West Glacier, our phones showed bars of LTE but struggled to load anything. The only place we got Wi-Fi during our stay was at our motel. Even at the large Many Glacier Hotel, only guests can access the Wi-Fi.

Due to this, we have three recommendations for navigating around the park

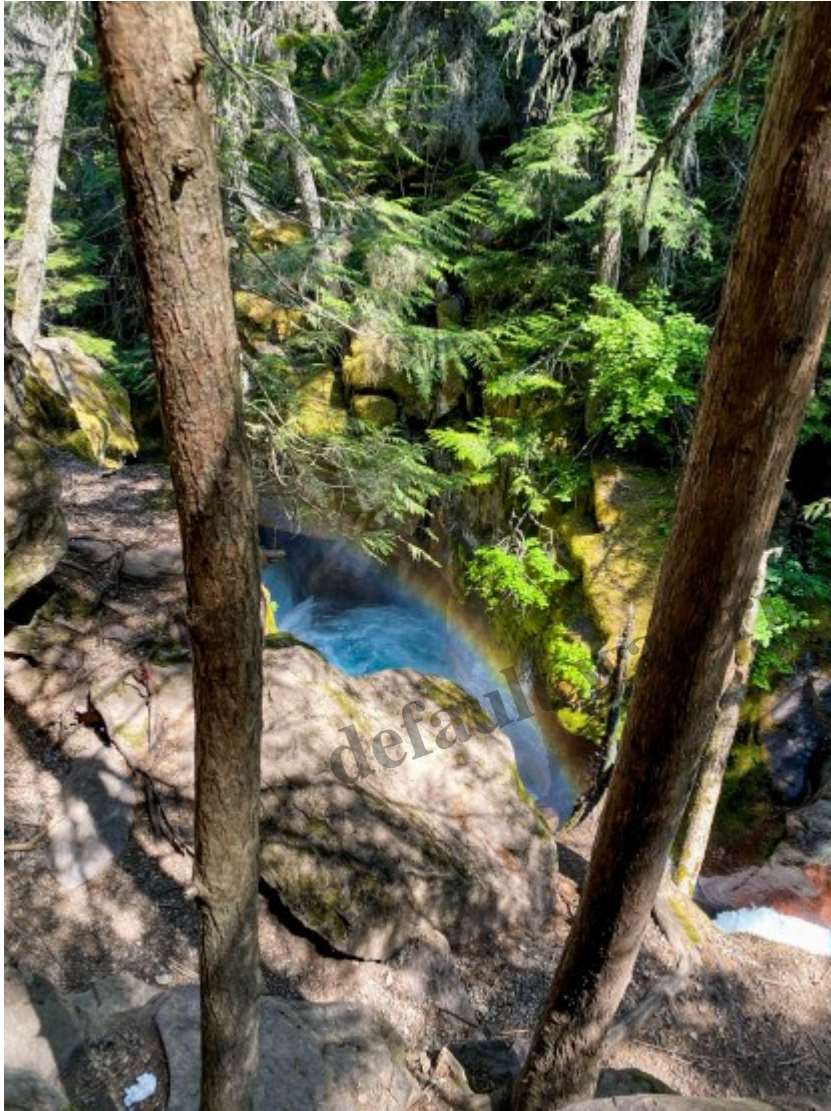
- Download an Offline Map (in Google Maps) of the entire park + surrounding area – this should only take 5-10 minutes if you have decent service.
- It sounds old school, but get your hands on different types of maps – we got a bunch of free ones from the park entrance, our motel, etc. Some of them showed more detail on the hikes vs. glaciers etc. Find (or screenshot) one that outlines hikes with their lengths and elevation gains.
- Download the “AllTrails” app, [link here](#), to help you choose hikes in advance. This has ratings and photos for each hike – the paid version also has an offline feature.

Off we go



With the car loaded and our offline maps in hand, we set off onto GTTSR and into the park. We researched AllTrails the night before and decided on the Trail of the Cedars hike as our first stop. (FYI – we only hiked about 12 miles of trails, but there are 700 miles of trails in the park, so there is A LOT

more to do!) On our way there, we pulled to the side of the road to take a few steps down to the shore of Lake McDonald and take in the scenery and feel the cold crisp water. After the quick stop, we got lucky and found parking at the Trail of the Cedars / Avalanche Lake trailhead.



Note*

The two most challenging places to park along GTTSR were Avalanche Lake (again, we got lucky) and Logan Pass Visitor Center. People will tell you to “go early to get a spot,” but everyone has their own definition of “early,” and it might be challenging to guarantee a spot after 6:00 AM (then you’d be waiting for all those early people to get done).

Avalanche Trail was seemingly easier to hover around and wait for a spot to open; Logan Pass was full of cars searching for spots, and we gave up after 15 minutes around 1 PM (and then came back at 8 PM). Otherwise, the small viewpoint lots were easy enough to get lucky and find a spot after a 0-5 min wait.*

Trail of the Cedars/Avalanche Lake is a 5-6 mile out and-back trail that took roughly 2.5 hours. If you’re

strapped for time, you should squeeze in the first part of the Trail – a 30-minute loop with a partial boardwalk. When you reach the top of this loop, you'll see Avalanche Gorge and can walk up this for a minute or two to see more of it. Otherwise, we'd highly recommend making the whole Trail – Avalanche Lake is big, beautiful, and exceptionally still (make sure you go up to the beach area). It's a perfect spot for a picnic and a lake float. Seriously we wish we had brought a float with us (the one you could blow up yourself) because the lake is so shallow and calm. If you do this, please send us a photo!

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First hike complete

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Excited by this amazing first hike, we hopped back in the car and continued driving east on GTTSR. As we made our way along, we stopped at various viewpoints, including Jackson Glacier viewpoint (where we did a super short hike to a tunnel under the road) and Sunrift Gorge & Baring Falls (which are short hikes that go up and down the hillside from the same parking lot).

As we approached the park's east entrance, we headed north to Many Glacier instead of south to Two Medicine. These are the two other roads that go into the park. They are only accessible from the east side and stop about a third of the way into the park.

Curiosity Pays

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On the drive into Many Glacier, we saw many cars stopped on the road and decided to inquire...low and behold, we saw our first moose! As we continued towards Many Glacier Hotel, the sky grew dark, and the clouds looked heavy. We had planned to hike Apikuni Falls (short, but all uphill) or rent a boat on Swiftcurrent Lake, but the weather had other plans.



Instead, we rode out the torrential downpour in the Many Glacier Hotel; a must-visit if you ask us! Some of the lodges – and this one for sure – have a unique Swiss theme. We saw something that claimed Glacier is the “Switzerland of North America” – not sure how authentic this is, but it’s certainly interesting. Since we had the time, we explored the hotel and stopped in the general store (there’s one in each of the park’s hotels) to grab a coffee and a six-pack of local beer. To our surprise, the selection was incredible, and it was ridiculously cheap!

The clouds cleared

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After the clouds cleared, we only had 20 minutes to spare before leaving for our boat tour, so we hustled along Swiftcurrent Trail to Fishercap Lake. It was also shallow and super calm (but small), and we'd also picnic and float there in a heartbeat.

We wanted to continue to Redrock and Bullhead Lakes but didn't have time. If you do the whole thing, the last part has many challenging switchbacks that connect you to the Loop trail on the west side of

GTTSR.

Boat tour



We jumped back in the car, headed out of the park through the Many Glacier entrances, and drove south back to the east entrance for our 6:30 PM scenic boat tour of Saint Mary Lake. It was a great way to take in the east side of the continental divide and its uniquely stunning scenery while learning more about the park's history.



Pro tip – we saw people bring cans of beer on the boat. We grabbed the six-pack we bought at Many Glacier Hotel to sip on while taking in the sights.

The tour wasn't too long, but an excellent way to get off our feet for a little while. After the tour, we stopped by a Native America Speaks event at the recommendation of our guide. This one, in particular, was put on by a local from the Blackfeet Nation. He played the guitar and sang his own songs that told stories of his tribe's culture.

Native America Speaks event is the longest-running indigenous speaker series in the National Park Service and is a unique way to learn about this complex part of American history. We loved the musical aspect of ours and appreciated how open and real the artist was in describing the struggles of his people. Here's a [link](#) for the series at Glacier, specifically.



Dusk sets over Glacier National Park



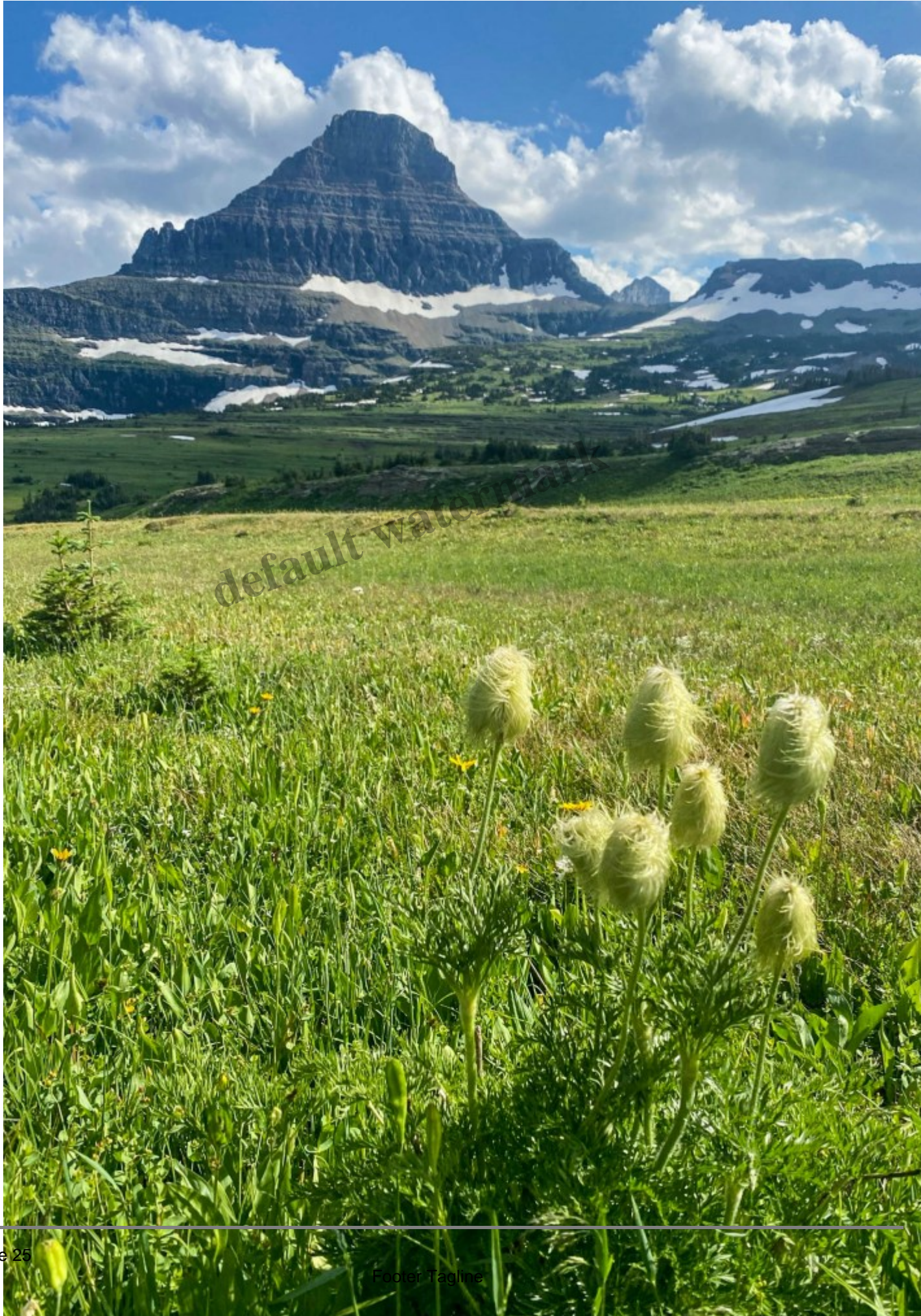
The day was turning to dusk, and we had a long drive back to West Glacier ahead of us, but we decided to stop at Logan Pass Visitor Center because we couldn't get parking there earlier in the day. Up there, at the top of the continental divide, you can take in golden hour views of the dramatic landscape east and west of you or hike the Hidden Lake Overlook trail. This Trail is apparently 1.5 miles, but it felt longer (maybe because it's entirely uphill). It's an extremely popular hike, but even in July, there were 3-4 sizable snowbanks we had to cross, so wear your most appropriate footwear!



We did this hike at night (starting at 9:15 PM), which ended up being a bit scary because we were alone, and it got dark quickly, so starting around 8:30 PM would be great. It's a wide-open area, so you don't have to worry about anything sneaking up on you, so we'd still recommend it as a good evening hike with beautiful sunsets and cotton candy sky. We saw five bighorn sheep and two mountain goats (all friendly) right on the Trail!

Our amazing day ends

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After breathing a sigh of relief for making it back to our car safely in the dark, we headed down the GTTSR (be extra careful at night of the steep drops AND wildlife on/crossing the road) and got back to our motel by 11:00 PM. Note – we found that most food options stayed open until around 10:00 PM. So when we got back, we had to rely on the snacks we had with us for dinner.

Suggestions



Next time we visit, we would love to stay in the park, especially at the Many Glacier Hotel! We'd also love to spend 1-2 nights on both sides of the park. They seemed like different landscapes with different types of hikes and things to see. FYI, if you aren't staying in the park, try to stay as close as you can (ex: West Glacier). That way, you don't waste time driving to/from the park.

To us, the benefits of the park's west side were: bigger towns nearby, the closest drive to a major airport, and more viewpoints/popular sites on GTTSR. In our opinion, it is also the more spectacular

side of the continental divide from a visual standpoint). The east side plusses are three roads/entrances to the park, and it's less crowded.

We'd also love to hike to Grinnell Glacier. We have family friends who did, and they said it was spectacular. They showed us some fantastic pictures as proof. We also had a friend hike to Iceberg Lake, where you climb on icebergs. Pretty cool if you ask us, and a must-do on our next trip.



Extra tidbits

- Huckleberry, everything is everywhere! It's pretty good, so give it a try, especially the ice cream!
- Boat rentals – you can rent boats at 4 of the lakes (kayaks, SUPs, or motorized boats at 2 of them). We didn't really see anyone renting boats. It sounded like a cool way to see new areas of the park / be on the water and relax. You could bring a picnic or drinks.
- Horseback riding is a fun way to explore the park too. We didn't do this, but we had a great time horseback riding in Yellowstone the week after!

Check out the official tourism page for Glacier National Park. Click [here](#).

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Where to stay & benefits of each area



We stayed in West Glacier, which is the town next to the West Entrance of the park. West Glacier has a small village with restaurants, mini-golf, a bar (open late), gas, grocery, gifts, etc.

There is a similar village in East Glacier by the East Entrance to the park. There are also a few lodging options in the park itself (Village Inn at Apgar, Lake McDonald Lodge, Rising Sun Motor Inn, Many Glacier Hotel, Swiftcurrent Motor Inn)

If you can not or are not staying in the park, it would be ideal to stay as close to an entrance as possible. The park is vast (and already requires a lot of driving once inside). You don't want to add too much to your daily drive time.

Benefits of the east side

Three roads/park entrances.

Less crowded

Benefits of the west side

Bigger towns

Closer drive for most people

More viewpoints/popular sites on Sun Road (In our opinion, the spectacular side of the continental divide from a visual standpoint).

It is important to price out properties on various sites. [Expedia](#) is a US-based company, whereas [Booking.com](#) is Europe-based. Not all properties appear on both, so check both. Our personal first choice is Booking.com. If the establishment has a website, check the price there as well.

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Hikes in Glacier National Park



Trail of the Cedars / Avalanche Lake

5-6 miles roundtrip, relatively easy and stunning. If you only have 30 minutes, definitely squeeze the first part of this in (a loop with a partial boardwalk). When you reach the top of the Cedars loop, you'll see Avalanche Gorge. You can walk up this for a minute or two to see more of it. Otherwise, we'd highly recommend hiking the entire Trail as Avalance Lake is expansive and extremely still (make sure you go to the beach area). It is a perfect spot for a picnic and a float (the one you blow up yourself) because the lake is so shallow and calm. If you do, please send us a photo!

Hidden Lake Overlook

This hike is apparently 1.5 miles, but it felt longer (maybe because it's entirely uphill). This is an extremely popular hike, but we had to cross 3-4 sizable snowbanks even in July. Wear your most appropriate footwear! We did this hike at night (it started at 9:15 PM). It was a bit scary because we were alone and it got dark quickly. We suggest beginning around 8:30. It's a wide-open area, so you don't have to worry about anything sneaking up on you. A good evening hike with beautiful sunsets/cotton candy sky. We saw five bighorn sheep and two mountain goats (all friendly) right on the

trail.

Swiftcurrent Trail

We had 20 minutes to spare, so we hustled to Fishercap Lake. It is shallow and super calm (but small). We'd also picnic and float here in a heartbeat. We wanted to continue to Redrock and Bullhead Lakes but didn't have time. If you do the whole thing, the last part is a bunch of challenging switchbacks. It connects you to the Loop trail on the west side of Sun Road.

Apikuni Falls

We didn't have time for this one, but it was next on our list. Short but all uphill.

Grinnell Glacier

Our family friends did this hike and said it was spectacular. They had some fantastic pictures.

Iceberg Lake

We also had a friend hike to Iceberg Lake, where you literally climb on icebergs – pretty cool if you ask us and a must-do on our next trip.

Other activities

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Boat tours – a couple of the boat tours include optional hikes, which seems like a cool idea (and helps cut off hiking time). We did the scenic St. Mary Lake tour and loved it – nice to have another guided tour. Only St. Mary and Lake Macdonald tours get you to access Sun Road.

Bus tours – we did the Red Bus tour and really enjoyed it. It is pricier (~\$65 for the west side tour); we mainly booked it because we didn't get Sun Road tickets, which lets you on. It was fantastic to get a ton of history on the park and things to do. We stopped at basically all of the viewpoints and exhibits. A great first-day activity to introduce you to the park.

Horseback riding – What a way it would be to see the park.

Explore Many Glacier hotels/grounds. A must-do in our view.



If you can't get Going-to-the-Sun tickets, don't give up; you can still access them through:

- Any of the above tours
- Our motel receptionist told us that Blankenship Road was open, which accesses Sun Road from this northwest service road. We didn't test it out, but FYI
- Hikes that connect to other hikes on Sun Road (although this would leave you without a car)
- Shuttle tickets

Glacier National Park

Final thoughts

Glacier National Park took our breath away with its vastness, greenery, remoteness, and wilderness.

It's a journey to an area of the country that not many people get to explore and is well worth the visit. You will be left wanting to return and tackle the hundreds of miles of trails left untouched and seek out the still undiscovered viewpoints. Visit in the summer, and you won't regret staying out late to catch the cotton-candy-colored sky of the setting sun.

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Montana has an excellent website on Glacier National Park. Click [here](#) to check it out.

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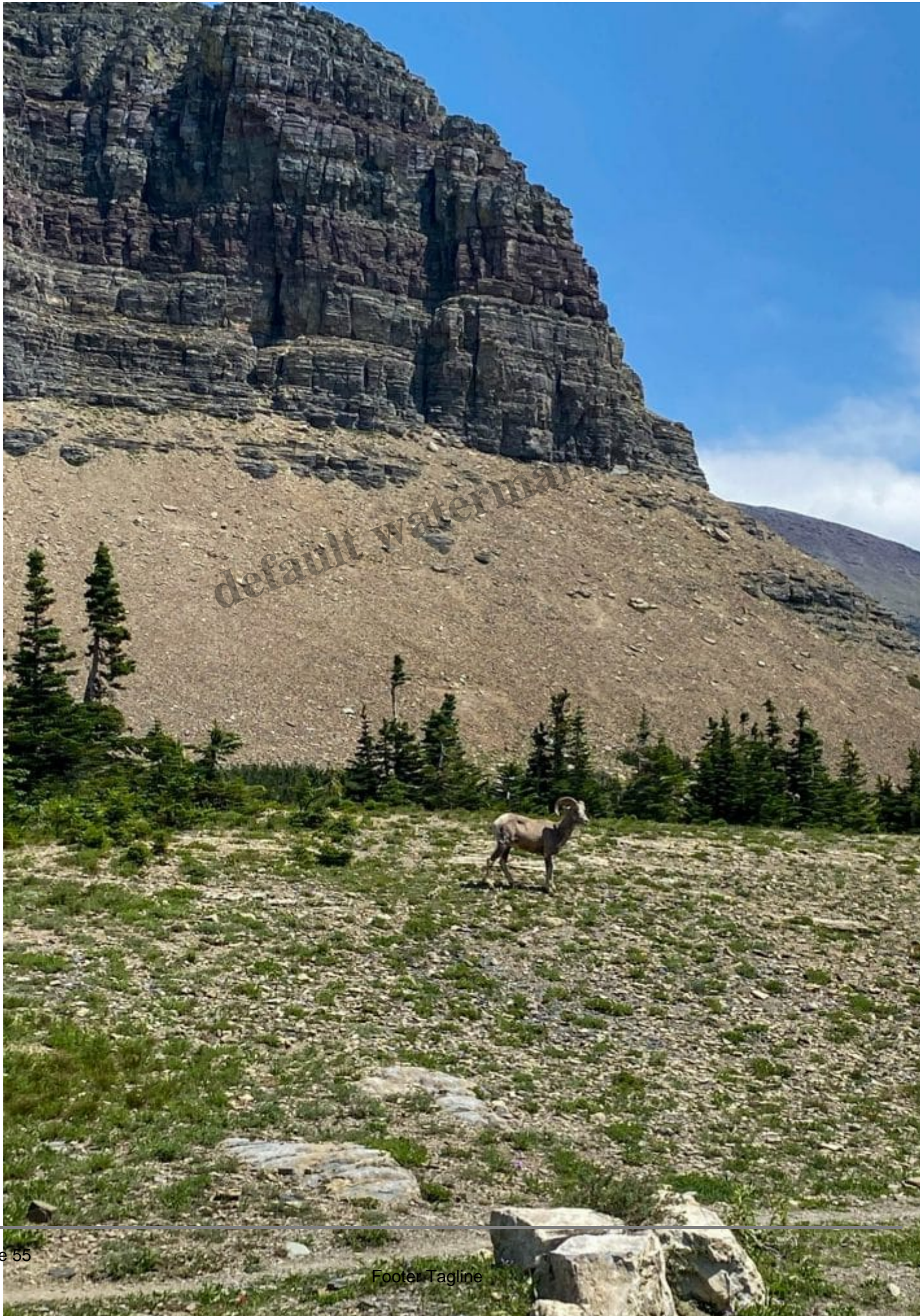




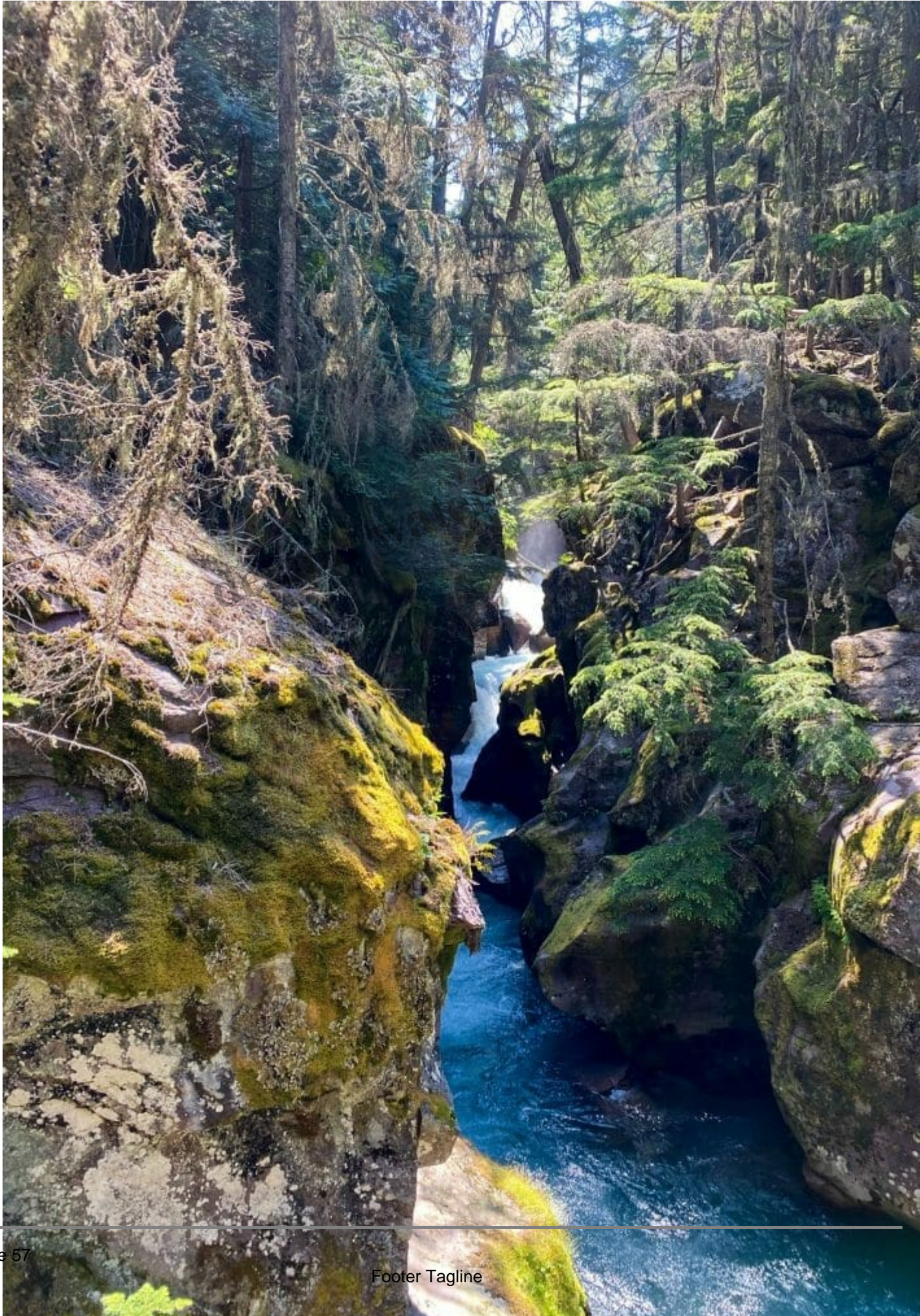
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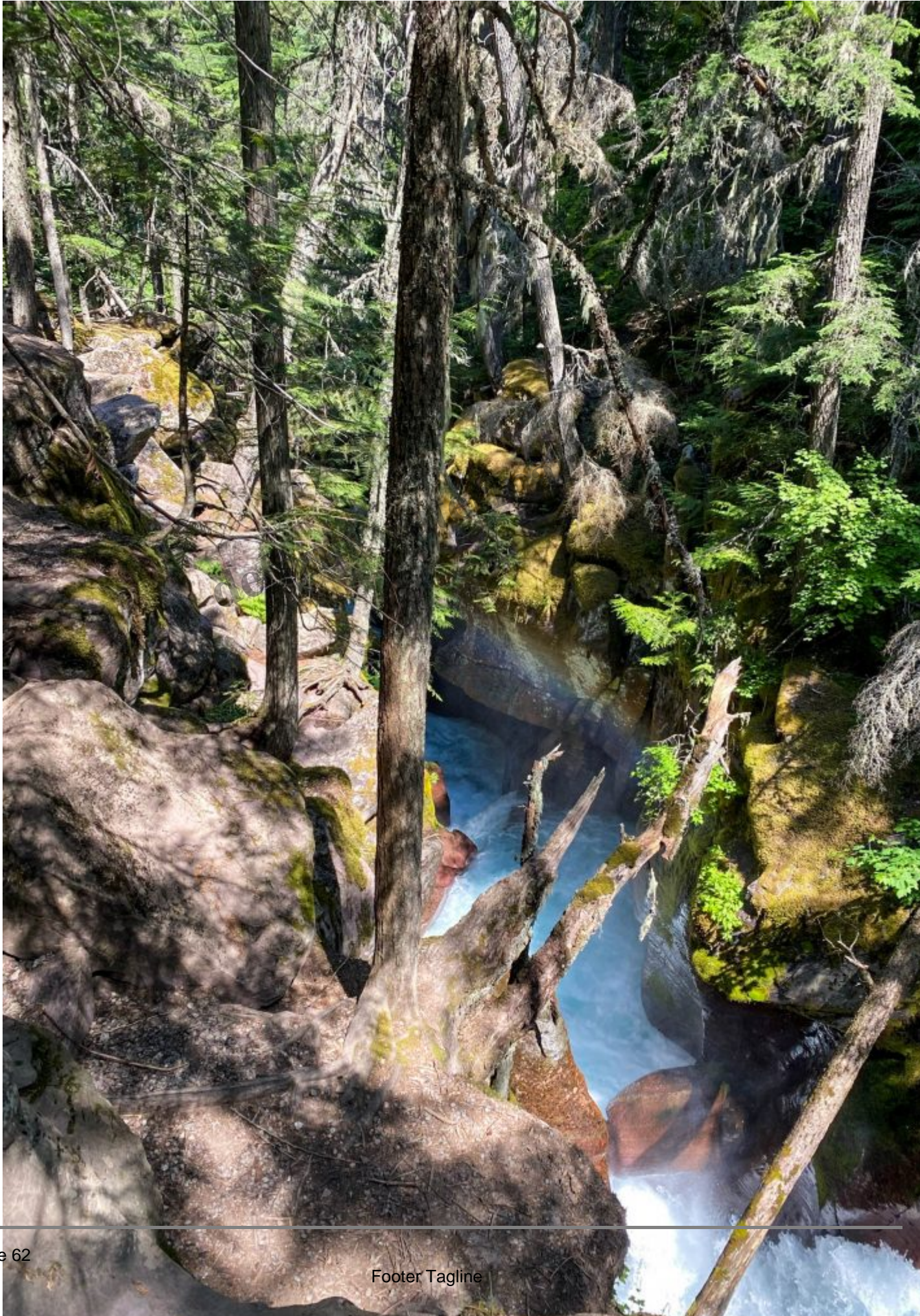






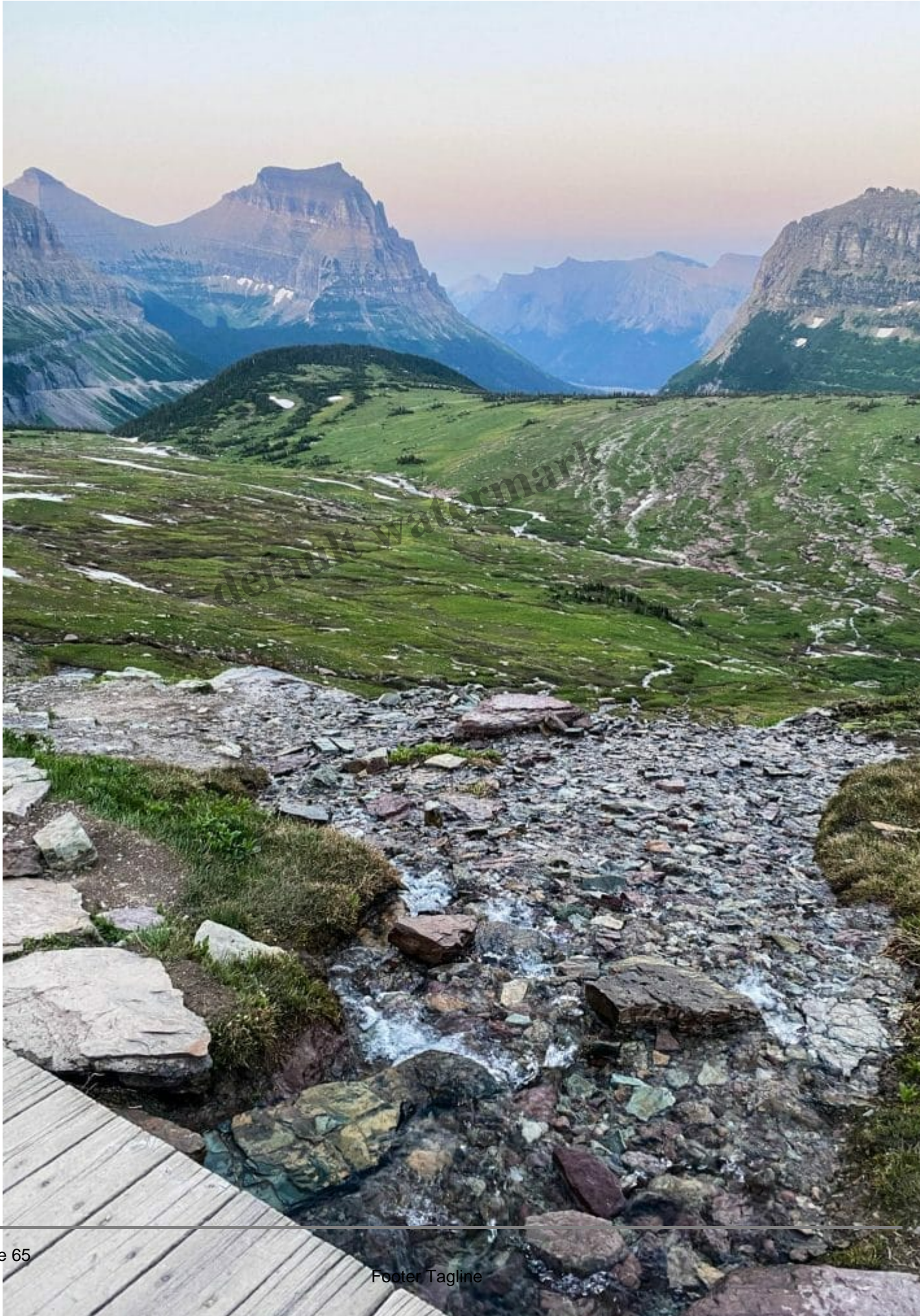


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About our guest authors, Susan and Christian

We met in the first week of grad school and joined our classmates in an environment of extraversion, adventure, and excitement over the next two years. As our grad program ended, we were fortunate enough to get job offers and start dates for the fall. With several months of “free time,” we set out to

travel the world (as safely as possible) and take advantage of this unique time in our lives.

While we had big ambitions to travel abroad, we also decided that part of our summer should be spent exploring the wonders that the U.S. has to offer, so we planned a 5-week road trip through the 11 westernmost contiguous states in the country.

Glacier National Park was one of the highlights of our U.S. tour, and we are excited to share our experience with the Wanderers Compass travel community.



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We always check Expedia and Booking.com to verify prices. At times, one is sold out of rooms while another at the same place has rooms. We also often find some European hotels, especially smaller ones, on Booking.com but not on Expedia. It could be they are a Europe-based company. Try both before booking accommodations.

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[VRBO](#) is now under the Expedia group's ownership, which many were worried about, but it hasn't panned out to be a concern. It is a massive network with access to all lodging forms should issues arise. Joelle has used VRBO for many years with her family and has had no problems with it.

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