

Thu., August 3: Swinging with the Clueless

At 7 a.m., I logged into the website for Glacier National Park. While planning the trip I learned reservations were required for its famous Going-to-the-Sun Road—and that I was already too late to get one, even if I knew what day I would be there! Like hotels in Jackson, they're booked two months ahead during the high season. However, every day at 8 a.m. Montana time, the park service supposedly releases some weird number of three-day passes, like 792. The website didn't explain the specificity of that number. Yesterday, I had logged in a few minutes after 7 a.m. (Pacific time), only to find they were already gone. Today I repeated my behavior and got the same results. Disgusted, I knew this meant I had to settle for Option 3: Arrive at the check-in gate before 6 a.m., and you can drive right in.

The closest reasonable hotel for tonight was 45 minutes away from the nearest gate. I was going to be getting up *really* early tomorrow.

I delayed my start today till 9 a.m. so I could say good-bye to my friends, who typically arise a half-hour before. Connie repeated that she had been convinced they would never see me again. I *told* you I would, I said, reminding her of my text about Groucho, mentioned in the Introduction. Apparently she thought I was lying. I'm joking—slightly. I over-react to people calling me a liar, and conflate not believing I will do something I say I will, with thinking I am lying.

The Sage and I went back to WA 195 and turned north this time, to use it as a bypass around town back to I-90 and US 2. I didn't bother with MapQuest because the atlas told me 2 would break north in the middle of town. What I did not account for is construction that had wiped out the usual signage, such that the symbol for 2 did not appear until the actual exit. I barely turned off in time. Heading due north out of downtown, I was again taken aback by the Spokane sprawl. Every time I thought I surely had passed the last set of city stoplights, another appeared.

Highway 2 drifts northeast, heading toward a gap in the Rockies in the far north of the Idaho Panhandle. The next landmark was the town of Sandpoint, Idaho. One thing I can say about it is it doesn't have much of an ego. If there is a "Welcome to Sandpoint" sign from that direction, it does not grab one's attention. No businesses on that side have chosen to name themselves after the town, so I was in the urban core before getting confirmation I was, in fact, in Sandpoint.

Northwest Passage

The highway took a hard left in an atypical setting, a residential neighborhood, and the indicator sign was either missing or hidden such that I missed it. But my intuition kicked in, causing me to take the next left and pull over to check MapQuest. In doing so, I saw my sister Arabelle's text that her daughter, married a year earlier, was pregnant! It was to be Arabelle's first, long-awaited grandbaby, so I immediately texted congrats to her and to Caroline. I told the latter I would always remember that I was in Sandpoint when I heard the news. She texted laughter. (A healthy girl was safely born.)

We pulled into a gas station despite the elevated gas price of \$4.11—the number had varied widely from the mid- to high 3s through most of the trip. An old Ford Thunderbird was on the other side of the pump. I heard the owner tell someone it was a 1956. "I'm jealous," I said, because I have always loved old T-birds. For the moment this was his "daily driver," he said, because over a few weeks his son broke his arm, his family moved into a fixer-upper, and his wife's car died.

The pumps being busy and parking nonexistent, I continued up the road and pulled into a Safeway to pee. As an added bonus I could pick up some crackers for the road-food bag. I grabbed saltines. The checker appeared very introverted, so I merely exchanged nods. But then she said, "You only bought one item," which I interpreted from her tone to be a compliment to my self-discipline.

"Road food, just passing through," I explained. She nodded again.

Eventually the road swung into the Kootenai River Valley, which at the town of Bonners Ferry is gorgeous, easily equal to Jackson Hole except for missing high mountains like the Tetons. The road then fell in step with the river to veer southeast.

Just after crossing the Moyie River, using what I soon learned was the second-highest bridge in Idaho, I pulled into a scenic overlook loop around and within pine forest. The Moyie empties into the Kootenai a short distance south. I rolled down the windows and munched lunch, only realizing after grabbing the road-food bag from the back seat that a family of five was doing the same, using camp chairs and a portable table from the small camper they were towing. The two teenage boys disappeared down an unmarked trail while the parents set up.

When done eating, I went to a marker about the river and bridge. There I learned the latter is 464 feet high. Partly visible through trees upstream were power plants and a dam, some a hundred years old.



An older foursome came in behind me and exchanged that they had hoped for a better view, so I mentioned the teens' trail. As I prepped to try it myself, a drama was unfolding. The girl in the family, maybe 13, was having a meltdown. Unfortunately she chose a tree by the trailhead to stomp off to. The two brothers, having returned to the camper, came over, followed by their parents, who arrived just about the time I coincidentally got there for the trail. Only then did I realize they were German. I nodded at the dad, avoided adding to the girl's troubles by looking at her, and hiked south to no avail: Trees blocked any view into the valley. Still, I found a tree for a prophylactic pee and got a cute couple of shots of a brown squirrel, a nice change of pace from the grays of the East that have taken over most of the country. Nearing the car, I saw the dad and younger son balancing along a couple of Jersey barriers,¹ nodded again, and got a German-accented, "Hi."

Back on 2, upon passing the sign announcing my return to Montana and the Mountain Time Zone, I finally remembered to satisfy a curiosity raised by crossing into Central early in the trip. I grabbed the phone and began checking to see how long it would take for the phone's clock to catch up. Longer than expected, around 10 minutes of driving. I'm guessing the handoff to the next cell tower did the trick.

Highway 2 parallels the Kootenai River through the mountains here. Another Little Brown Sign Moment arrived soon after the clock update, this one saying, "Swinging Bridge." I was so-o-o going to do that. We pulled into a very busy parking lot, and I walked down the rocky trail, stopping several times to enjoy the rushing river and get a panorama vid of a set of falls. The bridge was very much as advertised, swinging considerably, which was funtastic. In passing me carefully as I paused to try for a shot despite the motion, a guy commented, "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Wonderful," I responded, eloquently. Hey, he caught me off guard.

¹ Those triangular lengths of concrete you most typically see in long lines protecting road construction zones.



On my approach I had heard the sound of a large rock getting plunked into the river from a height. Across the bridge I exited into the middle of what I took to be a teen church group on an outing with a few clueless chaperones. Angling for a look downstream, I came across the culprit digging out another six-inch stone. Searching my brain quickly for a way to interdict him in a way he would listen to from some random old guy, I landed on, “Don’t let a ranger see you doing that.”

He looked at me with surprise and responded, “Oh, you’re not supposed to do that?”

“No,” I said simply. I heard him tell someone else in the group, and he stopped, so I guess it worked. Fucking clueless chaperones... why did I have to say something?

Northwest Passage

As I passed east to get a better view of the falls from a wide granite outcrop, some controlling middle-age guy was nearly screaming at someone on the far side to come across. Get a grip, dude; if they don't want to cross, they don't have to. On the post-view return I had to get a little controlling myself, saying "excuse me" twice, the second loudly, to get an oblivious teen girl to let me get back on the bridge. The teens had formed a semicircular wall around it, as if no one else was in the area. Fucking clueless chaperones.

On the upward trail, I heard a "hello," and realized it was the older foursome from the Moyie River. The eldest asked if the bridge was much farther. "A bit," I said. She asked for clarification, so I added, "I walk fast, but, five minutes?" That seemed doable to her.

Waiting for the outhouse near the parking lot, I noticed a lot of the accents passing by were German. Much of Europe takes each August off from work; must be a thing for Germans to travel the formerly Wild West.

A girl, not German, passed by in a University of North Carolina at Greensboro tee shirt. My brain farted a bit, and all I could blurt out was, "I'm from Durham!"

One of her companions asked her something, and she explained, "Different Durham." I surmised the friend was from England, where the original is. It turned out they were from Oregon, but the UNCG wearer had gone to the school. "I was there doing research a couple months ago," I said. Oddly, I also saw a UNCG shirt in Mississippi on a 2016 trip.



Northwest Passage



As the Sage and I continued east, an ominous sign appeared in the sky: a helicopter with a bucket hanging off the bottom. I looked for a fire, and sure enough, a column appeared ahead. As the miles passed I began to wonder if we were going to run into a road closure; for a time the column was dead ahead. Finally it drifted south of a ridge, hiding the source of the fire. It was a thick, worrisome column, as you can see.

I pulled over inside the aerial circle two choppers were making, as had several other vehicles. We watched the whole sequence, me getting some vids as they passed east from the column, sunk their buckets into a small lake or farm pond to the south, returned behind us, and dropped their loads at the edge of the smoke to the north. The sound of the rotors was sobering, and still is on the videos. There was nothing about a raging wildfire here on the local news the next morning, so I guess they succeeded.



Pulling into Kalispell, Mont., there was more smoke. This was imported from Canada, to a degree more noticeable than I'd seen before. I hooked right on the main drag and passed through downtown, circling an imposing courthouse, before arriving at the Aero Inn, yet another old-style motel. On my making conversation with the clerk, explaining why I would not be able to partake of the free breakfast—because I would be long gone by the time it opened at 6 a.m.—she said, “You better make it 5.” Some other guests had tried to enter the park at 6, got caught in a line, and didn't make it in time, she said. They had gone back the next day at 5 and breezed in.

For dinner I found a packed parking lot around The Montana Club, which turned out to be a regional chain. The place was hopping, but I grabbed a spot at the faux-stone bar for a decent Gourmet Mac & Cheese and fresh salad with pomegranate, rinsed by a sturdy Big Sky Moose Drool Brown Ale.

Northwest Passage

Figuring 5:30 was early enough for the park, I set my alarm for 4:15 and went to bed hoping the scenery would be enough to keep me awake the next day. 'Cuz, in case you haven't heard, I'm not allowed to have caffeine.