

Fri., August 4: Going to the Clouds

I woke up earlier than early, at 3:58, allowing time for a breakfast bar and teeth-brushing instead of shoving it down on the road and having dirty teeth all day. I snuck down the steps and out the outer door as quietly as I could, trying not to wake anyone. After passing around the courthouse again and through downtown, I pulled into a deserted gas station, happy to see they'd left the pumps on.

MapQuest wanted me to take Montana back roads instead of staying with Highway 2, but I overrode that decision. I'm not sure of my reasoning. Just to see 2, or thinking it was better lit and less winding? Quickly I realized the "why" behind the MQ suggestion, for 2 is urbanized most of the 32 miles to Glacier, dotted with stop lights. Fortunately most were blinking yellow, though not all—I had to slam on the brakes one time on realizing I wasn't go to make it through. Somehow occasional random traffic was nearly as irritating at five in the morning as consistent congestion 12 hours later. This included, for the third time this trip, passing a massive wind-power propeller blade, stretched across two semi-trailers.

Given the hour, I can't tell you what the approach to the park looks like. Bestial humps loomed up before the pre-dawn background.

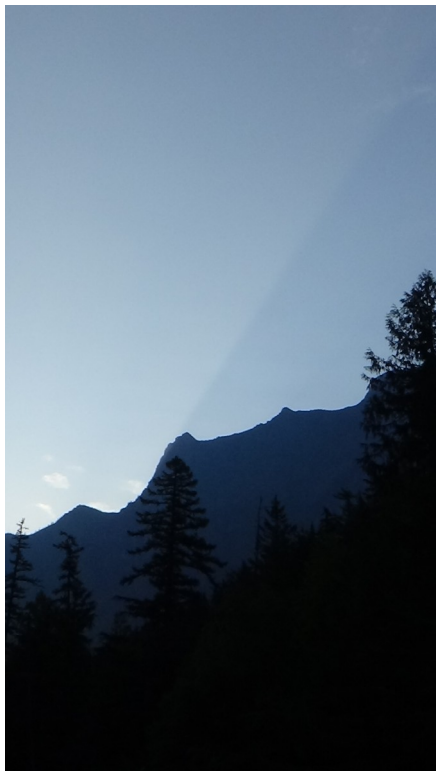
Despite the hour, the Sage and I were in a line of four cars turning into the West Entrance at 5:20. This turned into a traffic jam at the gate, confusing given that I could see two other entries to the right were open. After two near fender-benders with cars going around from behind too fast, we made our way beyond the stopped vehicles and saw the first lane was indeed closed. The car at the front did not appear to be trying to move, for some reason.

Now to find a parking space and await the sun. A perfect set appeared on the right, but I was being tail-gated and couldn't turn in. You tell me what the driver was in such a rush to get to at that time of the morning. Finding nothing better down the way, I U-turned back, and took my pick of spots in the perfect set. After wandering into the woods to pee while watching for coyote and bear eyes—"Hey, Jim, tell them the story of how you lost your penis!"—I pulled on my jacket and hood to nap. Sleep didn't cooperate, so once enough light had arrived, I read. Two other vehicles parked briefly, one, irritatingly, in the spot next to me when there were a half-dozen empties to my right.

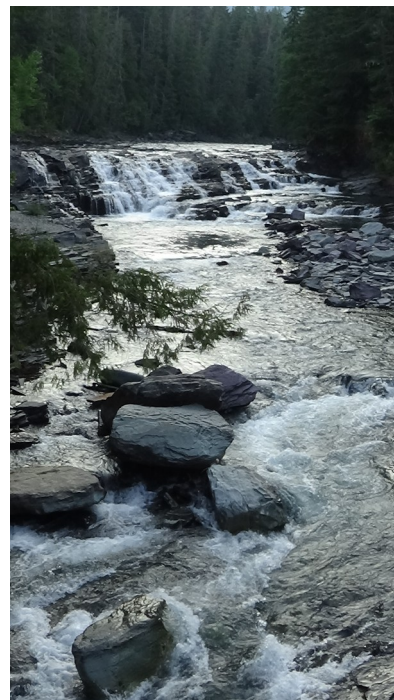
Finally at 6:30 it seemed light enough to begin my tour. "I could really use caffeine," I grumbled, as the Sage backed out and pulled into traffic no greater or less than that of an

hour earlier. I guess when you have a reservation, you don't feel the need for an early start.

Going to the Sun Road spends considerable time hugging the southeastern shore of Lake McDonald, above which glowers a long relatively low ridge. I have no pictures due to yet more incompetent traffic engineers. They had stripped the pavement off the entire stretch, the better part of 10 miles, in the process closing *every* scenic pullout! Most cars were zipping along the lightly graveled, rutted dirt road like they were all-terrain-vehicles and late for work. I was trying to catch some views where woods did not obscure, but couldn't



stop in the road. I pulled over as best I could, given no shoulder, to let people pass, ranting more than once against the PMs. “Strip, pave, repeat,” I repeated—do a mile at a time, leaving the rest open, dumbasses.



Off the east end the lake is fed by McDonald Creek, dropping through a lovely set of cascades that brought my blood pressure back down. A bit farther down the valley, my early start was rewarded with a photo I could not otherwise have gotten. At first I wasn't sure what I was seeing, a sharp diagonal line angling upward from a peak in shadow. Finally it struck me: I was seeing a shadow *in the sky*. I shoved the Sage into a tiny bit of shoulder and took advantage of lighter traffic to move

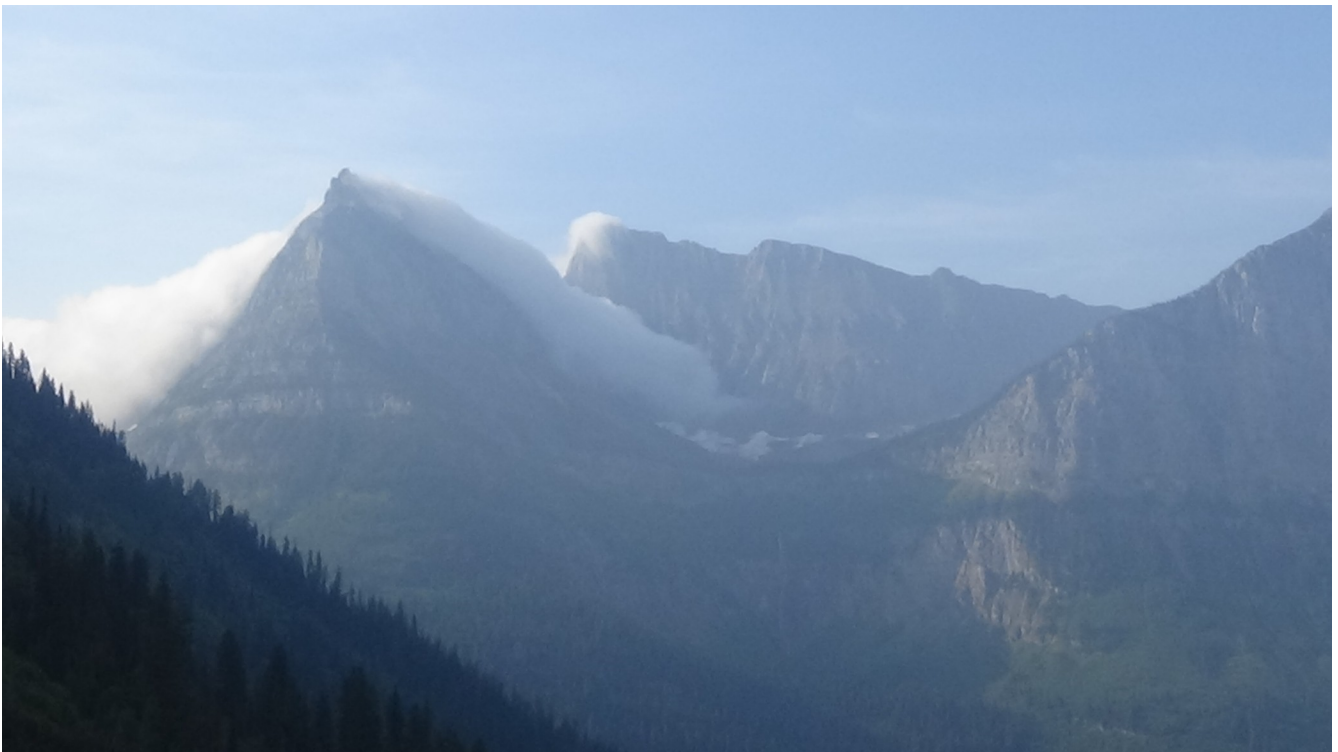
into the middle of the road for this shot.

Shortly afterward I viewed an “avalanche chute,” which, as it sounds, is a vertical indentation in the mountain regularly scoured by avalanches. No doubt the snow skiers among you are unimpressed, but this term was new to me. A marker explained that each slide rips out some of the plant life, creating opportunities for other species to move in. This region then becomes a smorgasbord for various animals. Bears like the young

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plants, and raptors enjoy frozen dinners of prey caught in the avalanches, as the victims thaw in spring.

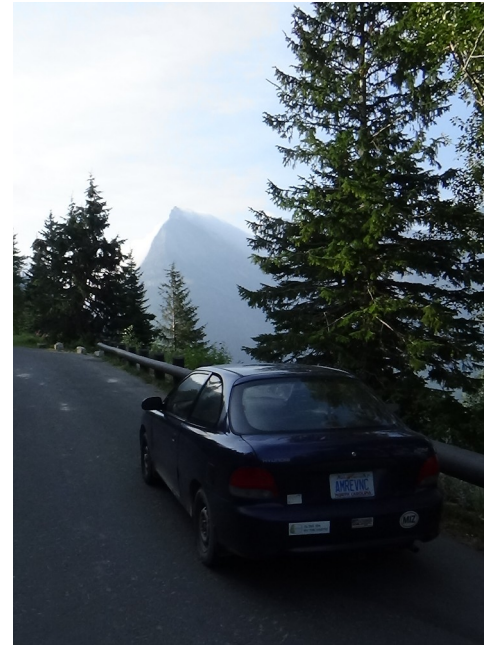
After taking a hard left, the road then began its namesake climb to the sun. Something caught my eye to the south, but pullouts were ill-marked, and I ended up taking advantage of the Sage's tight turning radius to whip into one from the far end. For at least 15 minutes, I stood on a small, flat-topped rock watching a cloud climb up, over, and down a ridge of Mt. Oberlin toward its twin peak of Clements Mountain. It was graceful, elemental, timeless, unaware of humans and wars and heartache. I could have stood there for the rest of my life, watching that scene from eons past.



Even the Sage was captivated. I found him watching, motionless, when I got back. I don't recall this happening at the time, but tears have appeared as I write about this, and again as I edit. As someone who has difficulty finding anything beautiful about life, I suppose being presented with a clear example to the contrary is enough to put the chronic nature of my low-level depression on pause.

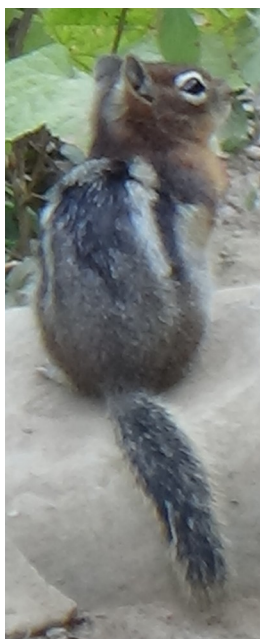
Wrenching ourselves from the view, we continued our climb until reaching a hairpin turn around packed parking lots on both sides. Only the Sage's petite shape allowed us to squeeze into the narrowing edge of the uphill lot. I pulled out the water bottle and on the hiking hat, and attacked the puzzle of how to walk across a busy hairpin curve with no marked pedestrian crossing, sidewalk, or shoulder.

I have mentioned Beth and Bill Plonk, before the trip and in Columbia. Their raving about Glacier after hiking the park was one reason for my being here. What I have not yet told you is that Bill is no longer with us. He died in his sleep a year earlier, with no warning to us survivors, at 60. The only blood relative within 90 miles of my house, he had also become a close friend, the person I turned to on the rare occasion of needing emotional support. By walking a short section of the Loop Trail, I wanted to metaphorically commune with him along with nature. I didn't know if they took this trail, but that didn't matter.



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A wide, moderate stretch drops one to a foot bridge over the quintessential mountain creek, rushing over rocks through a tight gorge. On the far side the trail climbed sharply and narrowly along the north side, with no railing and a rapidly increasingly sheer drop-off. Eventually it wrapped back along the ridge



line. As I stopped to take a photo looking west, I realized something familiar was missing. A few beats passed before I realized that within that short walk, all human noises had disappeared. Along the creek I could hear car noise, but with a turn of the trail's corner it was gone. If not for a lonely airplane contrail, I could easily imagine myself the last, happy misanthrope on Earth.



I was not entirely alone, though, as a chipmunk balanced on a nearby rock, apparently unconcerned at my presence. My panorama vid of the spot hears only wind. And, maybe, Bill.

Forcing myself back toward humanity, I noted with a smile the fresh Converse All-Star imprint I'd left in the loose dirt. Near the trailhead, a younger guy was reading the bear warning and asked with some concern on his countenance if I'd seen any animals. "Just little ones," I reassured him, indicating chipmunk size with my fingers. He repeated the line, smiled, and thanked me before braving the tiny terrors of the trail.

Next the road slowly climbs along the ridge called the Garden Wall. I stopped to see a crack cut over the ages by a thin waterfall, and later pulled over with many others primarily, in my case, to observe a field of wildflowers laid like a rug up the side of the wall.

Then I turned around.

"Nothing prepares you for this place," I texted several friends over a smartphone version of this photo, by far the most enrapturing of the trip:



This former professional writer, with a master’s degree in journalism, has no words to compete.

I already knew the 6,600-foot Logan Pass was socked in, because the cloud ahead was obvious with each left curve. After watching a number of cars dissolve into it, we joined the disappearance into what became thick fog. Lights on, I passed a sign saying “Lot Full” at the entrance to the Visitor Center at the gap. So I noted my odometer reading and crawled past, wary of fellow tourists walking along the narrow shoulders. The first couple of parking opportunities were full; a spot in the third was 0.7 miles downhill. “Here I go again,” I bellyached, as I pushed uphill to the Western Continental Divide.¹ “This better be worth it.”

It wasn’t. The VC was mostly an overcrowded gift shop. I couldn’t even find a park map. I had to ask a harried but polite ranger at a small desk in a corner for one. On the off chance of the weather clearing, I walked a short distance on a boardwalk trail toward a reputedly scenic lake overlook. But the fog just got denser as I got higher, happy to have my windbreaker in the mist. At a landing above some steps I paused to enjoy having my head in the clouds for a change. Usually I’m über-pragmatic.

¹ A continental divide demarcates which direction water flows. In this case, a raindrop falling into a creek on the western side and not evaporating ends up in the Pacific, while a twin on the eastern side goes to the Gulf of Mexico via the Mississippi.

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Back to the car I plodded, eschewing the wall on the outer edge of the road in preference for a rocky natural gutter between the pavement and sharp slope. I made a stop to video the cloud's interior as tufts raced upward along the rising ground.

The road's name comes from the mountain we were soon rounding, which I'd forgotten until I saw it again on the map just now. I never saw the mountain top, thanks to the clouds at the pass and being too close to the side on the drive. If you're wondering about the park's namesake glaciers, climate change has rendered them



unimpressive, looking only like small patches of lingering snow. Sad. Also sad was the scene along St. Mary's Lake nearing the exit, marked with the haunted remains of woods that had undergone a forest fire. Once past those, though, the end of Mount Logan's long ridge line on the far side made for a gloomy yet wistful good-bye to the most winsome park I've experienced:



Exiting at the town of St. Mary's, we were as close as we would get to Canada by road, 19 miles. We had crossed a national border nonetheless, into the Blackfoot Nation. Forty-five minutes later we entered its capital, Browning. I had added by hand their Museum of the Plains Indians as an option on the itinerary when reviewing the day's journey last night. The aging 1940s building surrounded by brownish grass was not promising, but I was reassured by the plain sign out front saying it was associated with the U.S. Dept. of the Interior Arts and Culture Program. Lest you think me prejudiced against an NA-owned museum, refer back to my comments about local museums in general.² A group of working-age men hanging out at a picnic table across the parking lot on a Friday morning, talking loudly, concerned me a bit. But I decided that was racist of me and headed in.

Two Blackfoot teenagers were up front. When the cashier asked where I was from and I answered, his co-worker joked, "Look at the hat." I was again in the Panthers hat. I laughed and confirmed.

² And, I add with privileged white defensiveness, the Museum of the Cherokee People is one of my favorite museums anywhere. Have I added that some of my best friends are black? That's a joke, though true in the case of Mike. I refer to the classic and irrelevant defense made by many people who don't think they're racist. Various -ist thoughts certainly cross my mind unbidden at times; I try to be aware and dismiss them, but I don't claim not to have them.

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The place is small but packed with artifacts of various nations, many from the mid-1800s. (Sorry, photos were not allowed.) Two items stood out. One was a Ghost Dance *dress*, the first I'd heard of such, much less seen. Remember, I've read a lot of NA history; this means no author had bothered to mention them, only speaking of the shirts worn by men.

A set of highly decorated bags was for long ceremonial pipes, of which they also had a good selection. Somehow it never occurred to me that, of course, they would have needed something to store those in.

I'm glad I visited, even though the reason the bags and scarfs I considered as gifts turned out to be reasonably priced was because they were made in India. Only at this moment does it occur to me they *were* made by Indians.

I *can* show you an artifact outside, with a fascinating history. A plaque identified it as a "Medicine Rock" once located above the Marias River, which starts in Glacier Park and runs into the Missouri east of here. Blackfoot warriors on a raid made the mistake of rolling it downhill just for giggles. Only two of them made it home.

Assuming the spirits were pissed, the Blackfeet wisely began leaving gifts on the rock like those we've already encountered on this trip. The EA family given the land by the government as a

homestead took care of the rock for the Blackfeet, the plaque says. It was moved to the museum after that was established in 1941.



Here a decision I had mostly made was finalized: I would leave my friend Highway 2 in order to see a major site of the Lewis & Clark Expedition. We bade farewell just south of town and the Sage stuck to US 89, another scenic byway.

One of the history markers along the way southeast was unusual. This described the Minuteman missile silos spreading out for miles around, holding nuclear missiles using solid fuel. The first generation of missiles developed in the early 1950s needed liquid fuel, which meant they had to fill up at the gas station, so to speak, before they could be fired. That delay could get them blown up in their holes by incoming. In contrast, solid fuel could be stored in the missile, ready to go. Hence they were named for part-time soldiers trained to respond quickly to threats during the early days of the American Revolution. Hundreds of silos were sunk into the earth across the Midwest and West, in part because

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of land availability, and in part because the extra distance from Russia and China meant more time to respond.

**At the southern edge of the rez, I looped back across the border out of simple curiosity. Cool metal sculptures turned out to be the welcoming committee for those entering from the south:



A little ways down the road I found myself again struck by the sheer beauty of the land, so alien to most Easterners, and the prototypical "big sky" of Montana. I pulled onto the shoulder and drank it in:



Pee time found me in the small farm town of Choteau. I meant to ask there how to pronounce that, but forgot and had to look it up while typing: “SHO-toe.”³ I was impressed to find this town of around 1,750 people had a staffed visitor center. The fact she was a psychic just added to the impact. I assume she was psychic, because right after greeting me, she pointed me to the restroom without my asking.

That mission completed, I agreed to sign her visitor log and then had a query for her. I had seen a questionable dinosaur “museum” on the way down, and there were kitschy dinosaur statues threatening the parking lot of the VC. What’s the deal with all the dinos?, I asked. I assume there are some fossil beds around here?

She said yes, but they would know more at the town museum off the far end of the lot. I forced myself past the homemade ice cream stand doing a steady early afternoon business and entered the low, wood-planked Old Trail Museum. A man in his 30s greeted me and then asked how I thought Bryce Young was going to do. It took a second for me to put together that A) I was wearing the Panthers cap again, and B) he was referring to the quarterback Carolina had just taken as the first pick in the National Football League draft. (If it seems odd I kept forgetting about the cap, my nephew Marty Brown had recently given it to me, and in N.C. I normally wear one from my AmRev site.) I said I “hope he’s better than the last five.” He mentioned Young is short, but I pointed out a

³ <https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/montana/pronounce-these-words-mt/>

famous short quarterback from days past, Doug Flutie. He then rattled off others including Russell Wilson, who won the Super Bowl with the Seattle Seahawks. I told him I had met Wilson⁴, and when he held up the trophy after the game in his right hand, I boasted, “I’ve shaken that hand!”

He confirmed that this region has been a major source of dinosaur fossils, including a T-Rex. Some were in the museum. But the most interesting remains were those of Old Sol, “the only skeleton in the world with Hudson Bay Company arrowheads embedded in it,” the display said. If you can picture (or look up) a map of Canada, you’ll see a big watery hole in its northeast. That is a massive bay of the Atlantic Ocean, named for a British navy captain who was the first white to explore it extensively while searching for the namesake of this book: a fabled “Northwest Passage” across the top of North America, a shortcut to China from Europe.⁵ A British trading company was created in 1670 to exploit the resources around Hudson Bay, eventually expanding its territory to pretty much all of modern Canada. Two hundred years later it sold most of its land to the new nation. The company traded various supplies to NA and EA hunter-trappers for furs until 1987, and still exists, mostly as a worldwide department store chain. (As of this writing, for example, it owns the famous Saks Fifth Avenue store in New York City.)

4 At a business networking event in Raleigh, N.C., when he was still in college. He was a star at N.C. State University who had transferred to the University of Wisconsin-Madison for his senior year. He was back visiting his girlfriend, who I knew from prior events.

5 Climate change has made this a reality, by melting the Arctic ice that formerly blocked the route to regular ships.

Old Sol, actual name unknown, was white, probably a fur trader, felled by Native American arrows in Eastern Montana sometime after 1830. We know that earliest date because the arrowheads that felled him are still in him, and are a type the company sold after that year. He might have been finished off with a tomahawk to the head. But his adventures were not over. Found in a shallow grave in the 1930s, he was proposed for display in a nearby town library, only to disappear for 50 years. Then he was found again in Great Falls, in the center of the state. How he came to be on display in Choteau in Western Montana was not explained, and I didn't think to ask.

Look carefully at the photo, and you can see a few of the arrowheads. The most obvious is stuck in his sternum (breastbone) at a diagonal from the left. Two more are embedded in the right side of his pelvis, one below and the other to the right of the card there.



Perhaps I'm just morbid—my friend and plant-sitter Amanda expressed some concern that the first half of my slideshow photos are dominated by death—but I would argue *history* is the cause of my highlighting one other exhibit. (The rest were the kinds of things, including fossils, I've seen many times.) This told the story of “Choteau's Last Hanging.” Unfortunately I can't read the date in the photo I took, or find it online, but I want to say it was in the 1920s. “George Hoffman attacked his victim with a piece of pipe and strangled him to death with a strand of telephone wire,” the panel said. The pipe and the wire are next to those words, behind glass. Apparently robbery was the motive, as the “wallet that prompted the murder” is also there. “Hoffman was kept under lock and key for nearly a year before his execution.” The lock and key are there, as are the rope that bound his hands, and part of the one that hung him.

While I was talking to the guy, a pair of gorgeous legs in shorts were visible in the small office behind him. I took these to be his teen-aged daughter's, as she watched her computer and a toddler boy. But as I was leaving, she came out, and told me in a heavy Eastern European accent to take an Old Sol postcard. She appeared to be in her early 20s, a good bit younger than him. I couldn't help but wonder if she was what used to be called a "mail-order bride." More likely her family just immigrated to the area and a love match was made. Regardless, dude was lucky, and assuming he's as nice at home as he was at work, so was she.

Old Sol's prior domicile of Great Falls was the reason for the detour from Highway 2. Thanks to the day's ridiculously early start, I pulled into town with time left to visit the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center. Here, finally, I bought my very own Senior Lifetime Pass. I'm set for life, as long as I remember to take the damn thing with me.⁶ Then I wandered the extensive exhibits about the Corps of Discovery.

To refresh your memory, we met the boys across from today's Louisville, left them at Arrow Rock in Missouri, mentioned that the Nez Perce helped them, and spoke of my visiting the Pacific end points of their westward adventure. The center generally does a good job of covering the entire mission for those with no exposure. I had read one of the definitive histories on the expedition a few years earlier, but was reminded of some forgotten points.

While spending the first winter with Mandans and Hidatsas along the Missouri in what now is North Dakota, they were warned they would run into a major set of waterfalls around which they would have to "portage"—that is, drag their crap around by land. A conundrum downriver brought Clark to the falls without Lewis initially. They had come to a point which appeared to be two equal branches of the river, so they weren't sure which way to go. The leaders thought it was left, but corps members thought right. Or wrong, as the case turned out to be. In an excellent management moment, L & C agreed to check both, and each took a portion of the corps. Eventually Lewis and his contingent figured things out and came this way, too.

What the NAs failed to detail, Clark learned, was there were *five* waterfalls over nearly 20 miles, including the Great Falls for which the city is named. The portage would be a lot longer than he'd expected. In surveying a route, he realized it also would not be an easy one. You'll find out why tomorrow.

⁶ Earlier in the week that I write these words in early November, I wasted a total of \$35 at two Park Service sites in Florida because I'd forgotten it!

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As a history myth-buster, I especially appreciated two large panels on Sacagawea, the most misunderstood member of the Corps. A Shoshone, she was kidnapped by Hidatsas as a child, who gave her the name we know. Contrary to the common pronunciation, it was actually “sah-KAH-ga-we-a.” Her French fur trader husband joined the Corps during that winter camp, and she and her new baby came with them. She was not a guide, as is often claimed, but she found edible and medicinal plants for the Corps, and served as an interpreter with the Shoshone. The captains praised her for her calm and competence.

I made my first attempt of the trip to lose my camera as the Center was closing, leaving it in the bathroom, but realized my hand felt funny as I approached the car. I’m a little surprised to say it was my only attempt.

A short distance down the road I turned into Giant Springs State Park. I walked past a few families leaving or at the playground to arrive at a circular, crystal-clear, pond about 25 feet in diameter. The undulating surface identified this as the park’s namesake. I was in or near the footsteps of William Clark, who called it “the largest fountain or Spring I ever saw.” Lewis visited, too, as they were preparing for the portage. Now tamed by sidewalks and a fence and a spillway, it pumps out 150 million gallons of water a day. That travels a total of 201 feet into the Missouri as “one of the shortest rivers in the country flowing into the longest river,”⁷ a panel says. (The Missouri is about 200 miles longer than the Mississippi, at 2,540.) I angled the shot at right to capture almost all of the Roe River.



⁷ The Yukon is longer, but less than 2,000 of its miles are in Alaska, the rest being in Canada.



Four of the five sets of falls are a short drive from the center. I visited two to the east, one crowned by a power generation dam whose river backup has submerged a third. The last set was some distance west, and there I met an old friend, Anaconda Mining Company.



Just below that set of falls there is an island in the river. Lewis spotted a black eagle in a nest on it, and approved of her security precautions, according to a history marker: “a more inaccessible spot I believe she could not have found; for neither man nor beast dare pass those gulphs which separate her little domain from the shores.”

Some 80 years later, a Butte mining company moved its facility to melt and refine raw material to this area to take advantage of the water power the falls provided. Within a few years Black Eagle Dam was atop the falls, and the company built a huge operation across 500 acres. That company was bought out by Anaconda in 1910—owners of “the Con” we visited in Butte. The refinery operated until 1980, contaminating the ground throughout. All the buildings except one were demolished and the ground reconditioned, to the degree it can be after a century of degradation.

Speaking of degradation, the motel I’d booked shifted my home-finding criteria. Booking had a nice-looking place, but I eventually found a hidden fee, a \$35 cleaning charge. I booked another downtown. However, I became wary as I approached, seeing the real estate values drop precipitously with each passing block. The Imperial had received a 6.9, but as I pulled in I spotted a bike with a couple of plastic bags on the handlebars attached to a balcony on an upper floor. Two men matching the appearance of homeless individuals were chatting through an open door. The place needed repair and paint. The office appeared empty and had a phone number to call out front. Unfortunately, I’d taken a nonrefundable rate.

Within the course of this trip, I had jumped two levels to the top of Booking’s loyalty program, which gave me priority customer support. I called, told the guy a synopsis of the above, and stated, “I’m not staying here.” I told him I didn’t know how they got their rating, implying fraud. He helped me find the right words to use for him to negotiate a refund, which I repeated firmly for the sake of the call recording, “Yes, I don’t feel safe there.” This wasn’t strictly true, given that I feel safe pretty much anywhere outside of a war zone. Nonetheless, I will rationalize this as okay under my “lying for security reasons” exception. After some back and forth, I got my refund the next day.

No other local options fitting my needs, I thought to check the IHG site. I joined their loyalty program after spending a month in a Candlewood Suites before buying my current house, and am a fan of their Holiday Inn Express concept. However, their locations are usually pricier than other acceptable options on Booking. Fortunately, the local Express on the southwest edge of town had a room available, and it turned out I had some points to use, bringing it into my price range. I drove across the river and down to a grocery-and-retail strip that was less than scenic. The HIE’s familiarity was reassuring, however, if not the full trash bag housekeeping had mistakenly left in the room.

A walk past a Home Depot led me to the Black Bear Diner, which turned out to be another regional chain. Finding a healthy vegetarian option on the menu seemed a challenge until I spotted the pesto fettuccine. This turned out to be regular fat-filled

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fettuccine alfredo with pesto partially mixed in, instead of the pasta covered in pesto I was expecting. From what I saw and overheard, I gathered the place was understaffed and the kitchen staff was being trained. So I'm guessing the recipe was a mistake. At least the promised diced tomatoes were there. I ordered an orange juice and a salad to get something else healthy into me.

In the elevator at the motel, I thought I recognized the woman and teen ahead of me, and confirmed from where: They had been at the museum in Browning. I confess one reason they stood out is they were black. Otherwise they were indistinguishable from any other middle-class family on a road trip from, in their case, Michigan. We had a pleasant if brief chat on the way to the same floor before parting amiably, fellow strangers in a wonderful land.