

## **ATA002: Hike, Bike and Horseback Ride in Glacier National Park**

**00:00** Hey Bear.... Heeeeee Bear... it's always a good idea to let a grizzly bear know you're coming up the trail. Today we're visiting grizzly country. And I'm about to go on a three week adventure, spending 24 hour a day together, camping and hiking with a woman I just met one evening, for a three hour dinner. What could possibly go wrong?

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**00:36** Welcome to the Active Travel Adventures podcast where we explore exciting multi-day active travel adventures that a reasonably physically fit person can do. The key thing about these adventures is that they require you to MOVE: you'll need to use your hands and/or legs to propel yourself from one destination to the next, whether its hiking, biking, paddling, horseback riding or some combination of the above.

I'm you're host, Kit Parks and today we will be exploring the many ways you, too, can have an exciting active adventure vacation at the majestic Glacier National Park.

**01:11** I met Venti while checking in to a hotel one fall Sunday night in the outskirts of Bourdeaux France. Like me, she opted for the more reasonably priced business district hotel five miles from town, as all of the reasonably priced hotels in the city were booked with weekend tourists. This hotel was on a bus line, making it an easy commute back the next day when the reasonably priced rooms were available again.

While checking in, I asked the desk clerk what time the restaurant opened as the place seemed dead – this was afterall, a hotel that catered to local corporations and it was a Sunday. He told me it wasn't going to open tonight. There were no restaurants or even shops I saw on the short walk from the bus stop.

**01:46** The lady in line behind me said, "You speak English?" Yes, I replied. Venti is an Australian expat living in Wyoming. She suggested we go to dinner together and I readily agreed.

The clerk recommended we go to an Italian place a short walk away. When we arrived and saw the unimpressive strip mall exterior, we braced ourselves for a uninspired dinner. Seeing how there were no other options, we headed inside,

It was like a going through a magic mirror. From that bland exterior, we were escorted to a charming outside patio with a beautiful garden. Our meal, the wine and the service were outstanding, and Venti and I became fast friends over our leisurely dinner.

**02:22** Fast forward six months. Venti and I had kept up lazily on Facebook. That spring, she told me she was planning a three week hiking and camping adventure in Glacier National Park. Would I like to join her?

I found Venti fascinating and even though I didn't know her well, I decided to jump at the opportunity. We are both pretty well traveled, she WAY more than me, so I figured that meant that we both knew how to roll with the punches when things go wrong – which as you know, something always does go wrong when you travel. Regardless, I considered the experience itself would be an adventure on top of me getting to see a part of the country I'd never been to. So yes, Venti, I WOULD indeed like to join you.

**02:59** Because of snow, for most of us, the best time of year to visit GNP is July or August, and even as late as mid-Sept. Snow keeps many of the roads closed into June, and then the snow can start closing them back up in Sept.

**03:11** GNP is in both Montana and the Alberta section of Canada. In 1932, through efforts of the Rotary International, the two country's national parks joined together as the **Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park**. UNESCO has declared both parks a Biosphere Reserve, and their union a World Heritage Site. However, they are managed separately, on the US side it is called GNP and in Canada, Waterton Lakes National Park. This means you have to pay fees on both ends. And before I forget: you need to bring your passport if you want to visit both sides, even if you are a US or Canadian citizen.

So what exactly IS a glacier?

**03:51** Glaciers are the glob of snow, ice, water, rock and sediment that moves under the influence of gravity. They get bigger when winter snows create more snow and ice, but retreat when the summer heat melts more than was created over the winter.

The glaciers have been in retreat since the last Little Ice age ended in the mid 1800's. There were once 150 glaciers in GNP but now it's down to 25 active ones (meaning they are still moving forward or backward, but pretty much they are moving backward these days).

When glaciers melt and refreeze, they scour the earth and MOVE the material, ie the rocks, soil and sediment, to another location.

**04:26** When I was a child on Long Island, I remember a teacher explaining that the reason the northern half of LI was hilly and rocky was due to the retreating glaciers. But the glaciers never ventured far enough south to make it to the southern, flatter, so therefore less rocky half. Funny the odd trivia you remember.

One cool thing about glaciers, is that sometimes rivers flow through the glaciers into rivers or lakes. When the glaciers scrub the earth and rocks, the abrasion between the rocks creates sediment. This sediment can be so finely ground that it becomes a powder, which stays suspended in the water. The sunlight then interacts with the sediment and can create this otherworldly milky turquoise color. You can see it on my photos at ATA.com.

**05:09** When you go to Glacier, it's a good idea to have a PLAN. Luckily for me, Venti did all the planning so all I had to do was show up -- SWEET!. I'm starting to get into someone else planning my trips for me 😊

**05:20** GNP park is HUGE: it is over one million square acres with over 700 miles of trails – and all of it is gorgeous. GNP is America’s seventh most popular national park. Plus the landscape is so impressive that it quickly became our eighth national park.

The park has several entrances, and five visitors centers. The most popular entrances are on the east side: St Mary’s and Many Glacier. On the west side is Apgar, and up north in Canada, there is one in Waterton. There are a couple of other small entrances with minimal facilities. There is also a huge VC at Logan’s Pass, in the middle of the main road.

**06:08** The main road through the park is one of the worlds’ engineering marvels. It runs from the west in Apgar east to St. Mary’s and through the popular and very busy Logan’s Pass. The road is called the Going to the Sun Road: it is fifty miles of some of the most scenic beauty in America.

This road is the first to have been registered in ALL of the following categories: [National Historic Place](#),<sup>[6]</sup> [National Historic Landmark](#)<sup>[2]</sup> and [Historic Civil Engineering Landmark](#).<sup>[7]</sup>

Just before Going To The Sun Road opens in the summer, the area around Logan Pass may have 80 FEET of snow **DRIFT** – just think about that for a moment. We’re talking snow around eight stories HIGH!!! Obviously, this makes it one of the most difficult roads to maintain in the country. Late winter avalanches have destroyed every guard rail they’ve experimented with, so in some places they have pretty much stop putting them up.

**06:40** It can take crews ten weeks to plow this scenic drive and the road is usually open by mid-June. However, in 2011, it didn’t open until mid-July – the latest in its history! Because of the hairpin turns, vehicles are not allowed to be longer than 21’ -- including bumpers, whether you’re driving a solo RV, or have a vehicle towing an RV or boat.

During certain hours, Mountain Biking is allowed along this scenic route, but because the road is so busy, I personally would only do it with a tour group so that you have the front and back van to protect you from driving visitors who are paying more attention to the scenery than to the road – and the road is pretty skinny even without the scenic distractions. My recommended tour companies are in the free cheat sheet at [ata.com](#) if you’re interested. Just type Glacier in the search bar in the upper right hand corner.

**07:26** But Kit, what about those Grizzly Bears??? Isn’t it DANGEROUS to hike or bike around bears?

I have to admit I was a bit nervous myself. On the east coast, we have black bears, which unless you are in a national or state park where they don’t hunt bears, the bears generally FEAR humans, so I consider it a treat whenever I see one.

They have lots of black bears in GNP, but also one of the highest concentrations of grizzlies on the continent. So what to do?

**07:51** The main thing is to do the common sense practices the rangers tell you to do and you’ll be fine. I have complete details from the national park service on the ATA website in today’s show notes. But a few key points for now:

First: you need to know the difference between the two types of bears as the bears have different personalities and have different personal space requirements.

- Grizzly bears have an obvious shoulder hump, dished face, rounded ears, and large white claws.
- Black bears have no hump, a straight dog-like muzzle, pointed ears, and dark claws.

And listen up! This fact is important: you CANNOT tell the difference between the types of bears by their color. There are brown black bears and black grizzly bears. Go with the body shapes and other identifiable features I just mentioned. From a distance, I find the hump and snout the most easily recognizable traits.

When hiking, make HUMAN noises like my HEY BEAR cadence when you are in an area of tall vegetation that may hide a bear, around berry patches where they may be feeding, or before a sharp bend in the trail. Your goal is to NOT surprise a bear. Believe me, the bears don't want to mess with you, either.

**08:58** According to a ranger, the bells that are commonly sold to alert bears that a human is present don't work, so don't waste your money. In fact, the instructor on the ferry over to one of my Crater Lake hike told us that sometimes the bells attract bears wondering what the heck the noise is. You should carry bear spray instead. The airlines won't let you pack it on the plane, so unless you're driving, wait until you get there to buy some. They confiscated mine at the airport for my return flight and told me that they'd give it to the boy scouts.

One other thing to note, the rangers are on the ball out there and they CLOSE any trails where they know of current bear activity. If you want more details, you can read my "[What to Do](#) if you encounter a Bear in the woods" included as a bonus along with today's show notes for this episode. Just type Glacier in the search bar in the upper right corner of ATA.com

**09:39** In my research, in the last thirty years, I found only two fatalities from bears in Glacier: one was a man who spooked a mom with her cubs and the other was a mountain biker who may have brought out the bear's chase instinct. Considering Glacier gets over 3 million visitors a year and celebrated its 100 MILLIONTH visitor a couple of years ago, AND 70% of all Glacier's visitors hike, I think you'll agree that with appropriate safety precautions you will be just fine and the treat will be in seeing a bear from a safe distance.

I got lucky three times: Once from the car, we saw a momma grizzly and her cub in the meadow. When bears are near the road, you'll get into what's called a Bear Jam, much to the park ranger's dismay – they telling us folks that we are supposed to keep driving when we see wildlife -- like THAT's going to happen!.

We also enjoyed watching a black bear from the safety of the car for about thirty minutes on another day. When outside of a vehicle, you are considered safe if you are at least 300' from a bear. But the most thrilling encounter was one day after lunch, sitting next to a lake. I got chilly after eating, so moved over to a sunny log. A couple of minutes later I saw a grizzly come out of the woods towards the lake, maybe 800' away. There were several dozen hikers at this section of the lake during lunch time. As the grizzly casually ambled towards us, we all watched with joy, but as it moved a little bit closer to us still, at around 400' away, we all headed back to the trail and away from the bear as a precaution. But what a thrill!

**11:02** I also saw plenty of wild goats. On a hike up to the lake, there were a ton of them. And actually there was still some snow on the ground! As Venti and I hiked up, a couple was eating their lunch on a large boulder and had no idea that on the meadow a few feet behind them, a couple of wild goats were also

enjoying their grassy lunch. The goats seemed fairly tame, but you are supposed to keep a distance of 75', which everyone pretty much ignored. I felt safe pretty close to them.

However, you need to keep a little further distance from the Big Horned Sheep, and I would stick to the 75' guideline. These impressive sheep like to be up really high. On this trip, I only literally saw a sheep's butt, and I wouldn't have even seen that except that a small group of them were on a cliff above our trail and were disturbing the rocks and pebbles as they fed. We obviously looked up to see what was causing the debris to tumble on top of us. So what if it was just big horn sheep butt??? I LOVE seeing wildlife and I'll take seeing sheep hiney if that's all I can get!

**11:55** Not only is the wildlife in abundance in Glacier, but I can honestly say that I have NEVER seen such a variety or abundance of wildflowers in my life! And I am a plant person.

I once owned a wholesale plant nursery and have a good eye for and knowledge of plants.

The funny AND cool thing about Glacier is that the growing season is so brief, so it seems that all of the wildflowers burst into bloom around the same time. We were there in mid-July. It was crazy that flowers I know to be spring wildflowers were blooming along side other plants I know to be fall bloomers, such as asters. These plants seemed to have evolved to all have this merry floral keg party at the same time and literally have to make hay while the sun shines.

Frankly, I wasn't expecting ANY flowers that far north, but the alpine meadows were LOADED with them! I must say that seeing one fabulous view after another of these colorful alpine meadows was a highlight! I read where there are over 1000 kinds of wildflowers here!

**12:45** It was incredible! In fact, they have a tall wildflower there called Beargrass, which at the top looks like a white Christmas bell or pom pom or sometimes even a boob, that was in such profusion-- and I am talking acres upon acres of blooms - that I have never seen anything like it. Colonies of this wildflower generally only bloom ever 5-7 years. In 2017, we were told that we were lucky enough to see the largest mass of beargrass blooms in thirty years! The mountainsides were sometimes covered in them! Despite the name, the bears don't eat them and they aren't a grass. They are quite beautiful and I am so grateful to have seen them at their peak. Up by Siyeh Pass, I took a [video](#) of a grove of these impressive flowers you can see on the website.

Another one of my favorites wildflowers is the delicate looking glacier lily – which is also a favorite of the bears. But frankly, it was hard to pick favorites because everything was just one beautiful, riotous burst of color in every nook and cranny of the trails, especially on the alpine meadows.

**13:41** Like I said, I am a plant person, and after many days of hiking, I became concerned when I saw two and ONLY two, small clusters of a very pretty perennial called Monarda, or Bee Balm, when most of the wildflowers had hundreds of clusters throughout the trails. I was worried because this lovely plant is in the mint family and is very invasive. I was worried that some hiker had inadvertently let loose some seeds that may have gotten snagged on her backpack from home or something like that, and that the plants would crowd out the native species, like some kind of kudzu. I was relieved when I met a retired teacher along the special trail to see the Upper Grinnell Glacier.

One this trail, there is a lovely viewpoint just above the glacier and it actually has a bit of a beach you can hike down to if you'd rather hang out down there. When the light hits the glacier, it can play tricks on your eyes, giving it a surreal appearance. This trail is about an eleven mile total hike that I would call moderate.

**14:34** Happily, on the way back from Grinnell glacier, I met that retired teacher who hikes Glacier every year. That particular day, he was hiking with a 20 year old student he had met the day prior, who like himself, was also travelling solo. I ended up joining them for a few miles.

This teacher was so knowledgeable about the park itself AND its plants. Plus he had an excellent color flower guide with him. I was grateful to see that the Bee Balm I had been worried about was indeed a native of these mountains, but I'm guessing the cold must somehow keep them in check. For this particular stretch of that hike, I felt like I had my own botanist giving me a private tour. I just love how you meet so many cool people while adventure traveling, and that this mutual love can bring together such disparate people as a college kid, a middle aged woman and a retired professor.

**15:18** Another superb hike is the Swiftcurrent Pass, which is about 7 miles each way to a scenic overlook of a chain of three glacial lakes. At the pass, you will intersect the Continental Divide, so be on the lookout for through hikers. For the hard core, you can add an additional 1.4 miles up switchbacks to the Swiftcurrent Lookout or go see the Granite Park chalet. At the summit, you'll see a chain of three glacial lakes connected by a single stream. They call this lake pattern Paternoster, after the Latin for Our Father, since the lake chain resemble rosary beads.

At GNP, you can go into the back country and backpack, or you can day hike, as we did, you can horseback ride multiple trails, you can mountain bike or even take a rafting trip. There are also boat excursions if you want a rest day.

**16:06** Because of the stunning landscape with the large variety of ways to explore it, GNP is VERY popular. And the weather window is so short to see it all unless you want to mess with the snow. This creates two problems:

1. It is crowded. That's one reason I wasn't so worried about bears because the open trails were so busy, it was unlikely a bear would come near them. The road gets congested and parking is difficult. If you want to park at Logan's Pass in the middle of Going to The Sun road, you'd better get there early. Venti and I preferred to park at the main entrance and use the free shuttle to get about the park. It runs several times an hour.
2. Lodging. If you want to stay in the park, you need to either get one of the early online reservations or get there when they open and hope to get a spot. We chose to camp just outside the park most of the time, or we stayed in a really basic motel just outside of the entrances. Inside the park, there are some magnificent historic lodges that are also an option. The hotel at Many Glacier on Swiftcurrent Lake is not only a nice place to stay, but do go in and have a drink after your day's adventures. There are also some basic chalets within the park. Generally the lodging is very basic but there is usually at least one higher quality accommodation if that is your thing.

**17:12** Remember that I mentioned that GNP joined with Canada's Waterton park? Well it is certainly worth the drive. It isn't that far of a drive, from Many Glacier, maybe an hour and a half including going through customs – but remember -- you need a passport these days.

**17:27** At Waterton, campsite access is similar to the US side, so you have to get there early to snag a spot, or you can stay in town at one of the hotels, there's a village campsite, or even the historic Prince of Wales Historic Hotel overlooking the Upper Waterton lake. This impressive lodge was built by the railroad company in the mid-1920's during the prohibition era to lure tourists who would then use the railroad. It has a magnificent view of the lake from up on a high bluff.

Waterton is a charming host town of less than 100 full time residents. It has several cute cafes and ice cream shops. There are some day hikes on the 120 miles of trails from the town center where you can see waterfalls and more, plus several mountain biking and horseback trails. Or, you can take the historic old ferry boat, the colorful red and white *M.V. International* which has been in service since 1927, on either a tour of the lake, as a shuttle to the Goat Haunt area trails, or across the lake to hike the Crypt Lake. Also just outside of Waterton is a Bison preserve you can drive through.

**18:37** If your lungs can take a fairly steep ascent, the 10.7 mile -- 17.2 km hike up to Crypt Crater lake is a must. The name comes from a 600' waterfall that flows underground like a crypt or cavern, before it comes out of the headwall into the valley below.

I would rate this a 3.5 star hike. Be aware that there is a 675 m / 2,214 ft. elevation gain, so you really need to have pretty good lungs.

National Geographic has named this hike as one of the top 20 most thrilling hikes in the world and it has been called Canada's best hike.

The ferry boat shuttles you over to the trailhead which starts through woodland. You book separate one way shuttles on the ferry, but if you guess your time wrong, don't worry, the captain will still get your back on a standby basis. Plan at least six hours for the hike.

**19:25** On the trail, some of the edible berries were just starting to ripen, so we treated ourselves to a few along the way. Once through the woodland, you start a steep ascent through a rocky path with many switchbacks. You'll pass two beautiful waterfalls about halfway up. Nearer to the top, you'll have to hold onto a cable wire bolted into the side of the mountain as the path is only about a couple of feet wide with a very steep drop down. It sounds scarier than it was. Shortly after that, you have to climb up a ladder and then hunch down and crawl through a 4', 100' long natural made tunnel through the mountain.

When you arrive at the top, you'll find the beautiful crater lake. It's a wonderful place for a picnic. There's a path around it, so I went for it. It was fairly easy going until I was about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through. There was still ice on the north facing side with about a 45 degree slope. The snow was not icy, but if I lost my footing, I could slide down the steep slope INTO the lake, which was freezing cold and super deep and it would have been very difficult to climb out. It wasn't slippery, just steep and I did have my sticks for balance. I wasn't scared (and I'm a scaredy cat), but I must say that I did feel a bit of a twitch. So what I decided to do was to kick my heel into the next step area to give myself a solid foothold to use for the next step. This worked out well enough so that I felt comfortable enough not to turn back.

**20:44** One thing I like about this whole region is how the mountains just pop up out of the flat prairie. It is so different than the mountains in NC where we have foothills, or increasingly larger baby hills leading up to the big mountains. Here you can be out in super flat prairie grass and then BOOM! you see the jutting massive mountain peaks. I understand the term Big Sky now as you can see so much more and so much farther than I am used to.

Another thing about this region are the potential summer wildfires. Some were just getting started when I was there and one, the Sprague Fire, is raging out of control as I record this. Wildfires are part of the cycle of a forest. The fire residue recycles the nutrients of the dead and the living vegetation so the area can start anew. Many plants, such as the magnificent beargrass I told you about earlier, do best after a wildfire. The clearings from fires allow for lush fresh new growth which also appeals to all the foraging animals.

**21:35** The smoke from the fires can be hard on the lungs and eyes, and the park will close areas if it gets bad. But I must say that the smoke makes for stunning sunsets. The particles in the air make for super red colored sunsets – see my website photo for a beauty enhanced by the wildfires. The haze from the smoke though can obscure the long distance views of the mountains. We didn't have much problem with this though. Be sure to check the NPS excellent website before you travel to Glacier to get any updates on not only the snow but also any fires.

America's National Parks have been called America's Best Idea. A guy by the name of Nagle had this to say in favor of starting America's national park system: "Europe had millennia of cultural superiority which we couldn't compete with, but we COULD with nature," When you visit Glacier, you'll see just what he meant.

OH! And remember I wondered earlier in the program how things would go spending three weeks, twenty four hours a day in close quarters with a woman I'd just met? Well, it turns out my adventure travel theory is correct. There is a special kind of bond with people like you and me who like to do these kind of outdoor things. Whether it is the 20 year old college student, the kindly professor, or my seasoned world traveler new Aussie friend, we all got along great, and truly, nothing DID really did go wrong.

The verdict on this adventure is that it is great for anyone looking for superior landscape views and endless trails. I'd put the average physical rating is from 2 to 3.5 out of five. The comfort level unless you are staying at one of the historic lodges is usually basic 2 star or camping. Unless you are backpacking in the backcountry, every day is a day trip so you can make it as strenuous or easy going as you like. This vacation can be readily planned and executed on your own, although I would definitely recommend using a tour company for a road biking adventure just for road safety reasons. Tour companies can also arrange your whole trip for you if you don't want to mess with the hassle of getting camp sites.

You can get my tour company recommendations on the downloadable freebie Cheat Sheet by clicking on the button on today's Show Notes page. The Cheat Sheet also has more of the nitty gritty details you need to know before heading out on this adventure. Just search Glacier in the upper right hand corner at ATA.com.

Remember you can get all the Cheat Sheets automatically in your inbox if you sign up for the monthly email newsletter, which also includes other travel tips and sometimes travel deals.

If you plan to add GNP to your bucket list, do try to go before 2030, as unfortunately, the forecast is for the 25 remaining glaciers to be melted around then.

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Thanks for listening. I broadcast the first and third Thursday of the month, so will see you in a couple of weeks with another epic travel adventure you're gonna want to consider adding to your adventure bucket list.

Until then, Adventure On!