

Hemispheres

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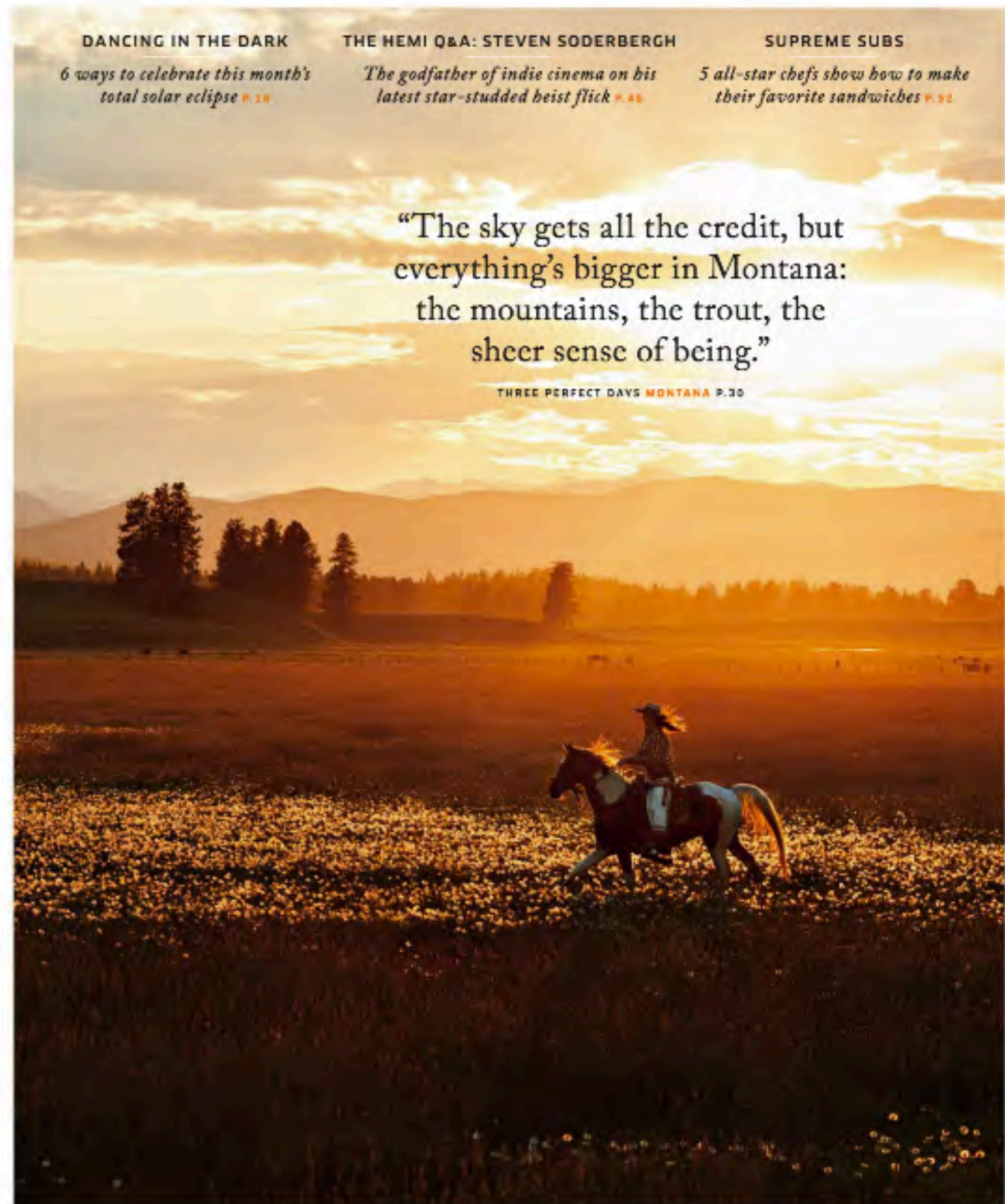
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THREE PERFECT DAYS **MONTANA** **P. 30**

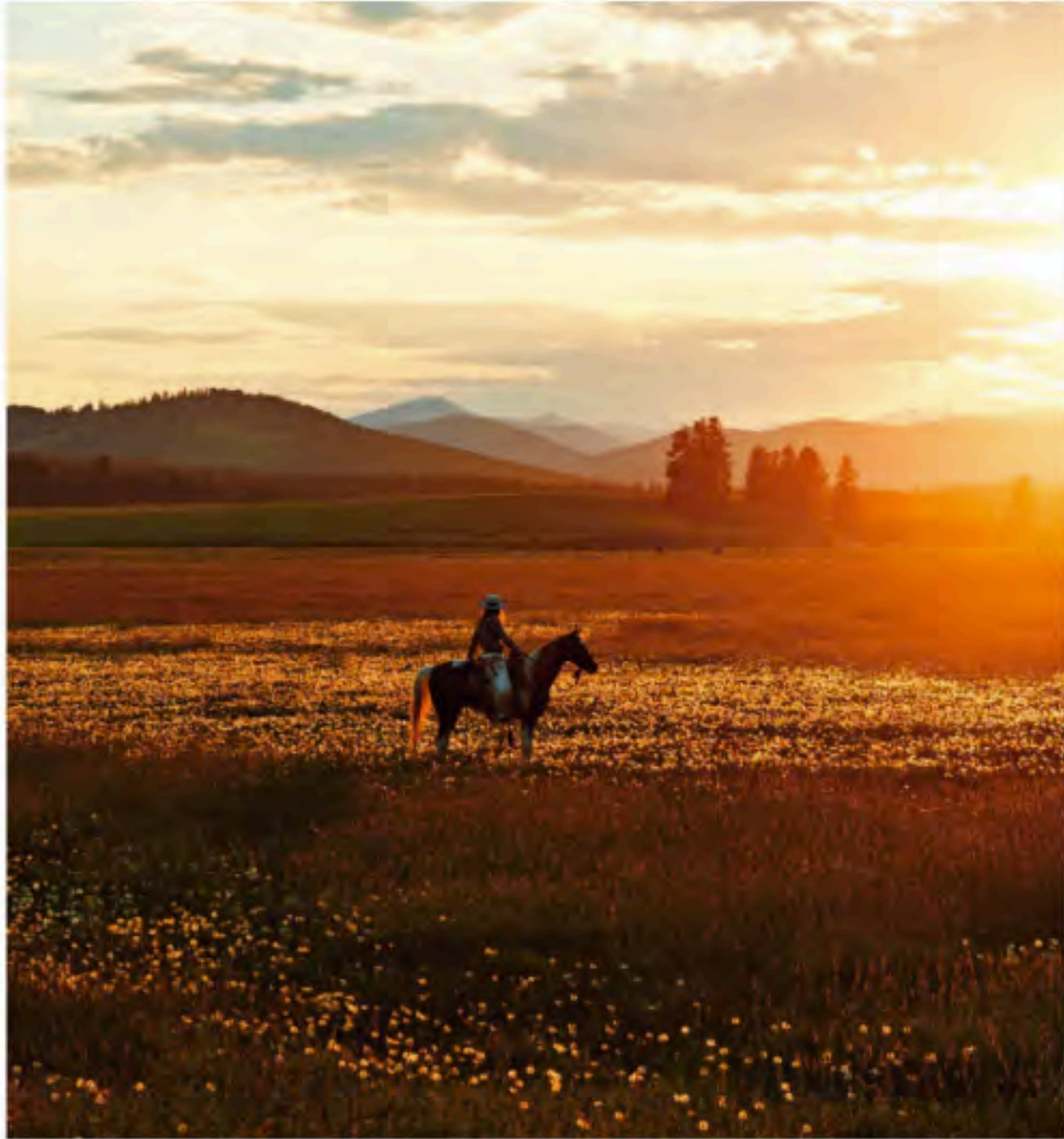


Three Perfect Days: Montana



BY JACOB BAYNHAM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
BRAD TORCHIA

Montana is a story best told outside. It's a place where people measure the worth of their weekends by the mud on their boots. Those who were born here know what they have. Those who visit will dream about finding a way to stay. But no one is indecisive about living in Montana. If you're here, you're all in. You're outside and getting up early, as Norman Maclean wrote in *A River Runs Through It*, "to see as much of the Lord's daylight as is given to us."



Above: the sun sets over a meadow at The Resort at Paws Up; opposite page: a cattle wrangler at Paws Up

DAY ONE

IN WHICH JACOB DRINKS ESPRESSO WITH A POP STAR,
DOES SOME VICARIOUS SURFING, AND FULFILLS HIS DREAM
OF OWNING—OK, RENTING—A 1986 VW VAN

I'm standing 620 feet above Missoula, beside a giant white "M" branded onto a mountainside. Fifteen thousand years ago, I'd have been underwater. During the last ice age, a glacier dammed the Clark Fork River, creating a lake that was 2,000 feet deep and larger than Delaware. Beavers the size of grizzlies roamed its banks. Then the dam

broke and flushed the lake out to the Pacific. I'm looking down at the aftermath, which is now the midsize college town where I live.

The sun hasn't quite crested Mount Sentinel behind me, but it's light enough to see the maple-lined streets and the Clark Fork unspooling through town. Somewhere to my right, in the shadow of Mount Jumbo, is my house. It feels good to linger in the cool air and listen to the meadowlarks, but few moments are as heavy with possibility as a Montana summer sunrise. So when the University of Montana clock tower chimes

the hour below, I'm already jogging down the switchbacks toward another kind of pick-me-up.

I find it at Drum Coffee, a new café owned by John Wicks, the drummer for the indie-pop band Fitz and the Tantrums. Wicks's wife, Jenna, grew up in Missoula, and after the couple had kids they moved here from Southern California. He's tall, with thick-framed glasses and a peacoat with notebooks in the breast pocket. Over a café cortado, he tells me how Montana won his heart.

"In Los Angeles, I got the sense that people were trying to make their lives as easy as possible," he says. "That's not a goal here. People want to see the benefit of their hard work. I really love that about this place."

Before he moved here, Wicks felt jaded, toiling away in a cutthroat industry. But now, when he's not on tour, he spends his days managing the café, giving drum lessons to kids, and running up the mountains behind his house. "The topography of this place plays a part in the humility here," he says. "These mountains don't care what you do. They're going to be here when you're gone. That plays a big part in people's priorities."

"Surfers paddle furiously into the froth and then spring to their feet, suspended by the roaring current."

One of my immediate priorities is brunch at Scotty's Table, an Art Deco-inflected bistro downtown. I order a burger made from cattle that graze a pasture along the Bitterroot River, south of town. It's topped with a farm-fresh egg and bacon, and it's a tribute to sustainable beef.

From here, I cut through Caras Park to the Clark Fork, where surfers are playing in a standing wave. The river is high and brown, but the surfers are out anyway, paddling furiously into the froth, then springing to their feet, suspended by the roaring current. I feel a vicarious thrill.



“
Montana is one of the few places where the far right and the far left coexist and want the same thing: to preserve what's here.
”

JOHN WICKS
MUSICIAN

Three Perfect Flies for Montana



Chubby Chernobyl Ant

Made of high-floating foam with irresistible rubber legs and a white wing for good visibility. In different sizes and colors, it can imitate a stonefly or a grasshopper, or just be a big, buggy attractor.



Purple Haze

In your father's fly box, this would be a Parachute Adams. The Purple Haze is a new and improved pattern that works as a variety of mayflies. And trout love purple.



Zonker

When the bugs aren't hatching, it's always worth swinging a big streamer through a deep pool. The rabbit strip on this fly undulates underwater, drawing savage strikes from large trout.



From left: surfers on the rushing Clark Fork River; strolling North Higgins Ave. in downtown Missoula

A hundred yards upstream is the Clark Fork Farmers Market, where locals wander among stalls bearing homemade jellies, morel mushrooms, beeswax lip balm, and kombucha. At Ninja Mike's breakfast stall, a man in a mechanic's jumpsuit works the griddle, flipping egg sandwiches to old-school hip-hop. Farther down, a sandy-haired kid in a Nirvana sweatshirt strums Green Day on an unplugged Stratocaster.

The day is getting on. I've spent weeks planning these three days, but I'm most excited about the driving, which I've arranged to do in a 1986 Volkswagen Westfalia Weekender Camper—a personal dream. I collect one at the airport from Dragonflyvans, where Scott Quinnett introduces me to a van he calls *Lizard King*—named both for Jim Morrison and for the lizard that was living in the engine when he bought it. The vehicle has a beige interior, the aerodynamics of a brick, and no power steering. I'm smitten.

Quinnett walks me through *Lizard King's* particularities (take hills slowly) and hands me the keys. "I can almost guarantee you a blast," he says with a smile. The van purrs to life, and I crank its large steering wheel homeward to pick up my family.



A few notes on my family: My wife, Hilly, gave birth to our second son, Julian, three weeks ago. Our other son, Theo, is 3. But Hilly is a fourth-generation Montanan, and game for adventure. So is our 10-year-old niece, Salome, who's along for the ride. We pile into the van and head to Tagliare Deli for sandwiches, all of which are named after rock bands—I order the Megadeth, with spicy capicola, soppressata, and mozzarella. We roll out of town through a notch in the hills on Highway 93.

Our next stop is for candy, at Hummingbird Toys and Treats in Arlee, on the Flathead Indian Reservation about 30 miles north. The

Hummingbird is a local fixture that sells 60 varieties of black licorice from around the world, and there is much deliberation before we can set off again.

Scarcely 10 minutes up the road is another mandatory stop: the Windmill Village Bakery in Ravalli, where owner Nancy Martin sells fresh doughnuts the way her mother made them. She chops one up for Salome and Theo, and hands me one on a square of wax paper. It's warm, soft as a marshmallow, and gone in a few savage bites.

Martin was born and raised in Montana. "When you live somewhere else, people don't like you until you give them a reason to," she says. "In Montana, people like you until you give them a reason not to. And you can't bear the scenery. The day we crest that hill and don't gasp, we need to reboot, because something's off the rails."

She's referring to Ravalli Hill, and when we crest it, minutes later, we do gasp, as always. The Mission Mountains rise straight from the valley floor here, a blue-green wall of peaks. They're distractingly beautiful.

"We drive the cows to an open pasture, and the wranglers teach me how to cut a cow from the herd, as real cowboys do."

We drive beneath them to Polson, a small town where the trees outnumber the houses on the shore of Flathead Lake, the largest freshwater lake in the West and one of the cleanest in the country. We travel up the west shore, past cherry orchards, to Tamarack Brewery in Lakeside (our lodgings are nearby, and I'm ready for a drink).

We sip our way through a comprehensive flight of beers and nibble on fish and chips. Everyone's tired. The West Shore State Park campground beckons. We pull into the site and I pop the top of Lizard King while Salome builds a fire. We can see blue water through the trees below us and snow on the mountains beyond. The campground is quiet.

At 10 o'clock, it's still light. Salome and Theo are asleep in the upper bunk; Hilly, Julian, and I are stretched out below. I go to sleep thinking there's no place I'd rather be.

Above: pies at Windmill Village Bakery; **opposite page:** driving cattle through sagebrush at Paws Up



“You get the beauty of a state like Colorado—the big mountains and the beautiful forested areas—but without the huge population. You don't feel crowded.
”

JACKIE REESKES
CATTLE WRANGLER



DAY TWO

IN WHICH JACOB COOKS A CAMPFIRE BREAKFAST, BOATS TO A LAKE ISLAND, AND CYCLES TO THE SUN IN GLACIER NATIONAL PARK

All right, the night wasn't total bliss. Hilly elbowed me awake to say, "You're doing that breathing thing again." The kids were restless. But by 6:30 the birds are singing, and I'm rested enough to slide open the van door.

Lizard King makes camping almost effortless. I pull a propane burner from the cupboard, along with a kettle and a French press. Minutes later, I hand Hilly a cup of coffee, and she hands me Julian, to burp. Salome and Theo help me cook eggs and sausages on the fire.

After breakfast, we walk down to the lake, which is lined with moss-green rocks and

clumps of purple flowers. The sun is warm, and I decide to take a dip. It's a brief one. This lake used to be a glacier, and it hasn't warmed much since.

Amy Grout, the Flathead Lake State Park manager, has offered to take me to Wild Horse Island, a 2,163-acre park and the largest island in the lake. The Salish and Kootenai used to swim their best horses out to the island, to foil thieves. It's still home to five wild horses, about 100 bighorn sheep, 50 mule deer, and a handful of coyotes—plus a black bear and a mountain lion that swam out there.

While my family plays on the shore, I wobble aboard Grout's motorboat, alongside a middle-aged couple named JoAnn and Glenn, who spend their summer weekends as volunteer guides. They're the sort of intense, competent types who can wield a phrase like "Drop the stern anchor." I fasten my life vest, happy they're aboard.

Grout steers away from the dock and points the bow toward Wild Horse. "This is a little gem of Montana," she says. "It's a pretty special place." Waves splash against the aluminum hull, and after some engine trouble—an opportunity for JoAnn and Glenn to cheerfully connect the backup motor—we make landfall.

JoAnn and Glenn stay with the boat as I follow Grout up the hillside. We wade through a knee-deep, bright yellow sea of arrowleaf balsamroot. Grout has short chestnut hair and the disposition of someone who gets paid to do what she loves. She still remembers her first visit to the

Flathead. "I fell in love with it," she says. "It was like the valley where I lived in Alaska. I was 13 years old, and I told my parents, 'I'm going to live here one day.'"

She leads me past a century-old homestead and an abandoned apple orchard. The trail is redolent of horse dung, but we don't see the horses. Groat does spot a giant highhorn sheep through her binoculars on a ridge above us. "That's a world-class ram," she says. Four others filter out of the trees around it.

We finally drop back down to the shore through a glade of old pondcrosas that smell of butterscotch. "This is where I was meant to be," Groat says. "I love the landscape and the people. Montanans, we're hardy. We'll do anything to help someone out. We can be very stubborn, but we love the place we live."

Back on the mainland, I rejoin my family to continue our caravan northward, past the strip malls of Kalispell and the lumber mill in Columbia Falls. In the town of Hungry Horse (population 757), we pull over at Willows' HuckleberryLand, a roadside gift shop that's said to serve the area's best huckleberry milkshake.

Inside, Buddy Willows himself is behind the counter, eating a buffalo burger. He's surrounded by shelves of huckleberry everything—honey, syrup, jam, barbecue sauce. "We use Montana huckleberries," he announces. "I'd say they have about 15 to 20 percent more twang." He hands me a



Three Perfect Beers in Montana



Single Malt IPA, Blackfoot River Brewing Company (Helena)

This golden IPA balances unblended floor-malted barley and two types of hops—but you don't have to be a beer nerd to know it's delicious.



Cold Smoke, KettleHouse Brewing Company (Missoula)

Named for the bottomless powder of a perfect ski day, this Scotch ale is smooth and dark, with a slightly sweet, coffee finish.



Bear Bottom Blonde, Tamarack Brewing Company (Lakeside)

Sometimes on a hot summer day outside, you want a beer that's refreshing and light. This easy-drinking Kölsch-style ale fits the bill.



copy of his self-published autobiography, *The Wild and Crazy Buddy Willows*. It's not a dull read.

We leave with a lunch of huckleberry shakes and huckleberry pie—don't judge—and drive 10 miles to the entrance of Glacier National Park, where we all go quiet at the view of the



Above: kayaking on Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park; opposite page: a café on Highway 93



From left: Buddy Willows at HuckleberryLand; the author in his beloved VW van



ax. We stop at Haystack Creek, a lovely spot a few miles from the pass. But looking around at what the Blackfeet call the Backbone of the World, it's hard not to feel sad. In the mid-1800s, there were about 150 glaciers here. Now there are 26. Some scientists project that within 15 years they will all be gone.

Later, back at the lodge, I meet up with my family, who spent the day walking the Trail of the Cedars. With a broad view of shimmering Lake McDonald, we dine on smoked Columbia River steelhead and tender local lamb smothered in a fennel demi-glaze. I wash mine down with a locally brewed Going to the Sun IPA, which only seems fitting.

As a woman plays "Edelweiss" on the piano, Theo passes out over his fruit plate. Salome informs Hilly and me that edelweiss is a white wildflower that grows in Switzerland. She's an uncommonly bright kid. Maybe someday she'll figure out what to do about the glaciers.

DAY THREE

IN WHICH JACOB FRUSTRATES AN INTELLIGENT HORSE, GLAMPS ON THE BLACKFOOT RIVER, AND LANDS A MEMORABLE BROWN TROUT

peaks rising behind Lake McDonald. Two mule deer cross the road in front of us.

Soon, we're checking in at the Lake McDonald Lodge, a chalet on the north shore that was built as a hunting lodge in 1913. The lobby has a stone fireplace, cedar beams, and game animals mounted on the walls. Lampshades decorated with Native American pictographs hang from the ceiling. Outside, a colony of ground squirrels scurry and chirp. "People call them whistle pigs," a lodge employee tells me. "They own the property. We don't."

It's time to leave the family again, as I'm not sure the kids would enjoy my next adventure: a steep bike climb up the Going-to-the-Sun Road, on which the winter's 80-foot snowdrifts aren't fully cleared until midsummer. Tyler Schmittel, of Glacier Guides, arrives to accompany me. We get off to an awkward start when I ask him if the bearded man tattooed on his leg is Fidel Castro. "It's Edward Abbey," he replies. "The writer and conservationist."

On that note, we start pedaling. Schmittel recently cycled from Los Angeles to Guatemala City, so he's not at all out of breath as he reels off the names of the wildflowers we pass. The white trillium look like fallen stars on the forest floor.

We climb and weave alongside McDonald Creek, which is an otherworldly shade of blue. "It gets that color from glacial silt," Schmittel says. We pass two piles of bear scat on the road. I notice my guide keeps a can of bear spray in his bike's water bottle holder.

We're surrounded by mountains, some of them giant domes of snow, others sheer rock faces that fall from their ridgelines like the cheek of an

After a huckleberry pancake breakfast (rich in antioxidants!), we decide there's time for a 5-mile hike to Avalanche Lake. Marsha, at the front desk, tells us a grizzly sow and two cubs were on the trail recently, so we pack bear spray, although we'll soon learn that Theo melting down over a lollipop is an equally effective deterrent.



The trail is well traveled. When I stop to take a picture of Theo and Salome in a hollowed-out tree, a lady walks by and says, "We have that same photo with our daughters, 20 years ago!"

At the lake, people eat granola bars and gawk at the enormous picture postcard in front of them. In the center of it all is a waterfall that begins at Sperry Glacier and crashes hundreds of feet down the mountain, too far away to be heard.

We have more driving to do. Back in Lizard King, we exit Glacier and follow the verdant Seeley Valley down the backside of the Mission

Mountains. Two hours later, we enter another, wider valley, where we find The Resort at Paws Up, a dude ranch on the Blackfoot River. We check in and are led to the River Camp, where we'll spend the night in a canvas tent. Paws Up claims to have invented the term "glamping," and I wouldn't argue. We are met at the tent by two butlers, who look more like outdoor sportswear models than coat-and-tails types. One of them points out a bald eagle's nest overhead. We're also shown the pavilion, where we'll dine, and the fire pit, where we can toast gourmet s'mores afterward.

My first activity is a cattle drive. In a wide meadow, I meet wrangler Jackie Kecskes, resplendent in white leather chaps and with an elk-antler knife on her belt. She introduces me to my horse, a tall paint named Kid. We set off through the sagebrush with three other wranglers, and Kecskes talks me through the basics: A tap of the heels makes a horse walk; pulling the reins makes him stop; pressure on his right side makes him turn left, and vice versa.

"I always say, you work with a horse the way you work with a man," she says. "You know the outcome you want to achieve, but it has



Above: there is no clear divide between fly fishing and religion in Montana

“I’ve stopped to help people fix a flat on the side of the road, and they’ll try to pay me. I say, ‘No. This is who we are in Montana. This is what we do.’”

AMY GROUT
STATE PARK
MANAGER



From top: cycling the Going-to-the-Sun Road along McDonald Creek in Glacier National Park; *cardo con mole* at Scotty's Table in Missoula

to be their idea, otherwise it won't stick." I recognize the principle from parenting.

As we reach the cow pen, the animals look up as if to say, "Oh no, this again?" Kecskes swings open the gate, and I try to help the other wranglers herd the cows toward her. But I keep messing up my turn signals, applying pressure with the wrong foot. Kid is confused. Then he seems to realize I'm inept and takes the lead. Evidently, he knows the outcome he wants to achieve.

"The rivers brought me here, and I think they're keeping me here."

Kecskes developed a love for horses in California when her parents let her adopt a half-blind pony at age 5. She came to Montana via Colorado and never wants to leave. "I love the pace of things here," she says. "We still brand our cattle on horseback, and the local sheriff comes out because he's handy on a horse."

By now we've driven the cows to an open pasture. The wranglers teach me how to cut a cow from the herd, as real cowboys do. I find it's a lot like parallel parking, except the curb keeps moving to join the other curbs, and my car has lost respect for me. I manage it once or twice, and then we drive the cows back to the pen. It's not exactly *Lonesome Dove*, but I've got a little swagger as Kid walks me back to the stable.

We have some time before my next activity, so I watch the kids while Hilly—who, let's not forget, gave birth three weeks ago—gets a

massage. She does this at Spa Town, a row of white tents on the forest's edge that looks like a place a soldier might have convalesced after a Civil War battle (or where a mother might convalesce after a postpartum road trip with three children). As the masseuse kneads the knots from her back, she listens to a whistle pig nibble on the tent. There's no escaping nature out here—it's an immersive experience.

With Hilly suitably relaxed, I head out for some fly fishing with Jason Much, a friendly Midwesterner with a man-bun and Muck Boots. Much came out to Montana six years





Clockwise from left: fireworks at Paws Up; a huckleberry mojito at Paws Up; hanging on the porch at Lake McDonald Lodge; an old school sign for a café on Highway 93



ago to fish for fun, and now he makes a living doing it. "The rivers brought me here, and I think they're keeping me here," he says as we drive to the boat launch.

The Blackfoot is running high with snowmelt, and I don't expect great fishing. But Much knows a few slower spots. He hands me a rod rigged with a big streamer and pushes off the raft. Now and then, he offers guidance. "Try in that slack water," he says, or, "That's brown town in there!"

He's right. Suddenly there's a tug on the line and a swirl of yellow. I've fished long enough to know that it's a big brown trout. Slowly, I work it toward the boat, and Much slides his net underneath. And then he lifts from the water one of the finest fish I have ever seen. It's a golden slab of a trout, with black spots and a hooked jaw. Its tail is reddish and the size of my palm. I ease the hook from its mouth and it swims powerfully away. Much lets out an open-mouthed laugh.

Around the corner we see a pair of geese with goslings and a sandhill crane stepping through the reeds. Much is explaining his theory of the philosophical progression of fly fishing. First, you just want to catch a fish on a fly. Then, you want lots of fish. After a while, you want to catch the biggest fish. "The final stage," he says, "is when you want to catch the most difficult. That's when you start to see the soul in a fish."

We're in fast water now, aloft on the waves as swallows hawk mayflies over our heads. We fall silent, and the only noise is the creak of the oarlocks, the rushing water, and the clap of ducks taking flight. Tall ponderosas lean toward the river from both banks like

crossed swords at a naval wedding. In places, a cliff rises from the water, the rocks mottled with lichen in shades of purple, orange, and gray.

The sky gets all the credit, but everything's bigger in Montana—the mountains, the trout, the sheer sense of being.

Our tent is a mile downstream. There will be a cold beer there, and a fire. We'll eat dinner outside, and afterward we'll climb into heated beds within earshot of the river.

"Did you catch anything?" Hilly will ask.

"Yes," I'll say. "I did."

Missoula-based writer Jacob Baynham likes to compare owning a VW van to owning a boat, although his wife reminds him that he has never owned either.



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