



October 4, 2009

Montana Scenic Loop 400 miles of beauty and adventure

By *AMIE THOMPSON*
Tribune Staff Writer

So you've probably been to Glacier, but how did you get there, and how did you return?

The Montana Scenic Loop offers a great opportunity to make the road traveled the destination.

Sprinkled along either side of the Bob Marshall Wilderness are some of the Treasure State's most prized gems.

Augusta, Choteau, Bynum, Dupuyer, Browning and East Glacier on the eastern side of the Rocky Mountain Front, and Lincoln, Ovando, Seeley Lake, Condon and Bigfork on the west side, pair with beautiful communities surrounding Glacier National Park, including Essex, Hungry Horse, West Glacier, Whitefish and Columbia Falls to make a scenic trip only Montana can offer.

"You could actually do it in a day if you didn't really get out of the car," said Corlene Martin, community coordinator for the Montana Scenic Loop.

The loop — 400 miles of some of Montana's most scenic highways — recently was named one of the Top 10 Scenic Drives in the Northern Rockies.

From the rugged Rockies to the wind-swept plains, this drive features Montana's most distinctive characteristics in Montana's most wild country. In the heart of the loop lies the Scapegoat Wilderness, the Bob Marshall Wilderness and the Great Bear Wilderness. Included in the drive are four national forests and several wildlife management areas and national wildlife refuges. The views include Glacier's unique peaks, the Rocky Mountain Front and the Flathead and Blackfoot river basins.

"I was impressed with the openness, how big it is," said Joe Bennett of Corbin, Ky. On his way to Glacier in August, they took Highway 89 through Choteau and Browning to get off the interstate. "People from our part of the country, we don't know the openness and beauty of Montana."

The scenic loop circles the Crown of the Continent, but doesn't include the parts of the Crown that reside in Canada, said Anne Dahl, director of the Swan Ecosystem Center in Condon. The center assists tourists every day who are on the Loop, many of whom travel from Glacier to Yellowstone on Highway 83.

"There are a healthy number of people traveling the scenic loop or at least a portion of it," she said. "Now is a great time to enjoy it. The weather is still good, there is less highway traffic and the campgrounds aren't full."

The Montana Scenic Loop is a partnership of the rural communities throughout the Northern Continental Divide region, the U.S. Forest Service, Montana tourism groups and Montana's Native American tribes. The group encourages tourism and recreation in these towns and in the national forest lands surrounding them. It was formed eight years ago.

The Top 10 Scenic Drives in the Northern Rockies originally began in 2005. The project was built around 14 national parks and four regional drives that have become All-American Roads, the highest designation in the U.S. National Scenic Byway system.

"In March we added four drives, including the Montana Scenic Loop," said Lorraine Roach, coordinator of the project. "They really have been a perfect fit."

At least a portion of four of the drives are in Montana. The 10 drives are:

1. Beartooth All-American Road (Montana and Wyoming)
2. Circle the Continental Divide Driving Tour (Wyoming)
3. Hells Canyon All-American Road (Oregon and Idaho)
4. Hot Springs Circle Tour (British Columbia)
5. International Selkirk Loop All-American Road (Idaho, Washington and British Columbia)
6. Montana Scenic Loop (Montana)
7. Northwest Passage Scenic Byway (Idaho)
8. Salmon River-Sawtooth Scenic Byways (Idaho)
9. Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park Loop (Montana, Alberta and British Columbia)
10. Yellowstone-Grand Teton Loop (Wyoming, Montana and Idaho)

For the towns along the Montana Scenic Loop, being listed as one of the top 10 is yet another way to entice travelers.

"The tourist business is an important part of our economy," Dahl said. The money these towns receive through tourism is especially vital during this downturn, she added.

Travelers might want to plan some extra time, because with every wind of the road, a new adventure could lie ahead. Opportunities for hiking, biking, sailing, golfing, white-water rafting, canoeing, fishing, horseback riding and rock climbing are easy to find. And within many of the towns, find museums, culture, shopping, recreation and fine dining.

But for Joe and Regina Turner of Longmont, Colo., it's the quiet and the nice people that draw them to Lincoln, on the southern most portion of the loop.

"We usually come for a couple of weeks a year. We like the forested land, and we've made friends," Joe Turner said. "It's just a real nice place for piece and quiet."

Martin, who administers the Loop's Web site, said that she feels a bit like a travel agent.

"We get a lot of traffic on the Web site," she said.

People from all over the world check them out online and often call or e-mail Martin with additional questions.

"Having towns like Bigfork on the loop helps the other little communities because Bigfork shows really well," she said.

But attracting travelers isn't new to her town of Choteau.

"Choteau has been a tourism community since way back in the 1920s," Martin said. "It was built to capture the tourist trade between Glacier and Yellowstone."

Reach Tribune Specialty Publication Editor Amie Thompson at 791-6536, or athompson@greatfallstribune.com.

