

ON THE ROCKS

Amtrak's Empire Builder has served it fast and neat for 75 years to Glacier National Park. You'll want to take it nice and slow once you get there.

BY STEPHANIE R. CONNER

Stepping off Amtrak's *Empire Builder* in Glacier National Park puts you smack dab in the middle of 1 million acres of Montana wilderness. (Talk about feeling small!) The park's beauty is awe-inspiring, and its simplicity will force you to realize how far from your city-slickin' life you really are. Summer weather is perfect for bringing out the wildlife (beware of bears) and more than 1,000 species of flora. And for bringing out the outdoor sportsman in you. So make plans to leave behind your laptop and cell phone (it won't work anyway) and head for the rugged, exquisite Glacier National Park.

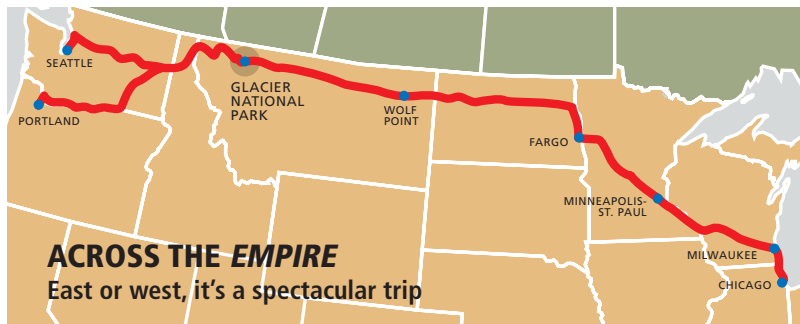
GETTING THERE

The trip into Glacier is half the fun. The *Empire Builder* offers some 43 different boarding stops, and whether you get on (eastbound) in Portland or Seattle or (westbound) in Chicago, the scenery is spectacular.

Boarding in Seattle means you're privy to 30 miles of the Puget Sound. Washington's lush evergreen forests and the massive Cascade Mountains provide a backdrop, where the aptly named Icicle Canyon hosts its annual Icicle







Creek Music Center Chamber Festival (this year from July 11 through Aug. 1) and is home to the lovely Columbia Cascade Winery.

In the middle of the Cascades, you'll ride through the 7.79-mile Cascade Tunnel, the longest in the country. Then, savor the ride through Wenatchee, the Apple Capital of the World—where 15 percent of the nation's apples are grown on 170,000 acres.

From Portland, the Columbia River Draw Bridge is an early sight before you get a glimpse of Mount St. Helens and Beacon Rock (the third largest rock on earth) and Dalles Dam. In Spokane, the Seattle and Portland trains link up and go through the Flathead Tunnel and Whitefish, Mont., before arriving in Glacier.

If you're picking up the *Empire Builder* in Chicago, the westbound track boasts an equally interesting landscape. A while after departing the Windy City, you'll see the Milwaukee County Stadium, Miller Brewery and the red sandstone cliffs of the Wisconsin Dells. Later, St. Paul-Minneapolis and quirky Fargo, N.D., are worth a circle on your map.

From Seattle or Portland, the trip to (West) Glacier takes about 15 hours and from Chicago to (East) Glacier, about 30. To get the most out of the trip, remember to check out the Sightseer Lounge Car, where sandwiches, snacks and beverages are offered—in addition to the best views through near floor-to-ceiling windows. For longer trips, a small, but comfortable room on a sleeper car ensures a good night's rest on the rails. For Chicago-Portland passengers, full-length films provide excellent entertainment for you—and the kids, of course, if you're traveling with family.

TIES TO HISTORY

Glacier National Park owes much of its early 20th-century development to the railroad. In those years, the Great Northern Railroad invested twice as much as the federal government in developing the park. By building roads, trails

and hotels to make it a desirable destination for East Coast Americans who had to travel by train, the rail company opened up an entirely new market.

While the late 1800s were marked by westward expansion, including that of the railroad, Great Northern's *Empire Builder* didn't officially go into service until 1929. When Amtrak was created in 1971 to consolidate all the railroads in the country, it preserved Great Northern's historic *Empire Builder*, named after James J. Hill, the railroad baron who founded Great Northern and aspired to see the tracks reach the West Coast. Currently celebrating its 75th year, the *Empire Builder* remains one of the best routes into Glacier.

WHERE TO STAY

A natural extension of your trip would be the Izaak Walton Inn (406-888-5700, izaakwaltoninn.com) in Essex, Mont. Built in 1939 to house workers for the Great Northern Railway, the inn showcases Great Northern and Amtrak memorabilia. You could even stay in a "caboose cottage" and grab a meal in the hotel's dining



car. Every morning, hotel employees run out to the inn's front porch to wave at the Amtrak train going by.

The inn offers great ski tours and packages, too. During the summer, though, you might want to station yourself closer to hiking trailheads and other activities by opting for other hotels in East and West Glacier.

For lodging information in those, contact Glacier Park, Inc. (406-892-2525, glacierparkinc.com), which can help you book at a number of Glacier hotels, lodges and cabins.

WHAT TO DO

While Glacier National Park offers activities year-round, June through September is the most popular time to go, and it's easy to see why. Temperatures are ideal, with average highs ranging from 66 to 79 degrees. And for the 1.7 million visitors who come every year, there's something for each of them. Fortunately, park fees are minimal: \$5 for a seven-day pass for single-person entry and \$20 for seven days for single-vehicle entry. Yearly passes and other specials are also available. Once inside, what is there to do? Have a look:

Hiking: More than 700 miles of trails are the reason many of Glacier's visitors come, so everything from day hikes to overnight trips are available. For guided hikes, call Glacier Wilderness Guides (406-387-5555).

Cycling: Bicycles are not allowed on the trails, but bike routes and roads abound. You can also bike along the Going-to-the-Sun Road (though there are some restrictions in summer). It's BYOB though—there are no rentals in the park.

Helicopter tours: Want to see the expanse of Glacier from a different perspective? Try flying. Kruger Helicopters is a mere 1½ miles west of West Glacier (krugerhelicopters.com, 800-220-6565).

Boating and waterskiing: You can rent a boat at Apgar, Lake McDonald, St. Mary Lake, Many Glacier and Two Medicine. Glacier Park Boat Company (glacierparkboats.com, 406-257-2426) can provide pricing. Be sure to learn the rules before heading out onto the water. Waterskiiers are welcome on Lake McDonald and St. Mary Lake only.

Horseback riding: At Many Glacier and Lake McDonald, guided horseback riding is available. Call Mule Shoe Outfitters (muleshoe.com, 406-888-5121) for information.

Fishing: Fishing is allowed in the park, but is limited to certain lakes, and the seasons vary by site. There are also daily catch-and-possession

limits, as well as restrictions on method. Learn the rules at nps.gov/glac. The Montana Raft Company (glacierguides.com) also offers guided fly-fishing tours.

Whitewater rafting: Take in some adventure on the Flathead River with a half- or full-day whitewater rafting tour. Learn how to whitewater kayak with Montana Raft Company (glacierguides.com), or, for a more leisurely ride, opt for one of the company's scenic floating tours.

Camping: There are 13 campgrounds with 1,000 campsites in Glacier, most of which are first-come, first-served

TALES FROM THE TRACKS

Let the storytellers from Amtrak's 'Trails and Rails' fill in the details



The Columbia ground squirrel is just one member of Glacier's vast wildlife family.

One of the perks of the *Empire Builder* is the extra education you get between North Dakota and Montana during the summer. The Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site's guides hop onboard to tell riders about the fort and this area of the country. It's part of the Trails and Rails program, a partnership between Amtrak and the National Park Service.

Great for kids and adults alike, Trails and Rails programs are available on several Amtrak lines. For example,

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (which includes the Gateway Arch) provides programs on the *Kansas City Mule* line between St. Louis and Kansas City, Mo. And Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site offers programs on the *Crescent* line between Atlanta and New Orleans. To learn more, visit nps.gov/trails&rails/parks.

(registration required). Fish Creek and St. Mary campgrounds can be reserved five months in advance via National Park Service Reservations (800-365-CAMP).

Going-to-the-Sun Road: This 52-mile stretch climbs 3,000 feet to Logan Pass on the Continental Divide, which separates two distinct regions within the park. It took 11 years to complete the road, which is considered one of the best drives in the country. It usually opens sometime in the first two weeks of June and closes on the Monday following the third Sunday in October (or earlier if snow requires it).

Cross-country skiing: Countless trails—mostly unmarked—are evidence that there's no better way to see the park than on skis (especially since snowmobiles are prohibited). For lessons or a guided cross-country ski tour, contact the Izaak Walton Inn (406-888-5700, izaakwaltoninn.com).