The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America
RICK'S ROADS
Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What

BLOG POST: 2026.07.31

Saint Mary Lake Boat Ride, Glacier National Park, Montana



It was just last year when I found out that boat rides can be part of the Glacier National Park (GNP) experience. Since I first laid eyes (and lens) on it, Saint Mary Lake (SML) has been one of my favorite spots in the park. And it was made even more special by a speck of rock and vegetation well off shore called Wild Goose Island. I had to get a closer look.

By the way, that is *not* Wild Goose Island (WGI) in the photo above, though it *is* similar, it *is* at GNP, and it *is* in SML. This hunk of granite, with its solitary tree, is named Rainbow Island. We got a nice, clear view of it because we had the wind at our backs and the smoky skies behind us.



Ah, yes, the smoke. It's a big part of the story. I came up to Montana because of the ubiquitous wildfires in Oregon and Washington, and, to my chagrin, the smoke came with me.

When I left Cape Flattery two weeks ago, I went east across the top of the Olympic Peninsula, that drove due south through WA, back into OR near The Dalles and continued south on an inland route to the eastern entrance to The McKenzie.

My plan was to do some extended boondocking – maybe a full month, maybe even more – just hanging out, doing little day trips to see the highlights of Willamette National Forest, and camping for free in the delightful evergreen groves.

It was working quite well for the first week. My favored spot from earlier in the month, NF-245 (photo, right), became home base. It was nowhere near as shaded as almost all the other spots were, but I needed it that way. Starlink needed open sky to connect to the satellites, and my solar panels needed open sky to feed on photons and keep my living quarters up to standards.



One day, I took the hour-long drive into Eugene to procure provisions and to get a minor maintenance issue fixed at Joe's Garage. Other than that, it was Rick's version of *Life In The Woods.* Until…

I woke up one morning, pulled back my curtain, and saw smoke where my clearing should have been. I had known that we were into wildfire season, that there were many blazes burning in other parts of the state, and that one had recently started not far away on the other side of the Sisters Mountains. Well, apparently, the wind had shifted and the smoke from that fire was now blowing my way. And that meant the fire itself would be turning in my direction as well. It was time to GTFO.



I made Glacier my goal, reserved a ticket for the St. Mary Lake boat ride, and set out.

Along the way I broke a toe in a campground, discovered that southeastern Washington near Walla Walla is the wheat-growing capital of the USA (who knew?), explored Couer d'Alene and its lake, found a pizza place named after me ("a" included), spent a night at a saloon just 5 miles from Canada, made a return visit to fabulous Polebridge for live music and a smashburger (and The Bob IPA), and, most surprising of all, found a field of hammer cages in the middle of nowhere (photo, above).

I was almost at my Boondockers Welcome host for the night – first one I have ever met that offers a shower *and laundry* to us wanderers (shout out to the good folks at Remington Ranch in Athol ID!) – when I slowed for an intersection of two long, narrow, 2-lane roads. At the stop sign, I looked left and saw all clear. I looked right and saw… *WTF is a hammer cage doing here??*

Just about everyone knows that the sport of Track & Field (known as "Athletics" internationally) is not just about running. And they know that athletes jump high, they jump far, and they propel heavy brass balls, flat-ish disks, and spears.

The most obscure event, though, is arguably the Hammer Throw. Its obscurity is the result of its danger. A runaway hammer can kill, and very track venues will allow the event to be contested on the infield; it is usually relegated to some field outside the stadium where none but the most avid followers of the event go to watch it.

The athlete holds a handle, which is attached to a sturdy metal cable, which, in turn, is attached to a heavy brass ball, which is the same weight as the shot used in the

Shot Put. But instead of flying 60 or 70+ feet, as it does in an elite Shot Put, the ball in the Hammer Throw sails 230, 240, 250 feet or more.

The athlete spins on smooth concrete within a 7-foot circle, with the arms extended and ball-and-cable extended out, gathering a crazy amount of speed and momentum in each of the three rotations. At precisely the right point in the spin, the thrower releases the implement and it flies a long way, hopefully in the right direction.



It is ridiculously dangerous, and large cages with netting are set up around the throwing area, allowing just a 35-degree angle for a legal release. Even the best in the world sometimes crash the cage.

I was at the World Cup track meet in Monteal in 1979, when a Soviet hammer thrower slipped just as he was releasing the implement, and his throw came out at an extreme angle that somehow missed the cage. The 16-pound ball came careening out at more than 60 MPH, completely across the infield, and landed on the inner edge of the track during the 10,000 Meter Run, bouncing wildly off the rubber surface and smashing loudly into the metal wall at the base of the grandstand another forty feet beyond.

Thankfully, the runners had just gone past the point (but only by about 50 yards) and nobody was sitting in that section of the stands. But, still, holy *shit!!* A 16-pound cannonball zooming onto the track at 60+ MPH. Yikes.

So, this is the type of cage I saw next to this remote road in western Idaho. There were also cages for the Discus Throw and the Shot Put, but the big rigs for the hammer stood out.

Historically, the Hammer Throw was just that: blacksmith's hammers and heavy sledgehammers. The current implement bears little resemblence, but the physics required for an elite throw are similar.

I needed to make good time to reach my host, so I made a mental note of where it was and returned the next morning.

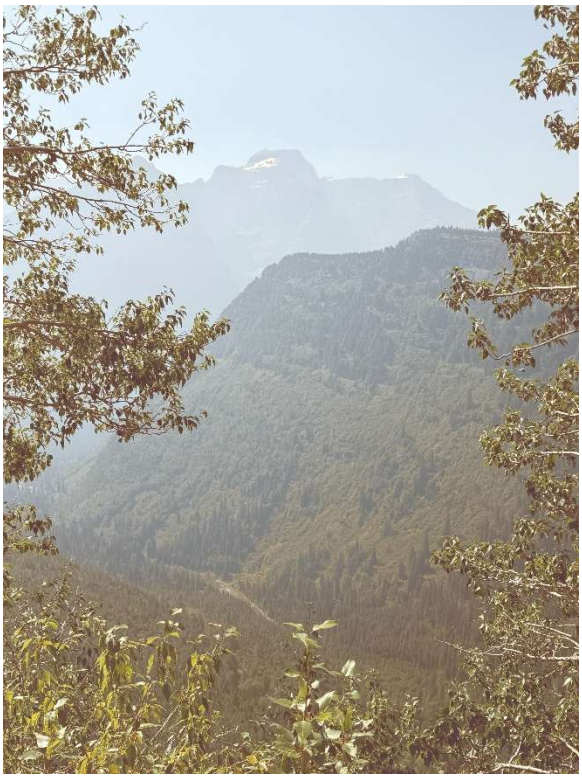
When I did, I pulled down the driveway and stopped at the nearest cage. A large young man in his 20's was practicing the event, and a large older man closer to my age was coaching him. They both were bemused by this unknown, gawking intruder in his big blue van, so I thought it best to get out and explain myself.



The coach chuckled when I asked what the hell hammer cages were doing here: "I'm impressed you actually know what they are!"

Between his athlete's throws, he filled me in on Iron Wood Thrower Development Camp, where hundreds of shotputters, discus throwers, javelin throwers and hammer throwers attend multiple camps to learn and practice better technique. About 370, both male and female, had come so far this summer, with a month remaining. It is a rare place, for sure, and throwers come from far and wide to attend. The guy in the cage was a Polish dude from Switzerland.

The website says this: *[Started in 1989], the Iron Wood Thrower Development Camp has established itself as the largest specialty track and field camp in the United States. As of 2018, nearly 5,700 athletes and coaches have attended Iron Wood! We've proudly hosted 31 Olympians and 7 former world record holders as well as several top-ranked collegiate, high school and club coaches on our instructional staff.*



Impressive indeed! I would have liked to see more, but I remembered that I was an intruder. So, I thanked the coach for his time, apologized for interrupting the workout, and departed.

And, ummm, yeah. Glacier National Park. This was on the way there.

By the time I reached GNP, the smoke had arrived as well. The skies had been clear 30 miles to the north, up in Polebridge,



Wild Goose Island up close (above) and from afar in 2025 (below, center)



but the haze gradually became apparent as I drove here, and when that 10,000-foot-tall wall of mountains got blocked the way, the smoke just piled up thicker and thicker.

I did lament what would surely be a poor photo day, but the prospect of doing a boat ride on this awesome lake still excited me. The west wind was howling, though, so

our outbound route was battered by spray. That photo of Wild Goose Island (above) was the best one of more than a dozen attempts. Through-the-window was futile, and trying get between-the-splashes shots was a bedeviling game.



We splashed along, listening to interesting narration, for about a half-hour, when the boat pulled up to a tiny dock on the north shore of SML, and we all got out to take a short (like 150 yards short) hike up to Baring Falls.

Usually one to outpace the group so I can snap a few photos before the people arrive, I was, this time, the slow poke, hobbling my way up the trail with my left foot in the half-boot that I was prescribed for my broken toe.

It was merely the fourth toe on my left foot. I can't think of a more useless apendage. Some inconvenience was there, and it would last a month, but it wasn't all that much, especially since I'd be doing nothing but driving for the first two weeks of it. First fracture of my life. Cross that off the Bucket List, right?

Baring Falls was purdy dang cool! It wasn't huge, but it wasn't small either, and it was gushing impressively.



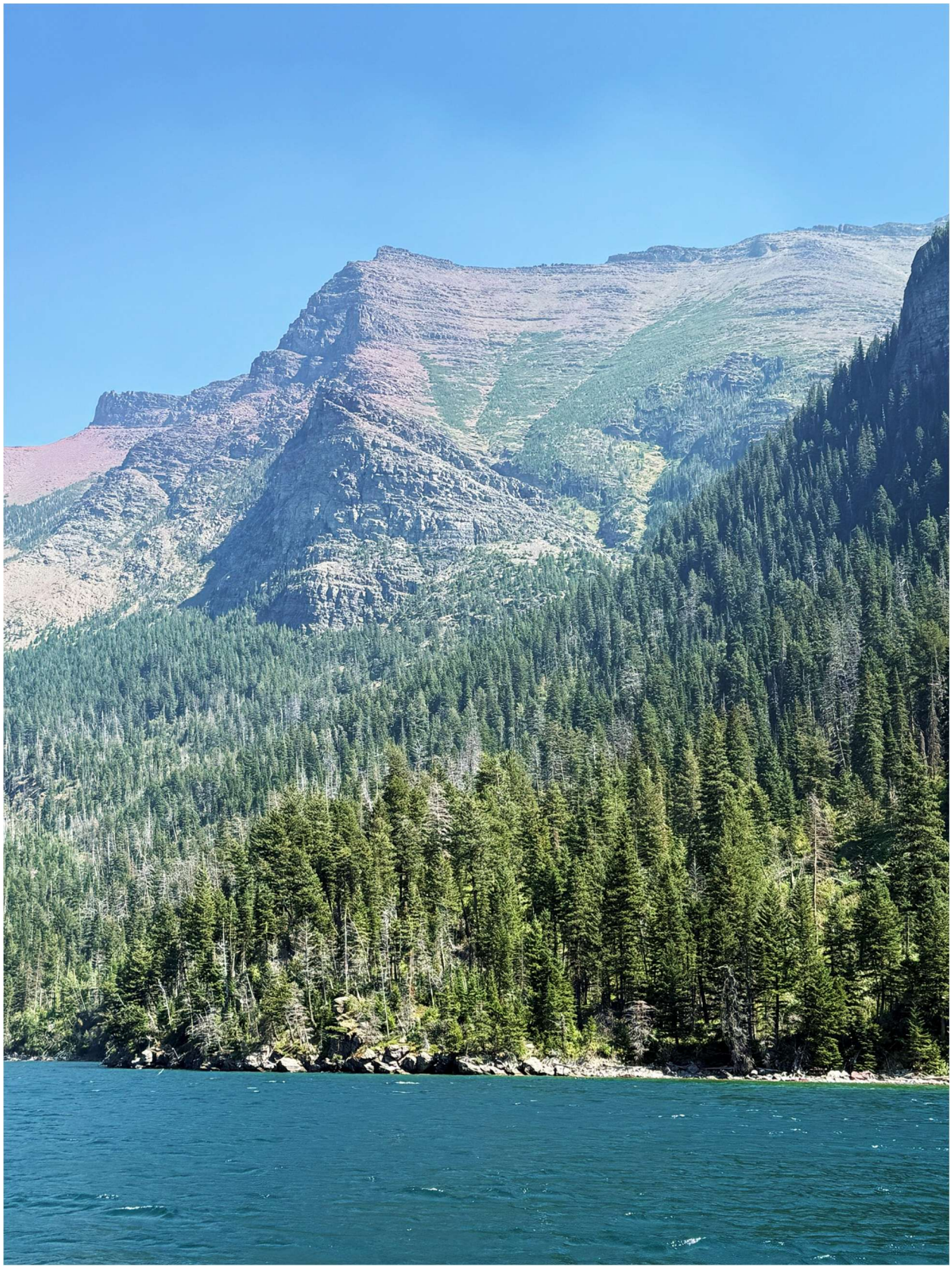






As we headed back to the dock at Rising Sun, the views looked a lot clearer. I stayed out on the aft deck since we weren't bucking the whitecaps any more. It was a beautiful afternoon and Glacier was doing its best to show off, despite the haze.







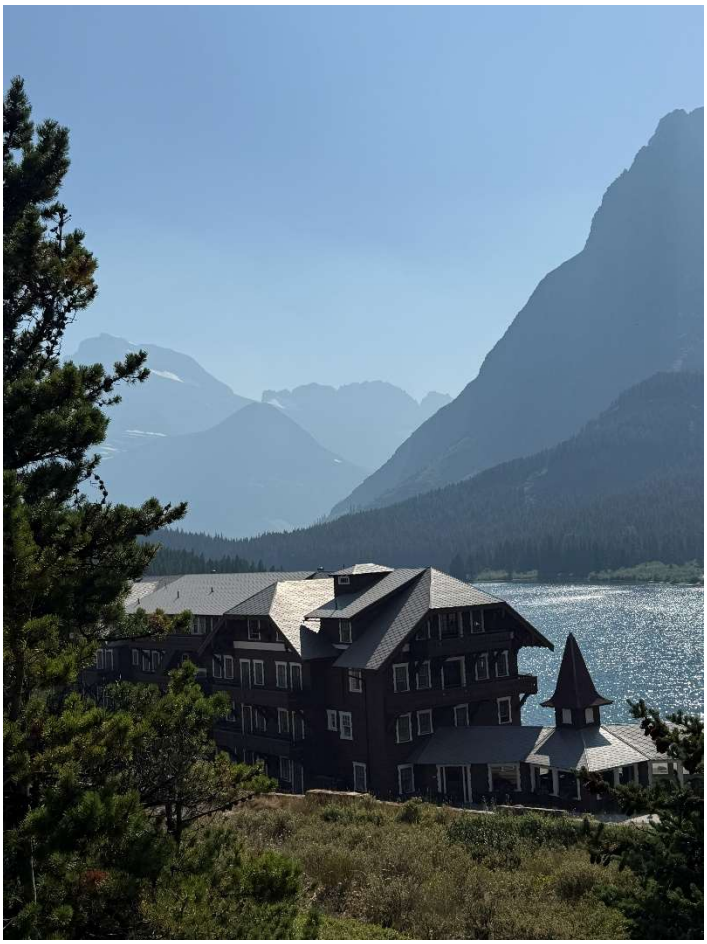
As part of the narration, our guide showed us a cliff atop which Glacier Lodge used to stand. She also told us a tale about the other lodge up at the Many Glacier area. Once we landed, I decided to drive up there and have a look.

It didn't look like a long ride, but GooGirl told me why it would take close to an hour to get there: 15 miles of dirt road, with most of it dusty washboard. Ugh.

The worst thing about that kind of road is the collection of meatheads in their pickups and SUVs that want to show off how fast that can pummel their vehicles over that terrain and how much dust they can kick up.

So that part sucked. I don't understand why the National Park does not pave it. This is a nice area of the park, but the road is a serious deterrent to visiting it.

Many Glacier Hotel is a Swiss-style lakeside lodge on the east shore of Swiftcurrent Lake. It was built in 1914-15 and has 214 rooms.

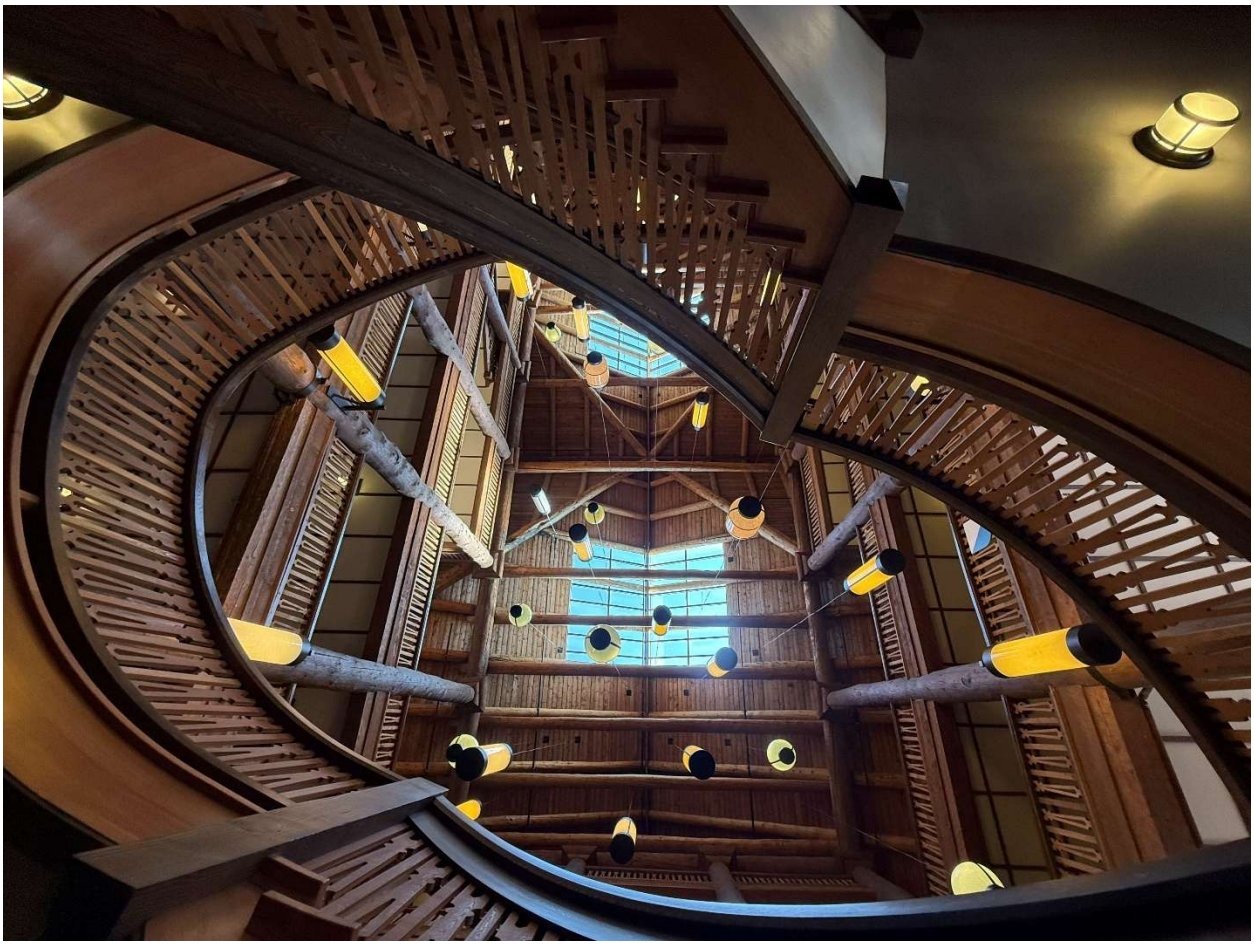




Between the haze and the into-the-afternoon-sun angle, photos were hard to come by, so I took my lens inside.















There were a couple of cool cataracts running across the entrance road and under the driveway bridge. Well worth a bit of clambering.

I told myself I was going to come back in the morning and get the reverse sun views – as I often do – but I didn't believe it. Haze would still be an issue, and that freaking washboard road was another. Bad enough that I had to traverse it *again* to get back out of here, so the zeal of enduring it *twice more* just for a couple of sub-primo snaps just wasn't there.

So, I headed off to a now-familiar campground: The Leaning Tree, about 25 minutes away, east of the park, listed as being in Babb, MT. Good place: electricity and showers were calling my name.