

## **Small Town Montana**

### **By Suzanne Wright**

“June can go either way,” says the shopkeeper, as she praises (and I bemoan) the steady rain. And it does: the next day the blue skies are back, after a dusting of snow in the mountains. The advantage of the sometimes-finicky weather: fewer tourists and a better chance to absorb the languid pace of the small towns I’ll visit outside Yellowstone Park, in Montana.

In Fishtail, the scent of pine fills my nose. Glancing through the local paper, I note that there’s been a “testicle festival,” featuring 100 pounds of calf balls (known affectionately as Rocky Mountain oysters) dredged in flour and spices and fried. “I had a ball at the Cowboy Bar” says the flier in the window of my favorite newly discovered spot, the Cowboy Bar and Supper Club. By night, they serve slabs of Montana beef and terrific chicken-fried steak; by day, it’s a café with bulging breakfast burritos.

Around the corner is the Fishtail General Store, where you get your fishing license and groceries and maybe a fresh baked cinnamon roll fatter than your fist. The owners happily said goodbye to Los Angeles last year and made this green valley in the Absorakee wilderness their new home. My temporary home is one of four spanking new Fiddler Creek Cabins six miles down the road in Rosebud Valley. Homey, with kitchenettes and a welcome tray of home baked goodies (there are a lot of sweets in the area, I learn), they have a view of the snowcapped, 12,800 foot high Beartooth mountains, two queen-sized beds and satellite TV, but alas, no soaking tub or fireplace. Deer jump the low fences of nearby farms; lupine, larkspur and dandelions dot the meadows; an occasional red barn looms.

I go four wheeling the next day with Benbow ATV Rentals. The candy-apple red machine is slightly intimidating, but owner Donna recites the operating directions and we practice maneuvers in the parking lot before heading up the 10-mile mountain road. Riding on the lip of a rugged path on Forest Service land, the emerald green and black-forested area yawns below, cotton balls clouds above in the cerulean sky. I pass families on two-person ATVs, pink-cheeked and smiling. I gain confidence, opening up and flying, exhilarated.

Sustenance comes in the form of Montana Hanna’s Trout Hole Restaurant, where I tuck into trout glistening with a huckleberry honey glaze and tart cherry pie. I’m not sure where the blink-and-miss-it towns of Fishtail, Dean and Nye start or end, but there’s an authentic western hospitality everywhere I go.

Saddling up with Paintbrush Adventures the next day, Wanda—petite, blond and no-nonsense—leads five of us on scenic pack trip, just like she has done for 15 years. We pass “gin-clear streams” just like the brochure says, as we head up in elevation on the nine mile trail, past water that runs white-green over boulders. We see moose, two of them. It hails, it rains, it’s sunny again. We warm up with a campfire and eat Wanda’s fried chicken. Mike, whom Wanda pronounces “the best fly fisherman in the state,” has a

good eye, as he casts into the stream and catches a 10-inch rainbow trout. There's poetry to fly fishing, even if I'm more Mother Goose than haiku.

That night I fortify myself at the Grizzly Bar & Restaurant in Roscoe—hard to miss with its giant plastic bear perched on the roof. The joint is packed with an easy mix of locals and tourists. I have a salad, tenderloin, and jojos, thick cut fries served by an older waitress. This is one of my favorite things this part about Montana: there are no fast food joints, just mom-and-pop places with good, solid food served by motherly types.

The following morning I hike Woodbine Falls in the Custer National Forest. I pick my way up the zigzag trail to the steep, rocky face and am rewarded with a spectacular waterfall view. As the spray moistens my face, I tip my baseball cap to the climbing skills of mountain goats. Nearby, the Stillwater River Gorge offers level, easy hiking along the roaring waters.

That afternoon, I join Absorakee River Adventures and our ebullient guide Tim for a three-hour whitewater-rafting trip along the upper Stillwater. Brr! The water is cold at just 46 degrees. Still, the splashing is good fun and we admire the kayakers and dream of a cabin along the river's edge during the stretches when we aren't paddling the rapids.

Packing up, I move an hour down the road to Red Lodge, home to a popular winter ski resort. I'm staying at the 39-room Pollard Hotel, an old railroad hotel, smack in the center of town and on the edge of the 943,377 acre Absarokee-Beartooth Wilderness. A blend of the Old West and the new, this historic town was established in 1884 when the Rocky Fork Coal Company opened the area's first mine. The burg also served as a resting place for Crow (Absorakee) Indians.

Residents of this quaint mountain town feel justifiably lucky to live here and I see why: a clutch of saloons and shops and an old-fashioned candy store are among its charms. That, and the live music played by a six-piece band of middle-aged citizens in front of the bank, on balmy summer evenings. In every store, the clerks trill, "Thanks for stopping."

At the non-profit, educational Beartooth Nature Center, the only public facility to house native animals that cannot be returned to wild due to injury or exposure to humans, I get to commune with wolves, mountain lions, black bears, elk, lynx and raptors. Here I meet another visitor, a Southern California author of several hiking books. We agree it's a privilege to see these creatures at close range.

Charles Kuralt dubbed the national scenic byway Beartooth Highway Pass "the most beautiful roadway in America." It may also be the roadway with the shortest season, passable just two or three months annually. Completed in 1936, it switchbacks and climbs to almost 11,000 feet and delivers truly breathtaking, "I'm sitting on top of the world" views.

That night's dinner is at Piney Dell, at the Rock Creek Resort. The rustic cabin is within yards of a brook, so I can hear its gurgle through the open windows. Smoked trout on

potato cakes and a filet topped with gorgonzola sauce are standouts. The next morning, I enjoy a final meal in Montana: the Pollard's continental breakfast features great granola and homemade coffeecake. But I really have to go now: after all this eating, I have to loosen my belt.