

Montana road runs through God's country

By Brian Schott
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WEST GLACIER, Mont. — I'm not a particularly religious person. But for some reason on my two recent visits to this storied place, talk of God kept popping up.

It was in mid-April that I was pedaling my dated mountain bike on the Going-to-the-Sun Road with my friend Erick Robbins. I told him I was surprised we hadn't seen more riders on such a beautiful Sunday morning. The section of this stunning road through the heart of Glacier National Park was closed to automobiles for spring repairs, and we were enjoying the solitude on the only American

entering the second year of a 10-year rehabilitation project. The construction necessitates closing the higher alpine sections to automobiles in the sleepier months of spring and fall when the biggest onslaught of the park's 2 million annual visitors aren't around. Statistically, 80 percent of those tourists drive the road in 500,000 cars.

A few more miles of pedaling, and we were staring at a shoulder-high wall of snow. The pavement had disappeared. A snow-moving machine sat idle, a massive yellow beast with huge turning blades poised to crank up on Monday morning to clear a road where drifts can be 100 feet deep. We turned around and glided through stands of old growth cedar as the wings of butterflies flashed in the sun.

Suddenly, we heard a grating rumble on the steep slopes in the distance and saw an avalanche spilling down from high on Mount Vaught. Every few minutes a new roar sounded as snow and rock crashed down from the peak. We were at least a mile from the destruction, the type of brute, punishing force that has battered the road over time.

The restoration involves fixing deteriorating retaining walls and guardrails, features that give the road much of its historic character and aesthetic appeal, as well as fixing inadequate drainage systems, crumbling pavement, tunnels, and bridges.

This road was the key to unlocking the beauty of Glacier to the masses. The men who dreamed big enough to believe in a road like this were pushed by a passion to preserve this place, while sharing this stunning scene with as many people as possible.



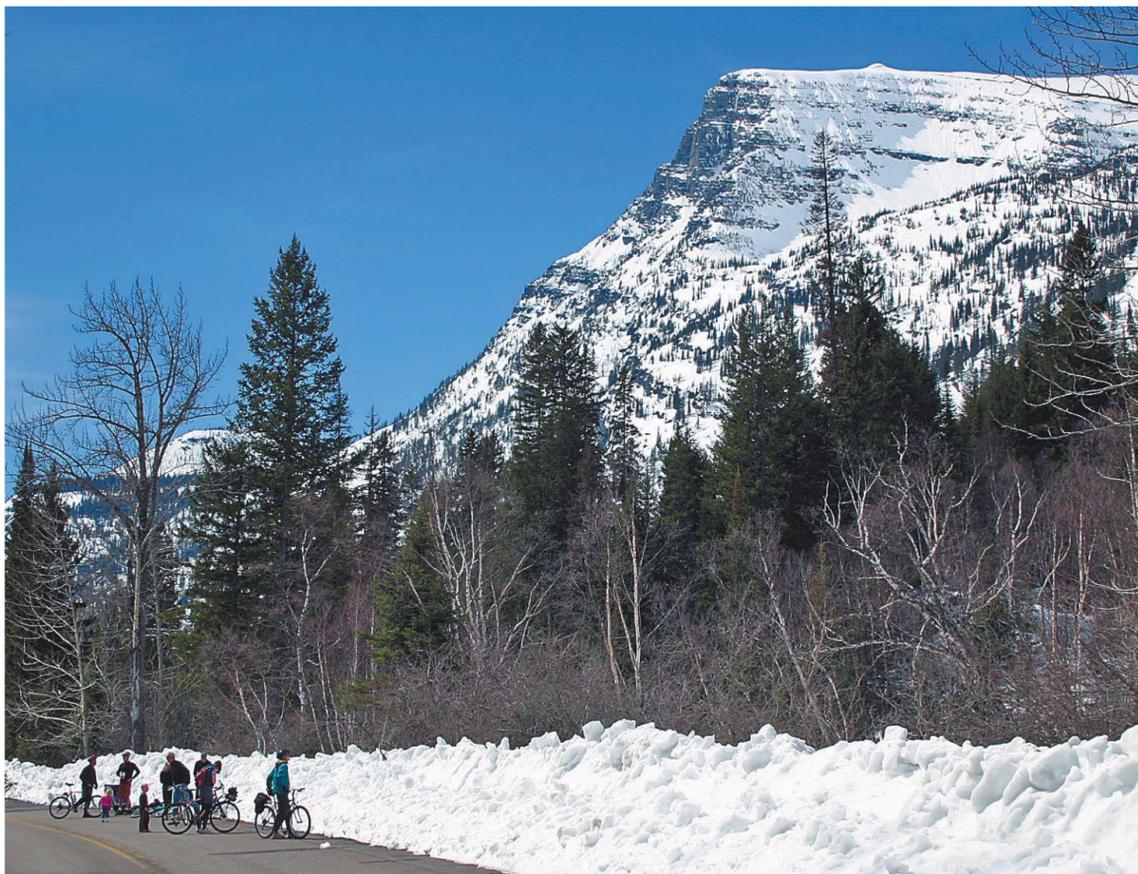
roadway designated both a National Historic Landmark and a National Civil Engineering Landmark.

"Everyone else is in church," Erick joked. "And we're in our church." He was right. Of any place in the world, this is the one spot where I have felt closest to the presence of a god, something bigger than these peaks that have held me in their grip since my arrival in Montana 12 years ago.

The crumbling 52-mile road is



Logan Pass is one of several on the stretch of the Continental Divide that runs through the park.



PHOTOS BY BRIAN SCHOTT/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Bikers stop on Going-to-the-Sun Road to watch — and hear — avalanches on 8,850-foot Mount Vaught in Montana's Glacier National Park. The stonemasonry guardrails (left) on the historic road are being preserved in a rehabilitation project.

Enormous care is being taken to preserve the historic architecture of the road, like sourcing ancient Helena Formation rock from local quarries to rebuild retaining walls. At the same time, modern engineering technology increases safety and longevity. New guardrails are designed to be removed in the autumn to let the winter avalanches glide through.

To allow for construction, cars can get to the high alpine section only from mid-June to mid-September, weather permitting. During this peak summer season 15- to 30-minute construction delays are common. But I can't imagine a better place to be stopped. I've seen bears, mountain goats, and big horn sheep, all with my hands on the wheel.

On June 27, I returned to the park for its 75th anniversary celebration of this engineering wonder. I jumped on the new shuttle from Apgar Village and was whisked along the lower stretches

of the road to Lake McDonald Lodge, site of the festivities. Miles away and more than a thousand feet higher, snowplow crews were still waging battle.

The Sun Road borrows its name from the 9,642-foot Going-to-the-Sun Mountain on the east side of Logan Pass and comes from the Blackfeet legend of creation that recalls Napi, who left his home in the sun to help the tribe. Once he had finished his work on earth, he returned to the sun by climbing the cone-shaped peak.

On that summer afternoon with cottonwood seeds floating on the breeze, the political gods had

descended from Helena and Washington. Governor Brian Schweitzer and US Senators Max Baucus and Jon Tester were here along with Native American drummers, and Blackfeet and Kootenai tribal elders.

"Before those 75 years, hundreds of generations had been coming to this place and found significant spiritual meaning here," Schweitzer said. "Whatever your religious background, when you come to this beautiful place, you cannot help but think there was a hand of God in creating this place."

Earl Old Person, the Blackfeet

Tribal chairman, dressed in full headdress, put it more bluntly: "It had to be a creator."

"It's not really a road, it's a journey," said Baucus. "It displays all the greatest attributes of being human. We have a moral obligation to protect this place so that in future years our kids can enjoy it."

Come mid-September when the gates are again shut to cars, I will ride my bike down the middle of the quiet pavement. I will return to the road, seeking a higher meaning amid all this beauty.

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Sun Road

Weather permitting, open to public vehicles through Sept. 15. Daily except Fridays expect traffic delays of a maximum of 30 minutes. After 10 p.m., delays can extend to 4 hours
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