

MY PARK TOURS

Glacier National Park

A thoughtful first visit

An unhurried guide from Stephen Branum.

COMPLIMENTARY GUIDE / OCTOBER 2026 EDITION

01 / START WITH THE MAP

Choose your side, then your pace

The right base can give a whole day back to your trip.

Glacier's west and east sides are not interchangeable places to sleep. A first visit feels better when your lodging follows the places you most want to see, rather than asking you to retrace long drives every day. Start with the time you have, your arrival point, and a list of two or three priorities—not a checklist of every overlook.

WEST SIDE / LAKE MCDONALD

A practical first base for an arrival through the Flathead Valley or West Glacier. Settle in by the water; leave room for Apgar, an easy walk, and a thoughtful start to Going-to-the-Sun Road.

EAST SIDE / ST. MARY

A base that places St. Mary Lake and eastern valleys closer to your days. Many Glacier or Two Medicine can each merit their own outing; check roads, services and the time needed to get there.



Wild Goose Island Overlook above St. Mary Lake. National Park Service photograph.

THE CROSSING IS CONDITIONAL

Plan a west-to-east crossing on Going-to-the-Sun Road only after checking whether the full alpine road is open to vehicles. If it is not, use the route outside the park when appropriate and confirm its conditions too. Glacier's roads, parking and services can change with the season.

Stephen's perspective: On a personally hosted Glacier and Waterton journey, I saw how a sensible lodging sequence leaves more time for guests' real interests—and less time spent recovering from the day's drive.

See NPS directions and seasonal roads and Wild Goose Island Overlook.

02 / GIVE EACH AREA ITS OWN DAY

A five-to-seven-day shape

Illustrative phases—not reservations, promises or a fixed route.

01 Arrive on the west side

Allow a quieter first afternoon near Lake McDonald, adjusted to your arrival time. Choose a lakeshore pause or a short outing that fits your group, then look at the forecast and road status before committing to the next day. If you are arriving late, let the first morning be gentle too.

02 Make one scenic crossing the anchor

When the full Going-to-the-Sun Road is open, treat it as a day to experience rather than a hurried transfer. Build in time for safe pullouts, weather changes, and the possibility that Logan Pass parking is full. An optional walk should fit the group's comfort and the **current** trail report. If the road is closed, use a west-side alternative and reconsider the east-side transfer.

03 Stay for the eastern valleys

With an east-side base, choose a distinct day for St. Mary scenery, Many Glacier, or Two Medicine—not all three in one dash. A lakeside outing, patient wildlife watching at a safe distance, or a more active trail can each work. Check which facilities, trails, activities and roads are actually operating for your dates.

IF YOU HAVE LESS TIME

Prioritize one base and one or two areas rather than treating the park as a race. An east-west crossing is not required for a meaningful visit.

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME

Add a flexible day for weather, a return to a favorite place, or an optional Waterton Lakes extension if border and Parks Canada details suit the trip.

The useful question is not "How much can we cover?" It is "Where do we want enough time to notice something?"



Lake McDonald Valley. NPS / Jacob W. Frank.

03 / ACCESS WITHOUT GUESSWORK

Before you set out

Separate park admission, road access, parking and shuttle plans.



Going-to-the-Sun Road, Glacier National Park. National Park Service photograph.

PARK ENTRANCE

A valid park entrance fee or pass is still needed. Check current NPS fees, pass eligibility and payment rules for everyone in your group. A lodging or activity reservation does not replace admission.

ROAD AND PARKING

A road's seasonal opening is never guaranteed in advance. Check NPS road and construction updates close to travel; summer parking is limited and congestion may cause temporary area diversions.

2026 ACCESS SNAPSHOT / CHECK YOUR TRAVEL YEAR

NPS did **not** require vehicle reservations anywhere in Glacier in 2026. Its July 1–September 7 pilot limited private-vehicle parking at Logan Pass to three hours, with a free timestamped permit from the on-site kiosk. A separate ticketed, express Logan Pass shuttle served longer day-use outings; each rider needed a date-specific ticket. Those 2026 dates have ended. Do not assume the same rules or shuttle service for a later visit.

For a longer Logan Pass hike in that 2026 window, NPS directed visitors to the ticketed shuttle rather than a private car parked beyond the limit. It did **not** run the old hop-on, hop-off shuttle route; Avalanche Lake and Trail of the Cedars were not shuttle stops. Check the current year's NPS access page before choosing a trailhead or arranging a return.

Official details: 2026 vehicle access · 2026 Logan Pass rules · roads · fees and passes.

04 / ROOM FOR WILDNESS

Wildlife, weather & trails

Let conditions decide how ambitious the day should be.

Give wildlife its space

NPS prohibits intentionally approaching bears or wolves within **100 yards**; stay at least **25 yards** from other wildlife. If an animal changes its behavior, move farther away. Use binoculars rather than getting closer, and never stop in a travel lane for a roadside sighting. Seeing wildlife is possible, never promised.

Prepare for bear country

Hike in groups, make human noise, carry bear spray where you can reach it and know how to use it. Never leave food or scented items unattended. The NPS bear-safety page gives detailed encounter guidance; read it before any trail day rather than improvising at the trailhead.

WEATHER CAN CHANGE THE ROUTE

Higher elevations can be cold and blustery even when the valley feels mild. Bring layers, water, food, sun and rain protection, and a sensible way to shorten the day.

TRAILS CHANGE TOO

Snow, water, closures and bear activity can affect trails. Read the current NPS trail report and ask a ranger about the specific route; not every condition is monitored immediately.

A FLEXIBLE DAILY RULE

Choose one main experience and one nearby alternative. If a trail is closed, a lot is full, or the weather turns, the trip should still have a satisfying shape. Your group's walking comfort—not a famous trail name—sets the pace.

Official details: NPS bear safety · current conditions · trail status.

05 / MAKE IT YOURS

Turn a first idea into your trip

Good planning accounts for both the details and the people.

Your five-minute starting list

01 DATES & ARRIVAL

When are you traveling, how many nights do you have, and where will you arrive and depart?

02 YOUR PEOPLE

Who is coming? Note walking comfort, accessibility needs and the pace that makes a day enjoyable.

03 WHERE TO STAY

Would one base suffice, or do west and east nights better support your priorities?

04 WHAT MATTERS

Lakes, wildlife, photography, longer trails, a quieter pace—or perhaps time in Waterton?

Two ways we can help

Custom Trip Planning & Concierge Coordination. We can shape lodging sequence, routes, independent days, reservation priorities and coordination with appropriately authorized local providers when relevant. Each trip is individually proposed; activities and costs are not automatically included. Tell Stephen about your Glacier trip ↗

Personally hosted by Stephen, by special arrangement. Stephen has personally hosted a Glacier and Waterton journey for returning guests. A future hosted trip depends on dates, scope and destination-specific rules and permissions; it is not a directly bookable Glacier tour. Read the real client story ↗

VERIFY BEFORE TRAVEL

Read NPS current conditions, road status, trail reports and entrance fees. For a Canada extension, check Parks Canada Waterton and Canada entry rules. Information checked October 5, 2026; 2026 access details are a dated snapshot.

Photography: cover © Sergei A / Pexels (authentic Glacier landscape); Wild Goose Island and Going-to-the-Sun Road from NPS pages; Lake McDonald Valley: NPS / Jacob W. Frank. This independent guide is not an official NPS publication. No signup required.