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America's national parks - as a new BBC series shows - are red in tooth and claw. But they also make for a great family holiday. **Helena de Bertodano** reports from Yellowstone and Glacier

The warning at the entrance was stark: "Bears enter this campground." We were at a remote area on the eastern side of Glacier National Park in Montana, looking for a campsite around a pristine glacial lake surrounded by heavy forest and snow-capped mountains. A man with binoculars to his eyes was sitting on his car. My seven-year-old son asked him what he was looking at; without a word, he handed us his binoculars and pointed. There, clear as day, was a grizzly bear with her two cubs, foraging for food on the mountainside. They were at least 500 yards away, but all the same, this was a little more hard-core than we had anticipated. We were travelling with our three children - aged seven, five and three -

BEAUTY AND THE BEARS

in a rental car with a six-man tent stowed in the back. We had been in Montana and Wyoming for a fortnight already and the tent had not left its bag. At Yellowstone National Park, nearly 400 miles south of Glacier in Wyoming, we had stayed in a nice house with a deck overlooking the Yellowstone River, taken day trips into the park and spent a couple of nights at beautiful old park lodges. We had glimpsed the campgrounds dotted around the park and hurried back to our comfortable house. Truth to tell, we are not exactly a rugged outdoor family.

During our six years living in the United States we had camped only one night - at a very tame campground in Maryland that resembled a shopping mall parking lot with fairy lights strung up between the sites. It was ghastly. But it was safe. The only wildlife we saw was a

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woodpecker. Now we were in the Wild West, where beauty and danger seem to go hand in hand.

I handed the binoculars back to the man and we drove on. At Two Medicine, the somewhat ominous name of the campground (how many medicines might we need after a night spent here?), the park authorities ban tents when bears are known to frequent the campground. Bears are creatures of habit and will revisit the same area for weeks. As we drove down a winding lane flanked by lush long grass towards the ranger station, I half-hoped that tents were banned tonight. At least we could say we had tried. Unfortunately not. "But you're probably full..." I said to the ranger hopefully. The site operates on a first-come, first-served basis: this was early July, the height of the season, and it was nearly five in the afternoon. "Not at all," said the ranger, waving us through. "We're half-empty. You can take your pick."

There were several wonderfully remote sites, with not another tent to be seen, but we picked the most populated area, reasoning that, if a bear was roaming around in the night, it would have a selection of tents to choose from, not just ours. My guidebook said that it was advisable to sleep with your sleeping bag half unzipped: that way, if a bear did drag you off in the night, you had a chance of getting out. As for sleep, it didn't seem very likely.

We pitched our tent, trying to look as if we knew what we were doing. Our camping style was minimalist, to say the least. Among the five of us, we had three sleeping bags and a torch. No camp stove, no axe, no cooking utensils. We had one paper plate, a packet of cooked sausages, a bag of marshmallows, some chopped wood we had bought from a local store and a box of matches. And some cold beer. We built a fire and roasted the sausages on sticks. A woman at a neighbouring site who had laid a plaid cloth over her table and set each place with napkins and silverware looked over at us pityingly and insisted we borrow her toasting forks. "But I like using a stick," complained Joe, our five year-old. "Sssh," we hissed at him. As we were to discover, Americans camp in more luxury than most people live: the amount of kit is staggering, not to mention the tents themselves, which are mini-palaces, complete with atriums and entrance halls.

After dinner the boys went fishing and my daughter dabbled her toes in the icy lake. As night fell we watched jealously as people closed the doors of their caravans – or RVs (recreational vehicles). We zipped ourselves into our tent and settled down for the night. I could hear someone snoring in a tent nearby – a sound both reassuring and annoying.

In the morning I woke with a start and looked around: everyone present, no limbs missing. We had

The writer's son Joe at Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park

survived! From then we were on a roll. We camped all over Glacier Park, from remote Many Glacier – where we caught our first (and only) fish of the trip in Swiftcurrent Lake, which made a welcome change from sausages for dinner – to miniature Sprague Creek by Lake McDonald.

We took Going-to-the-Sun Road, a narrow two-lane 32-mile road that bisects the park and is only open from the end of June until October. It winds through the mountains, with spectacular views from every bend, mountain sheep clinging to vertical rock faces and waterfalls cascading onto the road. The children whizzed down their windows and were delighted to be drenched. At the summit, Logan

Pass, we saw mountain lilies pushing their way through the snow that still blanketed the area.

Once on the west side, we hiked to Avalanche Lake, a jaunt enlivened by a large black bear cub crossing the path in front of us. We all froze but it paid us no attention and gambolled back and forth in the forest undergrowth. Most hikers carry bells on sticks, but we had been told that loud voices are the best deterrent. The locals disparage the bells, nicknaming them "dinner bells" and saying they actually attract bears, which are curious by nature. My eldest son took it on himself to impart this piece of information to every bell-bearing hiker.

PARKS BASICS

- ♣ At Yellowstone Helena de Bertodano and family stayed at The Old Faithful Snow Lodge (only because the adjacent and much nicer Old Faithful Inn was sold out) and at Lake Yellowstone Hotel. All Yellowstone lodging is booked through www.travelyellowstone.com (001 307 344 7311). Also see www.yellowstonepark.com.
- ♣ Crossed Sabres Ranch is a few miles outside the east gate of Yellowstone (001 307 587 3750, www.crossedsabresranch.com).
- ♣ In Glacier they camped at Two Medicine Lake and Many Glacier on the east side of the park and at Fish Creek and Sprague Creek on the west side. All except Fish Creek operate on a first-come, first-served basis. Fish Creek can be booked through www.recreation.gov (001 877 444 6777). To book a lodge in Glacier Park, see www.glacierparkinc.com (001 406 756 2444).

- ♣ On the journey between Yellowstone and Glacier, they stayed at the Double Arrow Resort in the Seeley Swan Valley (www.doublearrowresort.com, 001 406 677 2777). It offers riding and fishing and has an excellent restaurant.
- ♣ KLM has flights from London to Bozeman, Montana via Minneapolis-St Paul from £404 return, booked through Skyscanner (www.skyscanner.net).

GALLERY
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My husband and I maintained an argument over which park was more beautiful: Yellowstone or Glacier. I was for Yellowstone, he was for Glacier. In the end we agreed that they are so different it is almost impossible to compare them. Glacier is more stunning and majestic: a rugged wilderness comprised of jagged mountain peaks and forests tumbling down mountainsides towards crystalline alpine lakes.

Yellowstone has more diversity, with panoramic views, herds of bison (absent from Glacier), meadows of wildflowers and erupting geysers. There is probably more to do in Yellowstone. We had all loved the dramatic stagecoach ride that introduced us to the park. Marmots scattered as the horses trotted down a bumpy path and billowing clouds of dust gave way to views towards the Lamar Valley where packs of wolves roam.



Equally popular was Yellowstone's Firehole Basin Adventure Tour of the geysers – radiant pools and bubbling mud pots – although my children were unimpressed by the strong sulphuric smell. "It stinks like rotten eggs," they complained, holding their delicate noses.

On the vintage yellow bus, the

guide, Mark, enlivened the trip for them by pointing out ravens feeding off a bison carcass on one side of the road – my sons could have watched all day – while showing us steaming vents that looked like gateways to hell.

Such is the theme-park mentality of the United States that many visitors do not understand that the national parks are purely natural. Our guide said that he is often asked questions such as "When do you turn on the geysers?" and "What do you do with the animals at night?" People even try to sue the parks when accidents happen: three young men wandered out of their lodge one night after a few drinks, veered off a trail and plunged into a steaming cauldron of a pool – only one survived. But part of the point of Yellowstone and Glacier is that they are wild and there are inherent risks. Everything is left to nature. An elk killed by mountain lions will

Clockwise from bottom left: Ben, 7, on a 'gnarly ride' with Ray from Crossed Sabres Ranch; Morning Glory Pool in Yellowstone; a geyser; a bear cub at Yellowstone; the writer's sons at their Glacier Park campsite

ON SCREEN

Yellowstone: Summer is on BBC Two tomorrow at 8pm. The first programme can still be seen online at www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer.

remain where it fell until it is just a pile of bones. Trees burned by the Yellowstone fire of 1988 are left as they are, stark black limbs pointing skywards before finally crashing to the ground.

We broke the journey between the two parks by staying a night at the Double Arrow Resort in the beautiful Seeley-Swan Valley in Montana, near where Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* is set. It is on the scenic route between the parks, nearer to Glacier than Yellowstone, but a perfect place to pause and even fish the Blackfoot River if you are not in a hurry.

We might not have camped in Yellowstone but we did find what we felt was the best way to see the park properly, especially if you do not have much time. Just eight miles from the east entrance, on a road described by Teddy Roosevelt as the most scenic 52 miles in America, is a remote ranch, Crossed Sabres, run

by an old wrangler called Ray, who has a twirly waxed moustache and a thick gravelly voice. "Where are you varmints from?" he asked my surprised children. He takes guests on a whistle-stop, eccentric tour of Yellowstone, then saddles them up on horses and leads them on "gnarly rides" up mountains with sweeping vistas towards the park.

We slept in a rustic cabin, a step up from camping even though there was no electricity for most of our stay. "We're so far from anywhere, they have to pipe daylight to us," joked Ray. In the evening, you could either drive 40 minutes to the Cody Rodeo to see a junior ranch wrangler being flung from the back of a ferocious bull – a big hit with my boys – or you could stay at the ranch, watching the sun set from the deck over meadows full of larkspur and the ubiquitous bright yellow flowers known as mules. We saw no bears there, although it is grizzly

territory, and we heard that a grizzly had lumbered up outside the main lodge three weeks earlier, foraged around for an hour, then slunk back into the forest.

The bear, in fact, is what unites Glacier and Yellowstone more than anything else. Everyone you meet is on the lookout for a bear, every traffic jam you come across is caused by a bear, every story you hear is about a bear. One day we came upon a knot of people watching a mother grizzly catch a fish from Yellowstone Lake, then flip it through the air and bat it with a paw before feeding it to her cubs. Traffic was backed up for a mile or so, but no one seemed to care.

And despite the scare stories and the ominous warnings, bear attacks are extraordinarily rare. Bears are one of the main reasons for coming to these beautiful parks, not a reason to stay away. Just don't go hiking with bells.