

C.H.V.A. & The Corps of Discovery

The 2010 National tour presented by Pat & Judy O'Byrne & Harvey & Tolly Williamson
by Eric Beeby

September 10th 2010 and the National C.H.V.A. Club is embarking on one of the things that make this a great organization. Thanks to the O'Byrne's and the Williamson's we are in Great Falls Montana ready to start the 2010 National Tour. If there is one thing that this club does well its get in line, put the rubber on the road and tour magnificent parts of North America.

Most of the tour people have arrived a day early and the tour leaders have risen to the occasion by planning a half day of local tours. They include a drive through town to the overlook of Rainbow Falls and a visit to the extraordinary Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center.

Here we learn of the of the remarkable 1804-06 trek to the Pacific coast to map the newly procured Louisiana Purchase which has doubled the size of the United States. In the Center's air-conditioned comfort, we can trace the Expedition's 8000 mile journey from the St. Louis area to the Pacific Ocean and back. Accidents, illness, extreme physical exertion not to mention inclement weather and hazardous terrain were only some of the problems that faced the 'Corps'. Lewis & Clark, drawing on their long military experience, and with their cool-headedness and good judgment were able to placate their men and contribute dearly to the success of the expedition. The 'Corps of Discovery' numbered 44 men of diverse backgrounds and on their 28 month, 8000 mile trip only one man died and that was thought to be from an inflamed appendix. The Corp met and were befriended by many as yet undiscovered native American Indian tribes. These included the Nez Perce, the Piegan Blackfeet, the Clatsop & Chinook, the Shoshone Bannock & the Teton Sioux. All these meeting were initiated with some fear, trepidation and apprehension but all encounters turned out friendly and beneficial to both sides. It is a National disgrace that future expeditions and generations did not take a page from the book of "The Corps of Discovery" in their treatment of our Native Americans! Our visit to the Interpretive Center is a great start to our three state journey that will follow part of the legendary Lewis & Clark Trail.



Time is short but we set out for the C.M. Russell Museum. Not being at the least bit knowledgeable of Western art I am at a complete loss as to what to expect at the 13th St. North address. What we find is wondrous.

The C. M. Russell Museum simply states on its brochure "Come Witness the Art and Soul of the West". The Museum holds thousands of Paintings, sculptures, drawings and illustrations that Charles Russell (1864-1926) created from childhood through the end of his life. His 1900 era home, furnished with period pieces, and his 1903 studio made of red cedar telephone poles are filled with cowboy gear and Indian artifacts that Russell collected. A magnificent Browning (1855-1926) Fire Arms collection is also on display but the paintings and sculpture of Russell himself are truly the highlight of the museum.

His sculptures range from miniatures of most of the local domestic and wild animals to full size action figures of bison, mustangs and most horned game. His renditions on canvas of native Americans makes one feel they are actually in the picture and the action is palatable. C.M. Russell Museum, a great place to visit, an easy place to remember.



We head back to the host hotel, some of us shower, shave and shed some cloths and get ready for the welcome dinner, a Western BBQ.

The dinner is well presented with the hungry throng showing good discipline and only nearing the buffet when their table was called. Over the years most C.H.V.A.'ers have learned to sit patiently during buffet meals and until it is "their turn". Maybe it's old age induced but in any case it is a pleasure to see manners take precedent over hunger.

Day #2 is advertised in the excellent tour (guide) book as a drive from Great Falls to Helena. It starts with a drivers meeting at 7:15 AM. Those of us who are still a sleep hope that there are enough people listening to the briefing that we can follow someone who know what is going on.

We parallel Interstate #15 on a frontage road that features a winding, scenic Missouri River and picture opportunities around every turn. Most of the cars are on the lookout for wild game as we have heard that this is an area where the deer and the antelope play. There are also eagles and pheasants in the area but their camouflage seems to be working well.



The little used frontage road ends at The Gates of the Mountains Marina. Here we enjoy an informative and educating two hour boat tour of Holter Lake. We study the steep craggy cliffs that the "Corps" had seen hundreds of years before that form the Gates of the Mountain Wilderness area in this rugged region of the Missouri River.

Lunch is provided on the deck of the Marina overlooking Holter Lake and when sufficiently fueled for the afternoon's adventures we are off on rural roads toward Helena, Montana's Capitol. Here we are met by a couple of 'Last Chance Tour Trains'. These rubber-wheeled Choo Choo's, driven by well informed docents, give us an instructive tour of historic Helena and it's fascinating past. Time is available after the tour for visiting the Montana State Museum and the Montana Sate Capitol. Both revel in the rugged past of Montana and the facts that show that the state is the forth largest and the sixth least populated. No wonder it is described as "Big Sky Country".



Day three and the drivers meeting is at a little more civilized time of 8:45. Here we get instructions for the days trip from Helena to West Yellowstone.



Our drive is another scenic one through vintage towns and outstanding views. We mark the villages of Townsend and Three Forks into our memory bank as places we would love to spend more time in. At Three Forks we get a brief look at the historic Sacajawea Hotel and a lovely life size bronze of the brave lady on the opposite side of the street. We stop for a leisurely lunch at Belgrade and then we are on the road again to West Yellowstone. This part of the trip follows the beautiful twisting, winding, meandering (get the picture??) Gallatin River which flows almost into the town of West Yellowstone.

An aside. Highways 85 & 191 drive through some of the pristine forest area that was devastated by fires in 1989. Much of the land has sprung back to life with a blanket of Lodge Pole Pine now getting to be about 12 feet high. I (a fountain of knowledge) state on the CB that a huge re-forestation project must have been undertaken to get the land back to this luxurious state.

"Iron Doc" (Bob Trueax) answers back that he "didn't think they reforested in National Parks" and I find out later, much to my chagrin, that I was wrong and that he was correct. All of what seemed to be millions of re-planted young trees were the result of nature repairing herself and doing a great job of it.

The last time I was in the town of West Yellowstone was 2001 when a group of us were there on the way to the Route #66 tour. (day before 9/11) The accommodations at that time were, as I remember, pretty rustic and the choice of hotels/motels rather limited. It has evolved, in the last decade, into a real "tourist town". It has miles of new, large motels that were all displaying the "No Vacancy" even though we are there in mid September. It has an IMAX, a traffic light, a dinner theater, a bear and wolf attraction, western shops, casinos, some decent restaurants and a million T Shirt shops. It rents bicycles, ATV's, snowmobiles and hiking & rafting equipment. It has joined the 21st century and is enjoying the constant influx of visitors and foreign tourists that flock to this wonder called Yellowstone.

We end day #3 with a visit to the IMAX Theater and get an overview of what we will be visiting in the next couple of days. Once again I find the production fascinating as I have the 10 or 12 other big screen presentations I have seen. The IMAX formula of blending reenactment scenes with a present day actual, artistic shots is a format that is hard to beat.

Check in at the motel is fairly smooth as we are split into 2 groups and the line is a little shorter. Happy hour is in Joe & Cindy Kelman's room as they have somehow managed to score a mini suite and from the size of the crowd they entertained almost everyone on tour. Dinner is on our own tonight and I hear more than one group mention Bison Burgers.



Day #4 and we are off to Yellowstone park. Now I have been here before and thought that seeing Old Faithful blow its top, stopping in the road for a herd of Buffalo, and having an adult beverage at the rustic lodge was what Yellowstone was all about. Once again, was I wrong!!

Carolyn & I hook up with the Higday's and the Harrison's and they know how to tour! We start at about 9am and do not get back to the motel till after dark at about 7:30pm. Along the way we find a wide variety of wildlife. In the air we spot Eagles, Hawks, Osprey and various ducks and geese. In the woods we find Mule deer, Bighorn sheep. Pronghorn, majestic Bull elk and dozens of Bison. We miss out on the Bears

and Wolves but see them in captivity the next day at the very well presented Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center.

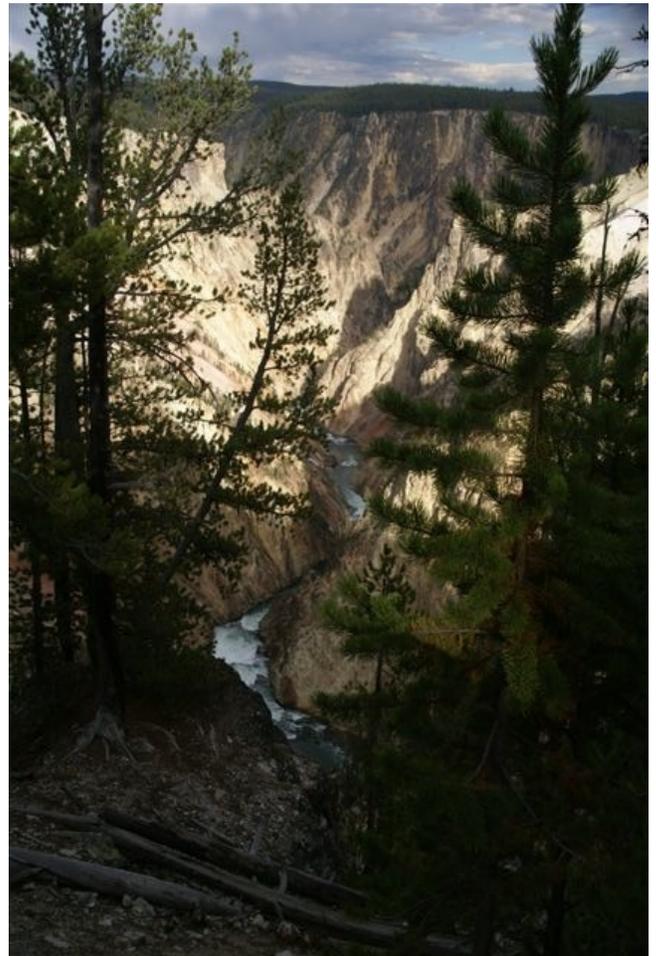
It is decided that we concentrate on the North Loop of the park. A drive of just over one hundred miles that looks like it should be able to complete in a couple of hours, Once again I was wrong. (notice a trend???) From the main junction at Madison (here you decide if you are going to see Old Faithful or turn north) we head toward Norris. This 14 mile stretch of road has the Monument Geyser Basin, the Artist Paintpots, Steamboat Geyser and Norris Geyser Basin. A walk a gawk around these wonders takes a couple of hours and I can see a full day of touring is only going to encompass part of the park. We turn north past the Roaring Mountain and head for Mammoth Hot Springs. Just before the springs is a visual wonder called Mammoth Hot Spring Terraces. Here we can drive through and around a thermal area of travertine (calcium Carbonate) that form elaborate and ever changing terraces. Our small group descends into Mammoth where we have a delicious lunch at the Hot Springs Hotel. This hotel and its accompanying hotdog/hamburger stand are the only eating spots in Mammoth. Usually that translates into higher prices, slip-shod service and poor food selection and quality. None of this is true at the Hot Springs Hotel and we all enjoy a great varied lunch served by a gracious waiter and at a very reasonable price. All of us would highly recommend it.



Full again we head east toward Undine Falls. This is another great picture point but what is even more outstanding is a turn-off simply named Calcite Loop. This beautiful, scenic view area is not even mentioned on our tour map. The walking Loop, of less than a quarter mile, gives us spectacular mini Grand Canyon views of the Gardner River thousands of feet below. We pass the Roosevelt lodge (closed for the season....seems a little early) and stop at Tower Falls. A short walk brings the falls into view as Antelope and Tower Creeks tumble 132 feet into the Yellowstone River. Another highlight of this stop is the lodge selling ice-cream but the long line saves us from over indulging.



From Tower Falls we travel south for about 19 miles, traveling over Dunraven Pass at an elevation of 8859 feet. Our group drops down into Canyon Village and we set out to see Upper & lower Falls. These outstanding Falls with such mundane names are a highlight of any Yellowstone visit. The lower Falls, at the bottom of the "Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone," are view from a 1000 ft. Inspiration Point. A short drive brings us to the brink of the 109 ft. Upper Falls and we note numerous trails that lead to the base of both waterfalls for those with a greater sense of adventure and a great more time on their hands.



Memory sticks full of wondrous shots, feet starting to bark just a little, our minds overwhelmed with spectacular sights and a feeling in our soul that only the great outdoors can produce we call it a day. Our trip back to the motel is interrupted a couple of times as the night shift of animals is sauntering down our commute road and of course everyone wants that last, special photo.

It's the end of Day #4, the tour is half done, my story telling is at an end and we are looking forward to another 4 great days of touring and the reminisces of Mary Jean Flory.