

# MONTANA'S DARK SKIES SPUR ASTROTOURISM

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A meteor streaks over Mount Oberlin in Glacier National Park. (Jeremy Weber photo)

One doesn't need to be in love to see what spring is like on Jupiter or Mars, as is suggested by Bart Howard's 1954 melody "Fly Me to the Moon," a tune later made famous by Frank Sinatra. Instead, starry eyes can be traded for a clear night in Montana, a good telescope and a pinch of pragmatism.

In recent years, a growth spurt in Montana's astrotourism industry suggests more and more people are doing just that — filling their travel itineraries for the Flathead Valley, Glacier National Park and elsewhere with more nighttime activities.

"We're the Big Sky state, but that doesn't just apply to the daytime," said Mark Paulson, president of the Big Sky Astronomy Club in Flathead County. "The sky is just as beautiful at night as it is in the morning."

Astrotourism is the act of traveling for space-related experiences here on earth.

The Lonely Planet, a well-known globetrotter publication, labeled dark-sky travel as a major trend for 2019. The organization pointed to an increase in light pollution as being a catalyst for more people seeking out the world's "last remaining dark skies." Light pollution, or brightening of the night sky caused by man-made

sources that inhibit the observation of stars and planets, among other disruptive effects, impacts about 80% of earth's land mass, according to research by the Light Pollution Science and Technology Institute.

And, as unpolluted night skies grow more elusive, people must trek to the areas most known for offering some of the darkest and clearest nights — areas such as Montana.

Glacier National Park and Waterton Lakes National Park of Canada were collectively designated an International Dark Sky Park in 2017 by the International Dark Sky Association — the first designation in the world to cross an international border and the first in Montana.

According to the association, the designation “helps enhance the visibility of designated locations and foster increased tourism and local economic activity.” Paulson, who is also the board co-chair for the Montana chapter of the International Dark Sky Association, is one of many night dwellers throughout the valley who has noticed the increase in after-dark tourism.

He points to his club's increasingly popular “star parties,” which are put on in partnership with Glacier National Park, as just one example.

The gatherings often involve educational presentations on what the night canvas might offer on that particular evening, followed by opportunities to peer through the club's many telescopes at the pre-described globular clusters, nebulas and other celestial objects.

The club's star parties launched nearly 18 years ago. At the time, the outings mostly consisted of a handful of astronomy club members and a few dozen eager participants shuffling to the top Lone Pine State Park near Kalispell.

The club, which has grown to 30 members over the years, still hosts parties at Lone Pine but has expanded to other areas such as Logan Pass in Glacier Park. Paulson said most of those who partake in the gathering drive the Going-to-the-Sun Road around sunset and arrive at the top fashionably early for the party at the pass.

Paulson said the first event at Logan Pass, nearly one decade ago, attracted nearly 400 people. Over the years, the event has grown to more than 600 participants consistently and at one of the most recent parties in the park, more than 700 participants were counted.

“I've met people from all over the world who say the star party was one of the favorite parts of their trip,” Paulson said, adding that he has met tourists from as far away as Europe and China.

Should one miss the party, they can drive a little farther east past Logan Pass to St. Mary, where they can view stars and planets at the park's new astronomical observatory.

The observatory, which opened in August this year, was made possible by the Glacier National Park Conservancy. The nonprofit fundraising arm of the park has been instrumental in reducing the area's light pollution and promoting night-sky programming.

WHILE PEERING through telescopes is one of the more common after-dark activities, nighttime sporting events and various camping opportunities have developed over the years as well.

Dave Nickelson, an attorney based in Florida who travels to Glacier National Park every summer, said the park's informal full moon bike rides up the Going-to-the-Sun Road have also become wildly popular.

Throughout the spring and summer months, full moons — which typically occur 12 times per year — cue cyclists to assemble at the start of the Going-to-the-Sun Road on the east and west sides of the park.

“We all head up around sunset and ride back down at moonlight,” Nickelson said. “There’s nothing like hearing the pedaling in the dark and seeing all the stars above you. It’s one of the most wonderful experiences I’ve ever had in Glacier.”

It’s an experience that has kept Nickelson coming back to the park every year since 2008.

He said year after year familiar local faces show up for the journey, but as word of the unofficial event spreads, more out-of-towners have started coming along for the ride.

Nickelson said cyclists from Spokane, Seattle, Colorado and even the East Coast come to pedal up the road with the locals. In 2015, Nickelson said more than 200 cyclists showed up for a full moon ride after the Reynolds Fire had rendered most of the Going-to-the-Sun Road impassable by vehicles.

“It’s one of those things that has gotten bigger and bigger over the years. You used to pull up to the lots and there would be no cars, nowadays you show up and it’s full,” Nickelson said.

At the opposite end of the valley on Flathead Lake, kayakers and paddleboarders appear to be adopting more nocturnal tendencies as well.

Brian “BJ” Johnson and his wife Juli own Sea Me Paddle, a company that provides kayaks, paddleboards and other water vessels for rent at five locations throughout the valley.

Sunset and full moon paddle tours have been part of the company’s offerings at its Lakeside location since the business launched in 2013. BJ said the two outings have become some of the company’s most popular, with slots constantly filling to capacity.

“This last summer was especially nuts. We actually ended up doubling what we have done in summers past,” BJ said. “We just about ran our tour guide ragged with how many people wanted to paddle.”

Down the road a ways at Big Arm State Park, several yurts are stationed across the popular Flathead Lake access point. During a recent trip to the state park, Coby Gierke, executive director of the Montana State Parks Foundation, said officials are looking into the possibility of incorporating stargazing domes to the property as well.

The mini planetarium-type structures, which closely resemble fish bowls at first glance, are typically completely transparent, allowing guests a glimpse of the night sky from the comfort of an enclosed cozy space.

AS ASTROTOURISM continues to gain popularity throughout parts of Montana, officials are beginning to brainstorm how the trend can benefit the state’s economy.

For example, the Montana Department of Commerce recently issued a series of Eastern Montana Tourism Partner Initiative Grants. One grant, in the amount of \$75,000, was awarded for the Eastern Montana Astrotourism Product Development Project.

The project spans the entire eastern portion of the state and hopes to establish ways in which the area's vast, dark skies can be an economic asset.

According to Paulson, astrotourism is a "bit of an untapped market over there."

Paulson said he hopes Montanans will continue to find ways to responsibly expand the state's astrotourism industry. After nearly 20 years of throwing star parties and hosting educational gatherings for curious people young and old, his nights spent teaching strangers about space remain some of his life's most rewarding experiences.

"There is nothing like watching someone's reactions when they peer through a telescope for the first time and realize exactly what they are looking at," Paulson said.

He went on to describe with fervor the process of a dying star, particularly those about the size of our sun or larger, when a large glowing nebula made of dust and gas is often left behind after the star's inevitable collapse — a marvel that is detectable through a telescope as a sort of light gray smoke ring.

"Then I tell them more detail about it, like that it's most likely 7,000 light years away, meaning the life that we're seeing left that space 7,000 years ago," he said. "And let me tell you, their faces just light up."

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