

# The New York Times

## *Big Sky, Open Arms*

By Judy Belk  
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I GUESS this means we're not going to Hawaii, huh?"

That was the reaction of my 11-year-old daughter, Casey, as she rolled her eyes in disgust on hearing the news that we were heading to Montana, not Maui, last year for our annual family summer vacation. I was about to remind her that when I was her age I had barely left my hometown, let alone traveled to Hawaii or Montana. But I stopped myself. It was bad enough that I was beginning to look like my mother with each new wrinkle. I didn't want to start sounding like her.

My 15-year-old son, Ryan, who was still lacking in the finer points of political correctness, was even more blunt.

"Oh, that's just great, mom," he said. "Four black folks from Oakland, Calif., cruising the back roads of Montana. Are you nuts? Montana, as in Montana Militia?"

His paranoia was in high gear. He had recently read "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," and was growing his first real Afro.

My husband, engrossed in the GameBoy gadget he had supposedly bought for the kids, just nodded, pretending that he had heard everything I just said. Later, a week or so before our departure date, Roger would finally look up and ask: "Montana? When did we decide to go to Montana?"

Montana was by no means my first choice. A limited vacation budget and a generous offer by a friend to let us use his family cabin put it at the top of the list. Deep down, I shared both the kids' disappointment and their anxiety.

I'm a stretch-out-by-the-beach kind of gal. Maui, which was never in play as a possibility, still sounded pretty good. I had also heard the stories about the survivalist presence. But for me, a person who has spent most of her life in urban areas on the East

and West Coasts, that part of the country was a confusing geographic mass comprising Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and a couple of Dakotas. Except for Idaho's distinctive shape, from as far back as my fifth-grade geography test, I've always had a difficult time keeping the boundaries straight.

One thing was crystal clear, though: the black population was practically nonexistent. What I wasn't sure about was whether the scarcity of blacks was due to the region's remoteness or an unwelcoming attitude. My anxiety was heightened when I asked a white friend who had recently vacationed in the area whether she thought it would be safe. Her response: "Oh sure, as long as you stay on the main roads."

I kept this bit of intelligence to myself. No need to worry my already reluctant family.

The plan was for us to fly from Oakland to Spokane, rent a car and, as my son suggested, drive as fast as we could across northern Idaho (which he insisted had the heaviest concentration of militia) and get to our Montana destination before dark. I knew my son's paranoia was rubbing off on my husband, Roger, when he suggested that we rent a massive S.U.V. with darkened windows. It was obvious what he was thinking: If we had to plan a quick getaway, we didn't want to be sitting ducks in a compact putt-putt of a car. We needed power.

As we crossed the Idaho state line, our plans were sidetracked by two weak bladders -- my daughter's and mine. Over my son's protests, we stopped at an official state-run rest stop. As soon as we got out of the car, we were greeted by two smiling, middle-aged white women offering us free coffee and home-baked cookies. Grabbing a couple of cookies, I couldn't help asking one of them why they were handing out freebies.

They were volunteers with a local community group, she explained. Various nonprofit organizations took turns offering refreshments at the rest stop as a way of welcoming visitors to the state. Besides, she said, a little sugar would help us stay alert: "Wouldn't want you to have an accident in our beautiful state."

As we drove away, I relayed the conversation to my skeptical son, who commented: "It's a trap, Mom. They heard we were coming and decided to keep us off guard with chocolate chip cookies."

My husband chimed in: "You'll eat anything, won't you? How do you know who or where the food was prepared?"

I just kept munching. I was beginning to like Idaho.

A few minutes later, the four of us exhaled a collective "Wow!" as beautiful Lake Coeur d'Alene popped up before us, breathtaking and unexpected. The bluest of blue juxtaposed against a backdrop of lush greenery rolled beside us for miles.

It was different terrain from what we were used to at home in the Bay Area. The higher altitude gave the air a crisp clean bite, even in mid-August. The vegetation was thicker

and more rugged. It was as if nature had just finished housecleaning -- every nook and cranny for as far as we could see was sparkling. We barely noticed crossing the Montana state line.

Our directions called for leaving the Interstate near St. Regis for the last leg of the trip to Polson, our destination. I felt the tension as we exited the safety net of the Interstate and made our way down less-traveled roads. I remembered my friend's warning about staying close to the main road.

This time, thirst necessitated a pit stop. We pulled into a dusty, shabby storefront. As we walked in, the storekeeper, a white, half-shaven man in his early 60's, gave us the once-over. I pretended not to notice the gun magazines piled on a nearby counter.

"Where did you guys come from?" the man said.

Here we go, I thought. Roger and I looked at each other.

With a don't-even-think-of-messing-with-me tone in my voice, I replied, "Oakland, California." He looked at me quizzically.

"No, I was just wondering if you just came in on the Interstate. Someone called in a bad accident and I was curious if the tow truck had made it to the scene yet."

Roger and I looked at each other again, smiling this time. I managed to mumble that yes indeed, we had passed the accident and the tow truck was on the scene.

As I was leaving, the storekeeper called out that I should help myself to a cup of ice on the house. "It's going to get hotter before it gets cooler," he said.

We made Polson before nightfall, weaving our way through miles and miles of gorgeous scenery. As an unexpected lake or vista teased us around every bend, I thought about how much we would have missed if we had stayed on the main road. By the time we reached Polson, we didn't think we could absorb any more beauty until we rolled over the final hill and saw magnificent Flathead Lake stretched out before us.

We slept well that night and even better the night after that. For 10 days we hiked through nearby Glacier Park; drove up the Rockies toward the sun; roamed the National Bison Range; waited patiently for stars to shoot through the midnight sky over the darkened lake, and braved the rapids for a ride down the Middle Fork.

Somewhere around the third or fourth day of our stay, we hit a turning point as our worries shifted from survivalists to bears. Luckily for us, neither crossed our path. We did, though, have one or two sightings of black folks. They were as surprised to see us as we were to see them. We exchanged smiles.