

Trails,
Fossils,
&
Jarritos:
Summer Reflections
Episode 1

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August 8th, 2021

There is nothing quite like driving through Big Sky country. When I lived in Florida, I hated driving through the constant bumper-to-bumper, road rage infested driving that Florida is. Driving in the Big Sky brings you none of those things. It brings peace, mindfulness of the present moment, and above all else, clarity of the mind. There are some places here in Big Sky country that seem to stretch on for endless of nothing but plains as far as one's eyes could see. It is a vast land where there is nothing but space and time, which is quite different from most parts of our country and our world.

There are a couple observations one can easily make when traveling through Big Sky country. One is that this land is untamable, wild, and open. It makes you believe you will never see rain ever again, and when it rains and that thunder cracks open the heavens, you will shake in utter terror clinching to the hope you will survive. It teaches you to slow down and to pay attention to the present moment before you. It makes you question your time and place in history and the space you occupy, and at the same time, this magical, mysterious land will direct you to the most important things in life...family & friends, fellowship, vacations and explorations, good beer, and it is one of the few places in America you can still get lost. It makes you question whether you have neighbors or because of its vast beauty, it makes you question whether another town in this state even exists. However, when you do find the people, hold on to them and treat them right, because in Big Sky country, there are some of the nicest folks you'll meet.

I imagine Big Sky country is not for all. So City Slickers, be warned, you ain't going to like it here! Not just because people's perspectives are different than yours, but when I moved to Glendive, I given this wonderful piece of advice, "Glendive has got everything you need, but it doesn't have everything you want." I think that is pretty indicative of Montana. It may not have every amenity we are used to in our post-modern, technology centered world, but if you pay attention long enough, then you may be on Big Sky country has to offer. Big Sky is exactly what it sounds like. It is

vast and it is limitless. I have fallen in love with Montana's wildness and her unpredictability. This is episode one of my summer reflections entitled, "Trails, Fossils, and Jarritos." Enjoy!

It was July 4th, the day I marked on my calendar as the day I just had to make it to. I was burnt out, exhausted mentally and emotionally, because since my return from Florida after Easter, it seemed as if work was constantly screaming for my attention with some new, challenging situation every week in the month of May and June. "It was summer! Things are supposed to be slowing down!" I kept telling myself as I begrudgingly completed to do lists and packed all my luggage and gear for my trip, but none of that mattered anymore because I had made it to that marked day on my calendar. Now all I had to do was prepare for my departure on Tuesday July 6th.

This trip had changed about hundred times it seemed like. At first, this was going to be a vacation to see friends in Virginia and Asheville, as I flew back to the East Coast to visit with friends from grad school and my fraternity brothers. But then I thought about beaches and how easy and relaxing it would be as fully vaccinated to just go visit family and dip my toes in the sand again. Then the trip changed into an exclusive trip solely to Asheville to visit some dear friends in ministry in the Metro district of the West North Carolina Conference. As you can see, I didn't know what I wanted this time of rest and relaxation away from two services in July would look like. So I changed everything one more time and said, "Let's plan a trip for me. A trip where I don't have to be tied down by someone's schedule. A trip where I can just rest and rejuvenate." So I figured it out.

This would be a two-tier, two-week vacation. First, I would go on a tour ride throughout Montana, primarily Central Montana as my journey first began in Bozeman, MT to do some hiking and camping. Then the following day, heading directly north, I would stop at the state capital of Helena to do some sight-seeing and travel to Great Falls the next day to stop at some state parks. Lastly, I would stop in Havre to visit my girlfriend and relax for a

quiet weekend before returning home for a couple days, because then I would conclude my trip the following week with a drive down to Denver and hangout with friends whom I had had little chance to visit with the past few visits. However, the day had finally come and now it was time to embark on my summer vacation!

My drive to Bozeman was pretty uneventful if I remember correctly. The Rimrocks of Billings loomed over me as I stopped for a Popeye's spicy hot chicken sandwich for supper and the peaceful drive and rhythm of the road put me on the beat and time of vacation mode as I approached the Gallatin Gateway. Although the drive there was simple enough, I did not think I would encounter the amount of campers I did when I arrived in Bozeman that evening. Every campground was filled. I began searching apps, looking at map notes I had made in various books about camping in Montana, and I looked at the Montana state map Ron & Joan Haugeberg had given me when I first arrived to try and find a suitable camping spot. I drove up a forest road in middle of nowhere only to find even the primitive camping spots were filled for this week. What to do now?

One of the blessings and the curse of our modern day society is the creation of Walmart. I pretty much hate everything about Walmart, even though they are quite essential in many communities. Even though my hatred for the Neo-Liberal company is strong, the Walmart parking lot was my savior that night, because all the campgrounds were full, all the camping spots I had plotted out were full, and I just needed some rest to gather the strength to hike Storm Castle Peak the next morning. I cracked the windows, I found my awkward sleeping position with my feet in the front seat and my body in the back with all my gear, food, and luggage. I was on vacation and that was good enough for me regardless of where and how I was sleeping tonight.



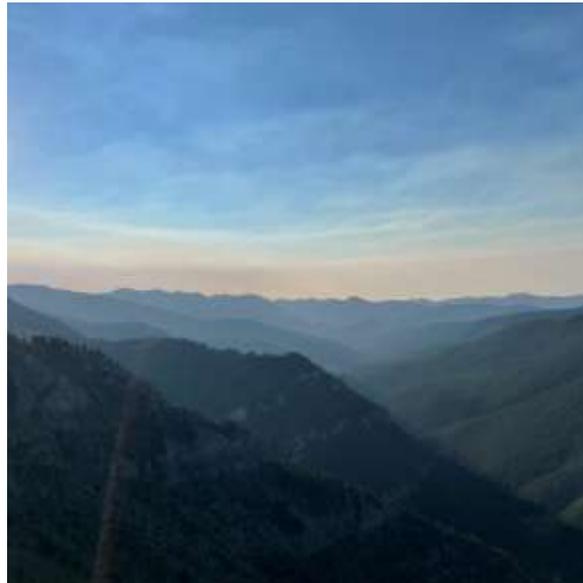
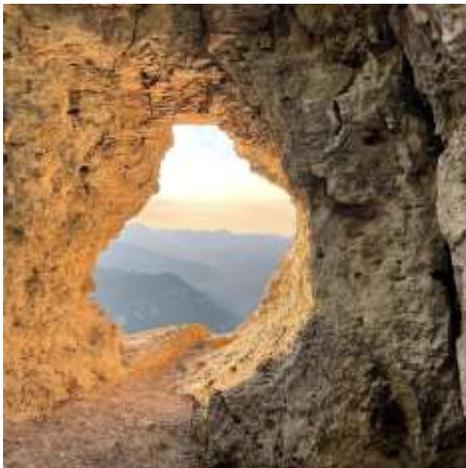
Storm Castle Trailhead

Trails have always shaped my life. Whether in Appalachia, Colorado, here in Montana, or even Florida, trails have always been a place where I center myself. Trails do not always bring a relaxing hike or a peaceful meditation, but

they always provide a challenge and reward you with a breathtaking vista or jaw-dropping landscape that leaves you stuck wanting to never leave this moment behind you. Storm Castle Trailhead was no different.



I was the first hiker to make the summit to the peak of Storm Castle this morning, and I knew this because I must have run into thirty spider webs strewn across the trail as each step brought me closer the majestic mountain peaks people have told me Montana has to offer. One of my favorite things about mountains and hiking in general is the reminder of how small you are in the grand schemes of the universe. To some, this may seem terrifying to think about, but to me, this releases a great amount of pressure and stress in my life. This is not to say my life is meaningless, quite the contrary! It means each moment is precious and must be appreciated in that snapshot of time in which you are experiencing it. However, that is an easy lesson to learn standing on top of a mountain peak with nothing but mountains beyond mountains on the horizon as the sun peeks just over the crest of the tree-line.



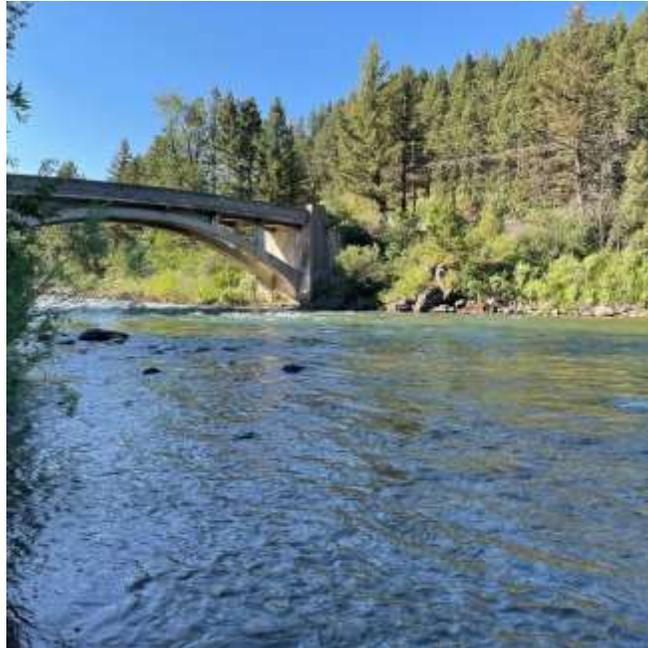
This is an easy lesson to learn when you are meditating on the mountain peak with the chorus of the morning hymns from the songbirds. This is an easy moment to be present with as the Earth gives me the reminder to breath in, breathe out as her mighty gusts of wind deafen any chance of me recording any meaningful video to record this delightful grandeur. This is an easy lesson to learn as your soul is being restored and healed. This quote from John Muir

never rang truer in my life, *“The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness.”*



Just before I headed back into the city, I made sure to dip my toes in the river before leaving the campground area. There is something different about the cool, melted mountain snow water from the Rocky Mountains compared to the warm water collected by rain in Appalachia that I am used to. I love the Rocky Mountain water and the refreshing chill it gives you! Rivers remind me of the old saying, “Go with the flow.” Rivers always remind me Taoism, which is an indigenous religious tradition of China.

The leader of Taoism, Lao Tzu, describes life as being like a river and time is represented by the current. The current, thus time, takes us where we need to go, says Lao Tzu, so there is no need to resist the current. However, we should let the current take us where it is leading and directing us to go. “Go with the flow!” Get it! You have always been a Taoist if you use this phrase! Rivers remind me to always take life one day at a time and do what I enjoy most to try and find beauty in each moment.



A must see in Bozeman, MT is the Museum of the Rockies. I am sure I learned about the amount of fossils found in Montana in elementary school at some point, but it never stuck because I was blown away by the rich fossil diversity this state is able to boast. Learning about the Montana before humans were even in this region was fascinating. It is a world that seems so distant and so long ago, but in the grand calendar of the universe, it is but a snap of a finger compared to all of time. I am so thankful for the diligence and determination of scientists who commit so much of their lives to such enormous, yet meaningful tasks and projects. Like science, religion continuously asks questions like, “What does it mean to be human? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What happens before and after life, and or will we ever fully know?” Fossils help answers those questions of our past and give us direction on where to go. Our ancestors figured it out and so can we!



I didn't get to enjoy a nice Southern cooked meal at the Roost as I wanted, but I did get the next best thing, which was a Jarritos at Los Jarochos. I highly recommend this restaurant as my smothered chicken burrito was delicious and filling! Jarritos always remind me of home and Florida. There was a small food truck that sold authentic Mexican food and my aunt and I would always get a Jarritos with our meal. I was where I needed to be in that very moment as I enjoyed that refreshing drink, but my adventures were going to lead to completely different places than the destinations I

had planned previous to my departure from Glendive. I wanted to get back to my mission from the previous day, which was find a camping spot. However, once again, I could not find a camping spot at any of the nearby campgrounds as they were all first come, first serve locations. So I did what any rational person would do and drove to Missoula, MT seeking out a camping destination for the evening. We will talk about my adventures in Missoula, and much more in next's week episode 2!