

From Prairie Grass to 11,150 Feet and Back...in Half a Day!

Sweeping valleys, steep gorges, wildlife, fast flowing rivers and a jaw-dropping view from the top of the world...all in half a day. In Montana's "Big Sky Country" just above Yellowstone Park is a drive that rewards you with all this and more. Covering about 160 miles, the circular route of nonstop experiences soars from grasslands all the way up to above treeline and back in an easy drive of about four to six hours.

Starting in Bozeman, route 191 first takes you up the Gallatin River Valley to Big Sky. The road follows the river from its sedate meandering in prairie grass up into rushing rapids coursing through steep, pine-covered slopes. Unexpected grass-covered meadows offer chances to see deer, osprey and other wildlife. In only 26 miles the climate changes dramatically as you climb some 6,000 feet to Big Sky, a world-class winter destination.

Make a short side trip into the Big Sky Resort and ride the tram up Lone Peak (11,150 feet) to take in the stunning views. Deep green valleys, snow-covered peaks and dark blue skies with no trees to block the 360° view (you're above treeline) make you feel like you're flying high above the world. Back down the mountain have a snack or a meal (and get warmed up) at the new \$50 million Summit at Big Sky luxury hotel.

Leaving Big Sky, route 191 travels straight towards West Yellowstone and the park's western entrance. About 8 miles before Yellowstone, route 287 heads west to Hebgen Lake, Earthquake Lake and the Madison Valley.

Hebgen Lake is more than 16 miles long and extends up to four miles at its widest point. On a high plateau, it's one of the premier summer recreational areas for boaters and fishermen alike. This is the largest high altitude lake in America (7,733 feet) with thick stands of trees and barren hills intermixing in quilt-like fashion all around. At the Cabin Creek Scarp Area you can see a 16 foot fault scarp where the forest floor was ripped apart during an earthquake in 1959.

Continuing down highway 287, the route follows the wandering Madison River into Earthquake Lake amid towering cliffs, pine forests, quaking aspens, gliding ospreys and massive stone formations. The same 1959 earthquake formed the lake when it triggered the Madison Slide where some 80 million tons of rubble blocked the Madison River. The lake still has an eerie feeling with bare rocks, scarred hillsides and a forest of silver-gray tree trunks breaking the water's surface. The visitor's center has fascinating records and presentations.

West of Earthquake Lake the scenery suddenly explodes into vast openness as you enter the lower reaches of the Madison River Valley. This is what Montana is famous for – vast open vistas that defy adequate description. Giant mountain ranges on either side of this wide valley seem to go on forever in changing hues of brown, green and blue. Fortunately, you can stop by the roadside in many places to soak in the view.

Route 287 then turns north leading to the town of Ennis, the home of "660 people and 11,000,000 trout". This is fly fishing country and Ennis is the capital. Wide, shallow and cold, the Madison River is perfect for the sport. From a homestead in 1864, the town quickly grew after three stagecoach lines were established in the 1880's to service nearby Virginia City. Built of old western style flat front buildings, downtown Ennis is a delight, full of interesting shops with art, furniture, clothing and unusual tourist items.

For a memorable side trip only 12 miles further up route 287, Virginia City, founded in 1863, is considered to be the most complete, original town of its kind in the United States. Walking the streets

instantly takes you back 120 years as you peek into old shops, watch the blacksmith beat tools from fiery iron and you savor original recipes from gold rush days.

Returning to Ennis over the separating hills you'll be treated to a spectacular view of the entire Madison Valley below you. In the fields you can see deer, elk, coyotes, foxes and other wildlife, especially late in the day. At the Ennis fly fisherman sculpture, route 84 takes you north to Norris. Sparkling below the hills of green and gold pastureland is Ennis Lake, a shallow reservoir popular for both fishing and water sports.

In 16 short miles, the crossroads town of Norris appears nestled in the folds of the surrounding hills. Here highway 84 heads east back to Bozeman through 29 miles of rolling crop and pasture lands. Along the way are farms and fields reminiscent of New England except, of course, for the spectacular mountains surrounding the valleys. As the land flattens out you'll return to your starting point, Bozeman.

With so much to see and do along the way, it can easily take longer than the promised four to six hours. But once you've driven it, you'll agree it's one of the most memorable day trips you can take anywhere.