



On Montana's high plains, early-morning light illuminates the tipis at the Lodgepole Gallery and Tipi Village, where you can spend the night and immerse yourself in Blackfeet culture.

## Blackfeet Country

Tipis, drums, and just-caught trout: Embrace Native American traditions on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation near Montana's Glacier National Park

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY LYNN DONALDSON

**SOME NEW MOMS** might think twice before packing up their 3-month-old son and checking into a tipi—one set on 200 acres of Montana's open prairie, no less. But with my husband working for the month in Mongolia of all places, I decide Charles and I also deserve an adventure out of the movies.

As a child, I spent summers trekking through the pristine forests and alpine trails of Glacier National Park; why not get Charles started early too? After a few days, though, I'm ready to leave behind the buses and tourists for a two-night taste of Blackfeet culture at the Lodgepole Gallery and Tipi Village (45 minutes from Glacier's main east entrance) on the 1.5 million-acre Blackfeet Indian Reservation I'd somehow always blazed by.

Anchored between the shadow of the Rocky Mountain Front—known by the Blackfeet as the Backbone of the World—and a rawhide horizon stretching 100 miles to the east, this landscape makes even the most spectacular shot in a John Ford western seem as insignificant as a postage stamp. But because the reservation borders Glacier, with its glorious Going-to-the-Sun Road and 700 miles of hiking trails, equally beautiful Black-

feet Country is often eclipsed as a tourist destination.

On a warm, sunny morning, we're greeted by Darrell Norman, an artist and member of the Blackfeet tribe—or Pikuni, as the Montana Blackfeet call themselves. Norman owns the camp and art gallery with his wife, Angelika Harden-Norman, an artist from Germany. An affable Will Rogers type, Norman hops shotgun into my SUV to take us on a half-day tour of the reservation. As we ramble along, passing tipi rings, buffalo jumps (where buffalo were driven off cliffs during hunts), and the branchy skeletons of medicine lodges, Norman talks. He tells us the Blackfeet creation story of Napi, recounts the tale of the Two Medicine Fight during the Lewis and Clark expedition, and recites treaty names and historic dates like most people rattle off the alphabet.

I pass up horseback riding through the high plains and trout fishing in the afternoon for a drum-making workshop. Although Charles is too young to partake, he'll appreciate my handiwork later (I realize I may regret this once he's old enough to bang on the drum). Sitting on the shaded patio, with a circle of wet rawhide the size of a large pizza, I watch as Norman nimbly





**LEFT** Spanish mustangs run on 200 acres at the Lodgepole Gallery and Tipi Village; hire a more docile steed for an afternoon ride through open prairie. **ABOVE** Kick back with a good book and take in the surrounding silence and distant views of the Rocky Mountains. **TOP RIGHT** Be sure to drop by the Lodgepole Gallery for locally made works of contemporary Blackfeet art. **RIGHT** The Crow's Nest functions as the Tipi Village's dining room and main lodge.



threads rawhide laces through. He stretches and pulls and makes it look easy, but as soon as I take over, the surface starts to buckle. Eventually, with coaching, I draw the reins tighter and finish the drum and fringed drumstick, then hang them in the sun to dry.

### Sleeping under the star-filled Big Sky

Soon enough it's time for dinner at the Crow's Nest, the main lodge. We've just missed July's annual powwow, in Browning, when all 10 tipis fill to capacity, but camp is festive nonetheless. A fun-loving French group fawns over *Charli* as we dine on bison tenderloin, fresh green beans, and local rainbow trout (smoked by Norman himself). A large couch heaped with buffalo hides and Pendleton pillows sits in the corner, waiting for the French to break out the *Pastis*—they kindly offer me the first glass.

Once the dinner dishes are done, Norman grabs a flashlight. We walk under an electric blue sky, stars twinkling above. There is *nothing* before us but rolling hills, wide-open land, and the tipis, just beginning to glow.

We settle into our tipi; this is not a Ralph Lauren take on Blackfeet life, but I don't care. We're camping Pikuni-style under sturdy canvas, with a firepit in the center and sleeping bags atop a bed of grass. Norman starts our fire, then leaves my tiny son and me to watch flames dance on our tipi walls as they do in old westerns. Despite Montana's cool summer nights, we stay toasty; I wake every few hours and toss on extra firewood. Coyotes howl, a train whistle sounds in the distance. Fade to black. ■

### Getting there

From Kalispell and Glacier Park International Airport, it's about 100 miles to Browning, Montana, and the Lodgepole Gallery and Tipi Village. Browning is 12 miles from the city of East Glacier Park and 35 miles southeast of the St. Mary entrance to Glacier National Park. Get more area info from Blackfeet Country ([www.blackfeetcountry.com](http://www.blackfeetcountry.com) or 406/338-7181) and Glacier National Park ([www.nps.gov/glac](http://www.nps.gov/glac) or 406/888-7800).

### Where to stay

**Glacier Park Lodge & Resort** Historic resort in the nearby city of East Glacier Park. Open through Sep 29; from \$140; [www.glacierparkinc.com](http://www.glacierparkinc.com) or 406/892-2525.

### Sherburne's Mountain Pine Motel

If sleeping in a tipi is not your thing, try this immaculate and affordable motel in East Glacier Park. Open through Oct 1; from \$66; [www.mtnpine.com](http://www.mtnpine.com) or 406/226-4403.

**Tipi Village** Authentic lodging on the Blackfeet reservation. From \$52; [www.blackfeetculturecamp.com](http://www.blackfeetculturecamp.com) or 406/338-2787.

### What to do

**Tipi Village activities** Everything offered here is à la carte, from meals and lodging to tours and classes. Activities such as horseback rides (from \$50), beadworking classes (from \$35), drum making (\$85), and tours (from \$80) should be scheduled before arriving. For reserva-



tions and more info, go to [www.blackfeetculturecamp.com](http://www.blackfeetculturecamp.com) or call 406/338-2787. **Lodgepole Gallery** Contemporary and traditional Native American art that's far from stereotypical, plus frame-worthy greeting cards, coffee-table books, and Blackfeet drumming CDs. 10–6 daily through Sep 30; State 89 at Durham Rd., 2½ miles west of Browning; 406/338-2787.