

A range of different perspectives from a Montana fire lookout

By **Brian Schott**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WERNER PEAK, Mont. — Getting above it all, staying at a historic fire lookout perched at 6,960 feet on the spine of this mountain, is a fine way to snuff the stresses of life.

A few weeks back, I called the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and booked our stay at this site, which has been manned by firefighters since 1914. While modern technology and airplane surveillance take on larger roles for spotting flames in remote regions, lookouts are no longer used as an active resource for fire detection, except during extreme fire conditions.

Montana has 21 fire lookouts for rent through the US Forest Service, but this is the first state-owned lookout for rent and I felt lucky to reserve a weekend with my wife, Lyndsay, and her friend Sabine and Sabine's daughter Naya, 10.

At the Land Office in Kalispell, I was given a detailed map and the combination to open the heavy metal gate 200 yards below the lookout, then similar codes to gain access to the catwalk and the lock on the door.

Have you ever eaten sushi at the top of a mountain? We did. I ordered take-out in Whitefish, the ski town at the base of the Whitefish Range, and then drove up here near sunset, stumbling along 12 miles of dirt roads north of Whitefish Lake, then six miles to the summit. Any car with decent tires can make it — and although I would recommend a hearty auto, Sabine drove her low-clearance Honda. While unnerved by some of the exposed drainage pipes, she made it without a glitch.

Expecting rustic and ready for anything, we were surprised by the interior — newly tiled

floors, fresh mattresses, sparkling appliances, including stove, oven, and fridge — and all for \$35 a night for up to four people, ages 10 and over. There are two twin beds and two fold-out cots. You have to bring your own water, but for mountain-top living, this was pretty sweet.

It seemed surreal to have our cars parked outside this shelter on the edge of a cliff. I have lived in the mountains for nearly two decades and this was as dramatic a view as I have seen. A huge rock slide falls away from the summit to the northeast looking toward the peaks of Glacier National Park and the Canadian Rockies (we were 25 miles from the border as the proverbial crow flies). A turn of the head and we were gazing at the spine of a mountain ridge. Turn again and we were looking down into a lush glacial valley 3,000 feet below.

While we celebrated our perch with raw fish and red wine, Naya spotted a thunderstorm rolling toward us and said, "Wow! Look at the clouds on top of the mountain! We're in the clouds!"

Cool, moist air enveloped us as we walked around the catwalk, and we nervously joked about the warning in the welcome packet that instructs guests to sit on the wooden stools in the event of electrical storms. We moved inside to watch thick arcs of lightning pierce the peaks a mile away as thunder reverberated across the mountains.

The guest book comments, compiled since the July 1 opening, reflected the overwhelming experience: "Stay of a lifetime." "A life wish of mine." And an entry from July 3: "Have now been inspired to write a book entitled Pooping with a View?"

Indeed. The outhouse, locat-

ed a short hike down the trail, is set at the edge of a precipice that looks out at the glacier-carved peaks. One would be crazy to sit with the door closed.

In the middle of the night, Lyndsay and I awoke to the screech of a mountain lion. In the morning as I fried eggs, I questioned what we had heard. Later, fresh scat on the dirt road confirmed the visit.

We hiked the Ralph Thayer Memorial Trail, which extends from Werner Peak to Diamond Peak and Red Meadow Lake. After wandering through fields of wildflowers — Indian paintbrush, bear grass, purple aster, and fireweed — we dropped down into China Basin and found an abandoned miner's cabin. It reminded us how tough the pioneers were. Sushi at a fire lookout? What would old Rudolph J. Werner, the trapper from the 1880s for whom the peak is named, say about our cushy lives?

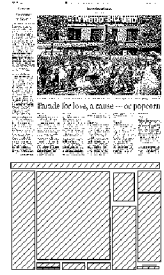
Up at the lookout, I listened to our laughter bounce from peak to peak and forgot my worries. When you're looking at your troubles at close range, gaining some altitude gives you a fresh perspective and forces you to take a breath.

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If you go . . .

Werner Peak Lookout
Northwestern Land Office
Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
406-751-2240
www.dnrc.mt.gov

The lookout is available July 1-Aug. 15 and Sept. 15-Nov. 1. In mild fire seasons like this year's, it is opened for rent during the interim on a week-to-week basis.





PHOTOS BY BRIAN SCHOTT FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

One perspective from the Werner Peak Lookout is onto the Whitefish Range in northwest Montana. Sabine Brigette, left, her daughter Naya, and Lyndsay Schott enjoyed their panorama.

