

PERSONAL JOURNEYS

A Case for Getting Far, Far Away



Roy Wood

Aniakchak National Monument and Preserve, in Alaska.

By CHRISTOPHER SOLOMON
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For a decade now I've been obsessed with one of the most overlooked patches of real estate on the American Monopoly board — a place I've never even seen and that you've probably never heard of called Aniakchak National Monument and Preserve.

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H.D.R. composite photo by Roy Wood

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I'm obsessed with Aniakchak for what's there, of course — a blown-out volcano like Oregon's Crater Lake that today is home to pumpkin-colored hot springs and a lake where salmon that taste like volcanic minerals spawn, and to brown bears that crawl from dens in the 2,000-foot caldera walls each summer to feed on them.

But I'm also obsessed with the place for what I won't find there when I finally do visit: crowds. Aniakchak lies 350 miles southwest of Anchorage at the base of the Aleutian Islands, that frozen tail of North America that wags at Kamchatka.

So many people on vacation follow the trampling herd to Las Vegas, or South Beach, or Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the nation's most popular park, where nearly

9.7 million visitors last year dueled with sporks over picnic tables. I have never understood such urges. When I have a few days to spare, I flee in the opposite direction, away from the hive.

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more remote and vacant, the better. I've got no beef with Manhattan. I've met fascinating people in Seattle bars and in Boston suburbs and in tiny ski towns high in the Rockies. But give me the empty places, the abandoned places, the mountains where the sound of the wind through the ponderosas draws a shivery finger down your spine.

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I am grumpy about the prospects for our country for many reasons these days, but one thing that still gives me some hope is the ease with which we can still vanish here, how many forgotten corners remain to escape to and explore. I keep a list of ones I want to visit in my head. Sometimes I take it out and savor their strange names: The Bruneau River. The Absarokas. The Beartooths. The Wallowas. Pasayten. Gila Wilderness. Alvord Desert. Freezeout Ridge and Burnt Boot Creek and Cigarette Springs. Aniakchak.

I remember the day I knew that the white spaces on the map were the places for me. I was 25, suburban-raised and driving to the West for the first time. In late October I raced through the East and across the Great Plains. When I reached the Rockies, though, I eased off the accelerator, pulled out the dog-eared Rand McNally and began to follow the meandering green dashes that were marked as "scenic routes." As they wound through the green splotches of national forests and past an Oz of unfamiliar names — Uncompahgre, Yampa, Uinta — I felt as if I was following a treasure map. Near dry Vernal, Utah, I saw a sign for yet another name, Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area. I turned, and turned again, until soon my packed, arthritic Volkswagen was jouncing down a rutted dirt road.

The air was wintry but the day was bright, and I rode with the windows down, not minding the cold and dust as Götterdämmerung clouds swept shadows across endless sage. A herd of antelope raced us, the old VW and me, through the grass — "their mouths open," as Gretel Ehrlich wrote in "The Solace of Open Spaces," "as if drinking in the space." Then the road suddenly ended at a sea in the desert — Flaming Gorge Reservoir — where buttes floated like steamships, and those operatic clouds pushed offstage toward Wyoming. The desert light slanted down, the wind plucked at the water. Standing there — alone, not to be found for days if the car had broken down — I don't think I'd ever been happier.

In the years since, I've sought out remoteness whenever I could. I'm no loner. Often I go with two or three friends; big country has a way of sharpening the connections between the people you choose to surround yourself with. These trips are guided by an unstated hypothesis: a trip is memorable in inverse proportion to the number of bars of coverage on your cellphone. Way out there — away from what the writer Edward Abbey, that solitude-greedy coot, called "syphilisation" — is my sweet spot as a traveler.

The premise has held up well. Mountain biking at 11,000 feet on a stretch of the high-and-wild Colorado Trail between Monarch Pass and Telluride, I saw with fresh eyes how mountains knitted themselves together, how creeks dove to seek other creeks, and dove again until they earned the name of river.

Miles from a road on a lazy raft trip through the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness in Idaho, friends and I pulled hungry trout from the Middle Fork of the Salmon River until our casting arms grew weary, then soaked those arms in campside hot springs and drank beer beneath stars undimmed by city lights. And we wondered what the rich people were doing that night.

In the dry, dusty corner where Oregon, Idaho and Nevada meet, a few committed desert rats and I clambered for days through Owyhee canyonlands so stunning they should be a national park, yet remain so anonymous that arrowheads lie on the rocks as if native hunters had dropped them yesterday.

True, destinations like these aren't easy to get to. But that's only led to a corollary to the cellphone theory: the colors are always brighter if a place draws a little blood first.

We need this kind of remoteness more than ever. Today we brush elbows on a crowded planet. We fight traffic. We hunker in offices. We marinate in what the late David Foster Wallace called Total Noise. Maybe for you, too, this modern life overwhelms. If you're like me, only getting far away from all that allows you to shake off the dross. Out there, the

world shrinks until all that remains are “the rock-bottom facts of ax and wood and fire and frying pans,” as John Graves wrote in “Goodbye to a River,” his classic 1960 account of a solo three-week paddle down the Brazos River in Texas. But don’t think yourself an ascetic for savoring such simple things, Graves added. “In a way you’re more of a sensualist than a fat man washing down sauerbraten and dumplings with heavy beer while a German band plays and a plump blonde kneads his thigh. ... You’ve shucked off the gross delights, and those you have left are few, sharp, and strong.”

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I’ll admit, too, to enjoying the fear that can accompany such seclusion. Several years ago friends and I spent days fishing at a fly-in forest service cabin at Martin Lake in the Copper River Delta outside Cordova, Alaska. I still remember the afternoon we stood in the lake and hauled in leviathan Dolly Varden trout, only to see a very large brown bear squinting at us from the shore as if gauging whether we were worth the effort. He left tracks larger than coffee cans, and snuffled through our dreams all night. There are few thrills that quite match the electric prickle on the neck that comes from knowing one no longer stands atop the food chain.

Grete Ehrlich said of those yawning Wyoming spaces that she loves, “Its absolute indifference steadied me.” I know what she meant. We spend our days trying to be big. In the middle of nowhere, though, we can surrender to smallness again and instead find where we fit in the landscape. Out there, where there’s nothing, is where there’s the most to learn.

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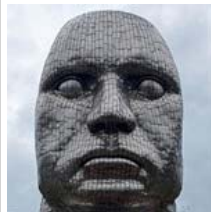


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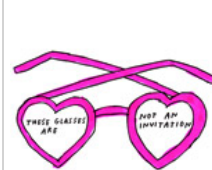
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