

Minding the Inn

From October to April, Glacier Park's famous Many Glacier Hotel is in the hands of one man

STORY BY ALEX STRICKLAND
PHOTOS BY BRIAN McDERMOTT



Facing page: Between October and April, Steve Lautenbach works as the winter keeper for Many Glacier Lodge in Glacier National Park. Ice fishing is one of the ways he passes the time. This page: Lautenbach inventories the inn several times a week.

Even here, at the end of a dead-end road ringed by tall peaks and head-high snowdrifts, Steve Lautenbach is not alone. There is always the wind.

When it blows hard and warm, the ice opens on Swiftcurrent Lake and whips the water into a foam-crested frenzy. And when it blows cold—like it almost always does—it piles drifts up against the side of his cabin and the huge, slumbering hotel left in his charge.

Lautenbach, a compact, excitable 35-year-old, is the winter keeper of Many Glacier Hotel in Glacier National Park's remote and intensely beautiful Many Glacier Valley. From November to April for the last two years, Lautenbach has lived in a small cabin about 200 yards from the 215-room hotel.

Each day he rises early to ponder how to clear his front "yard" of bighorn sheep that hold no fear of him, and flips on his television to watch the *Today* show. For a man so geographically disconnected, Lautenbach is remarkably plugged in. Satellite TV, Internet access and a MySpace profile all link him to the rest of the world.

Matt Lauer before the workday or not, it's still Glacier in the dead of winter and Lautenbach, every inch the outdoorsman, has what he knows most do not.

"There's something to the mornings and the energy," he says. "There's something sacred here, I have dreams about it."

A typical work day starts when Lautenbach dons his double-kneed black Carhartt pants and gaiters and pulls on one or two jackets, depending on the weather. The hike from home to hotel starts by passing his Honda Accord, diligently dug out and only 10 or 12 feet from the surface of the surrounding snow. At the top of the snow-cut steps the vista explodes into searing white and blue as snow and sky mix in a swirl of razor-sharp peaks, and clouds that fall like a river over rocks as they spill into the valley.

Once across the wind-polished ice and into the hotel, Lautenbach strips down to his indoor wear and prepares

for the daily battle to keep the winter and the wind from taking over the hotel.

All the park's properties are managed by Glacier Park Inc., the park's concessionaire, but Many Glacier is the gem. Built by Louis Warren Hill in an effort to lure curious easterners along the Great Northern Railroad's new line, Many Glacier is the largest, most remote and most spectacular hotel in Glacier.

Many Glacier Hotel in summer is a busy, sunlit place with gift shops, awestruck visitors and a sizable staff cleaning rooms, dispensing directions and serving food in the Ptarmigan dining room. In winter, the huge timbers that dominate the cavernous lobby feel frozen to the touch and the wind screams against the roof.

During his winters here Lautenbach has taken on a list of projects ranging from putting wheels on each of the hotel's beds to refinishing bathrooms. Besides being Lautenbach's workplace, the hotel is also his gym. Flashlight in hand and running shoes laced up, he runs wherever he goes to stay fit when the snow or the darkness keep him from his skis. "I'm 35 and I'm in the shape of my life," he boasts.

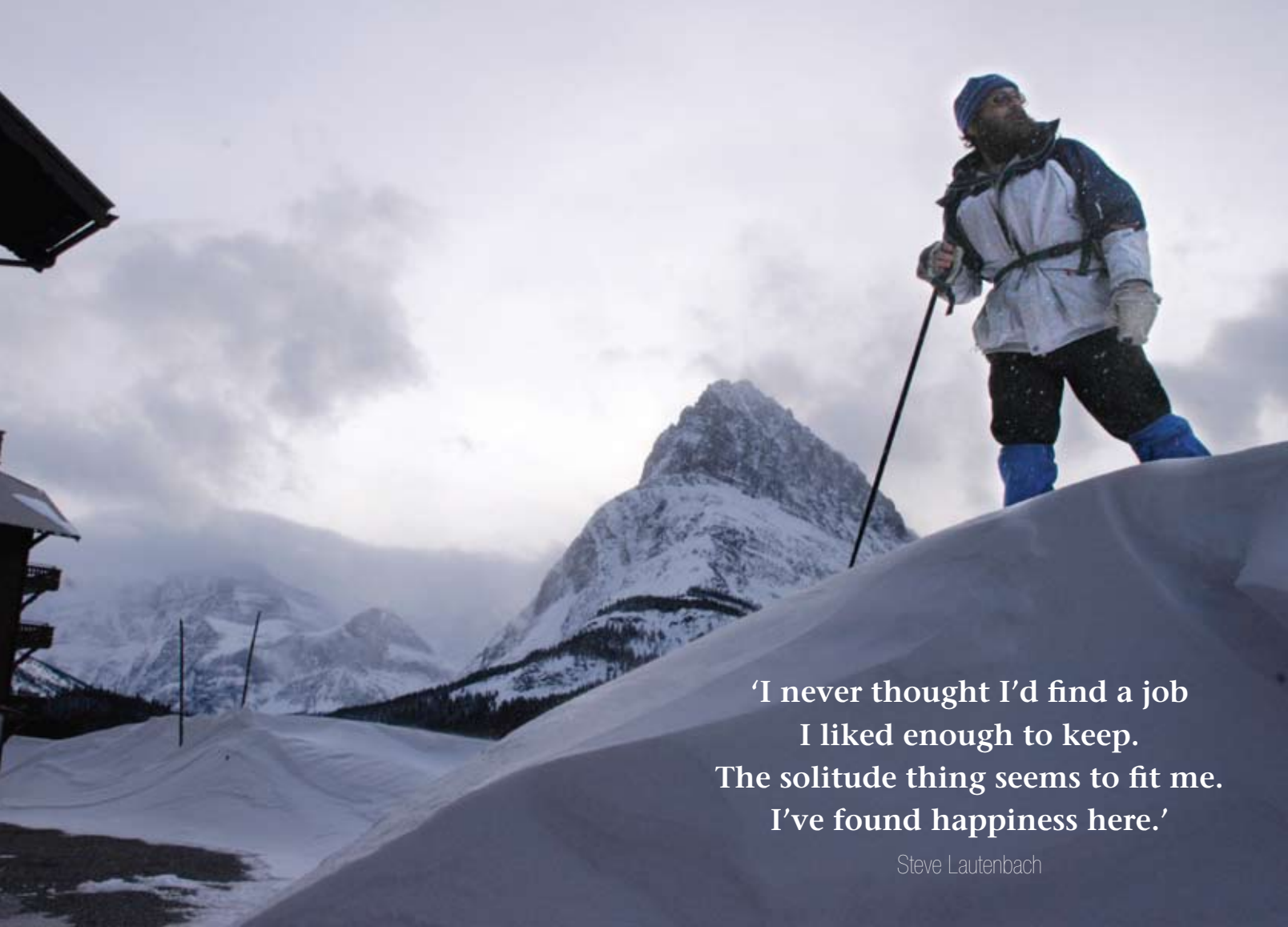


Lautenbach is literally prancing across the ice, his red frizzy beard bobbing around making him look a little like a leprechaun.

"You hear that? You hear that? We're close," he screeches before letting out a whoop that bounces off the mountainsides on this clear morning.

I hear it. And I know we're not close at all. Lautenbach's ancient—and dull—auger is making slow progress through the ice and instead of sounding hollow as he claims, it sounds like we're drilling through steel.

In celebration of the rarest kind of day—a windless one—Lautenbach has decided that ice fishing is his recreation of choice. And with photographer Brian McDermott and me ▶



**'I never thought I'd find a job
I liked enough to keep.
The solitude thing seems to fit me.
I've found happiness here.'**

Steve Lautenbach

taking long turns at the auger, it seems clear we're being had.

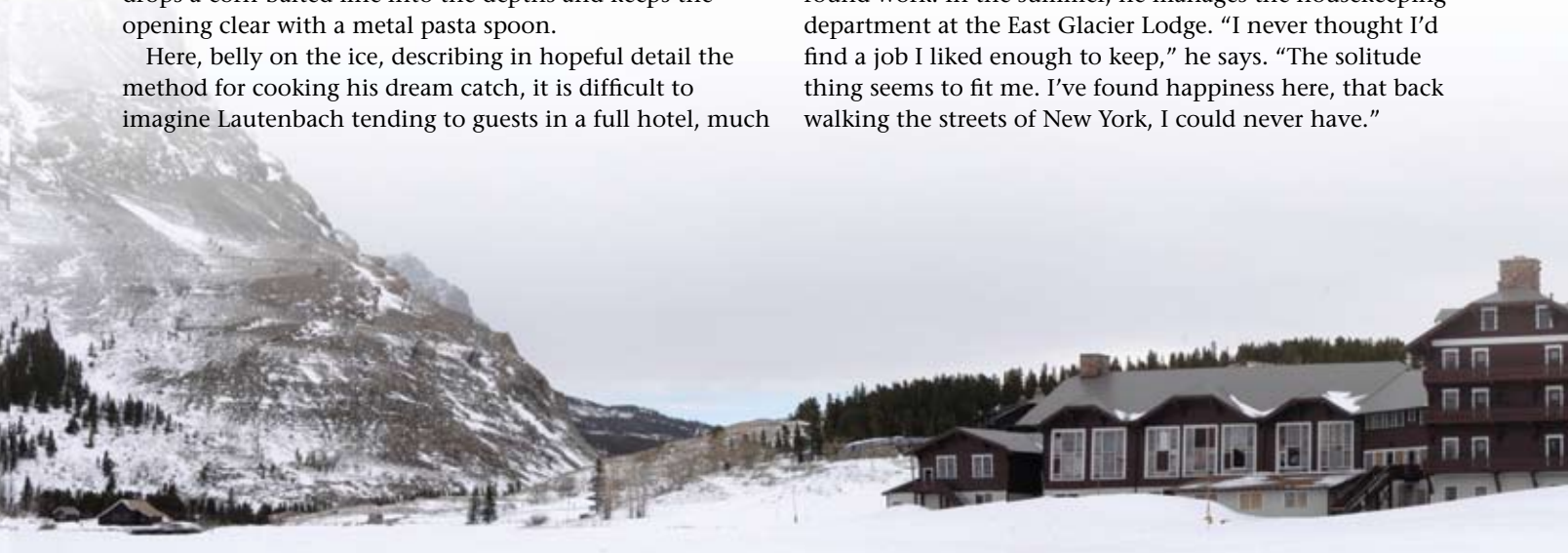
"This is the beauty of being out here," Lautenbach says, fit to burst with excitement.

Initially nervous about being almost 100 yards from the shore of Swiftcurrent Lake, we laugh at our concerns as the auger plows through one, then two, then three feet of ice. When the water gurgles through the hole, Lautenbach drops a corn-baited line into the depths and keeps the opening clear with a metal pasta spoon.

Here, belly on the ice, describing in hopeful detail the method for cooking his dream catch, it is difficult to imagine Lautenbach tending to guests in a full hotel, much

less driving a cab in Schenectady, New York, like he did six years ago.

In terms of miles and lifestyle, Lautenbach has gone about as far as he could from Yonkers, where he was born. A Navy veteran with a degree in accounting, the death of a close friend sent him West to work first in Yellowstone National Park as a room cleaner, then to Colorado, back to Yellowstone and finally to Glacier, where he landed year-round work. In the summer, he manages the housekeeping department at the East Glacier Lodge. "I never thought I'd find a job I liked enough to keep," he says. "The solitude thing seems to fit me. I've found happiness here, that back walking the streets of New York, I could never have."



Each Monday, Lautenbach's work week begins with a full check of the hotel, inside and out. He glances in every room, walks every floor and circles the building—something which must be done on skis because of the two-story snow piles along the backside. On this weekly circuit he finds a window cracked from a storm or a snow-filled room, and gains a familiarity that can only be earned with time and attention.

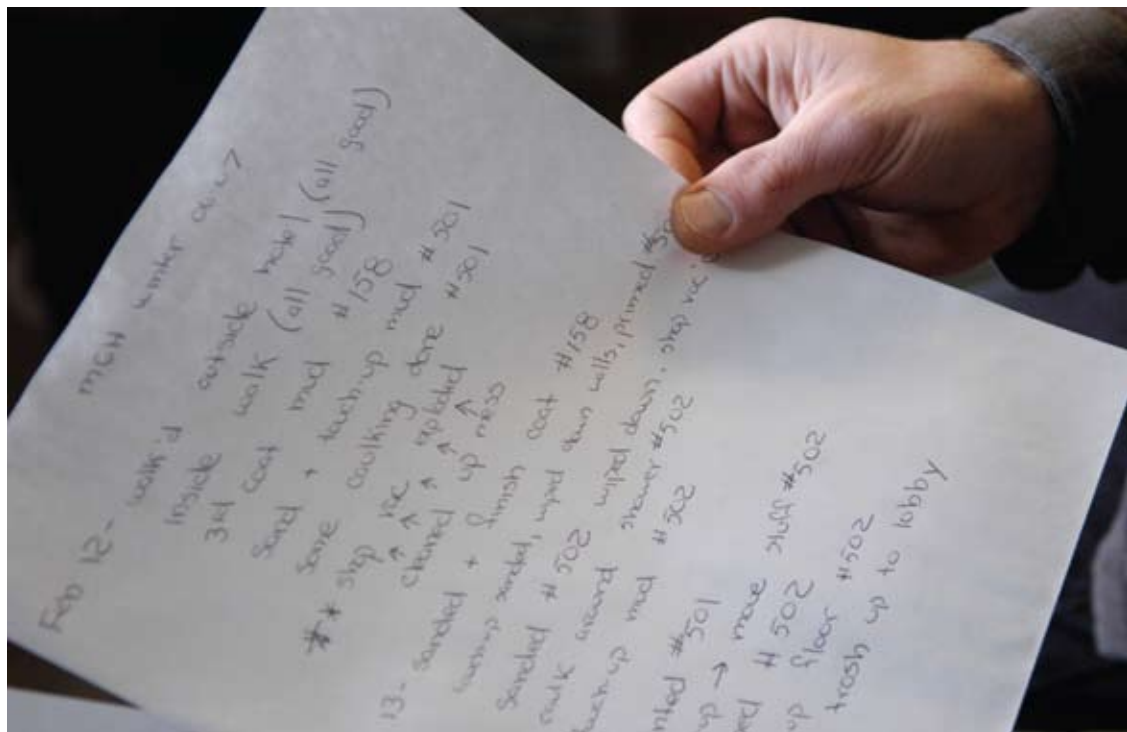
Early in his first winter at the hotel, Lautenbach was still learning his way around, taking special care to notice the details of the grand building. Outside the dining room he lingered over a wine case, each bottle tucked into its labeled slot, glass doors closed, locked and dusty. There were no empty slots, he noticed, aside from a quick cleaning, it was primed for the first days of the season.

Then, on a Monday in February while making his usual sweep of the hotel, he came upon an empty wine bottle in the middle of a hallway he walks each week. Rattled, but chalking it up to chance, Lautenbach picked up the bottle and went to the dining room. There, the glass doors hung open and the bottle in his hand matched the one empty slot on the rack. "It bugged me out," he says. "After that I never went back into the annex."

Lautenbach says that later that year he related the story to a veteran employee who has driven Glacier Park's trademark red buses for years. "He said there were spirits in the park—a good spirit on the west side near Lake McDonald and vengeful spirit on the Blackfoot side."



Back in his cabin, Lautenbach lights a cigarette from his last pack—settles into his sizable recliner. Here, surrounded by *The Sopranos*, *Season One*, every *Rocky* movie ever made, speakers, well-stocked cupboards and a warm bed, it does not feel like winter in the wilderness. "My family thinks



This page: Steve Lautenbach keeps a detailed journal while watching the Many Glacier Hotel during the winter months. Facing page: Snowdrifts can become a huge problem at the Inn as rarely a day goes by without wind.

"I'm nuts being up here all alone," he says. "But maybe I am crazy. But I like being alone out here, it gives me lots of time to think."

Right now he is thinking about the future, and hoping it's more of the same.

"I'll stay here as long as they'll let me," he says.

When summer comes he moves down to East Glacier to work. It's a move of only 40 miles or so, but somewhere in the trip, the park changes too. "In spring, when it first gets packed with guests I think, 'I'm gonna have an anxiety attack,'" Lautenbach says. The shock wears off quickly, though, and he loves the work and the atmosphere.

And in Montana it's never long until the snow flies and Lautenbach moves back into his own valley. He'll unload his trusty car, wave goodbye to the last of the summer crew and settle in for the too-short winter.

Just him and the wind. ■



Alex Strickland wasn't born in Montana, but he got here as fast as he could. A graduate of the University of Montana's journalism school, Strickland is currently a reporter for the *Bigfork Eagle*.

