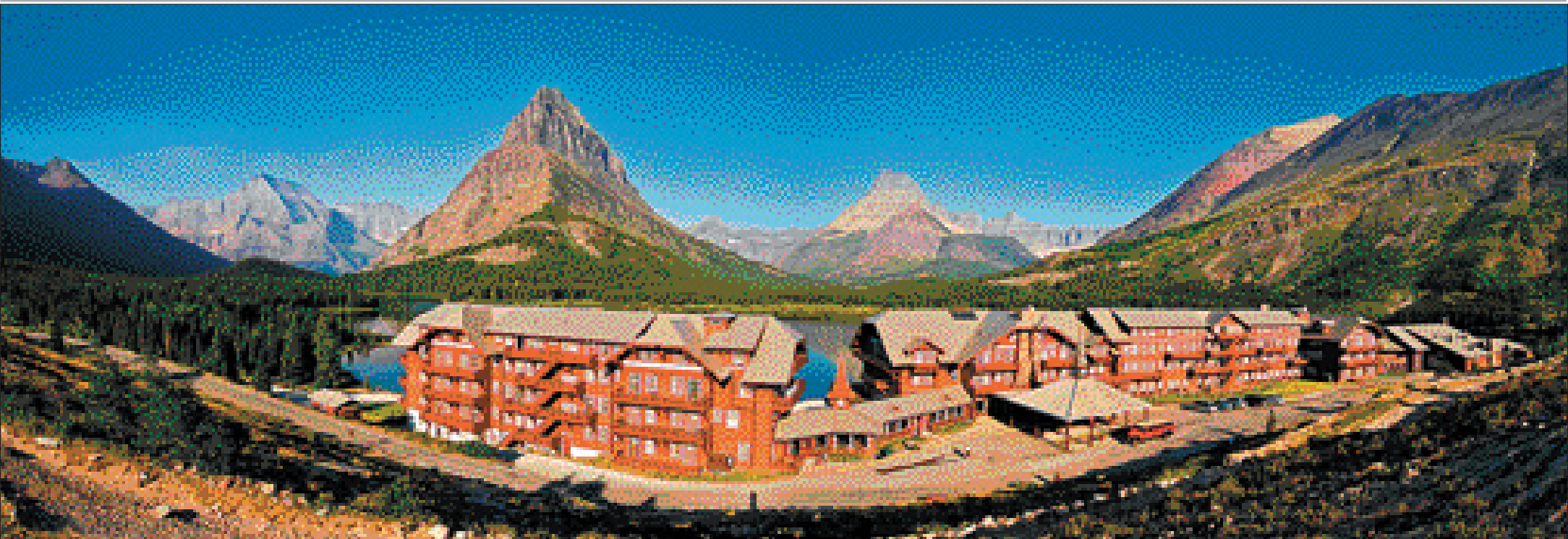


VALLEY



THE PANORAMA of Many Glacier Hotel unfolds in this photo, taken by Kalispell photographer Bret Bouda.

Getting the Big picture Photographer's work 'reflects freedom'

By MICHAEL RICHESON
The Daily Inter Lake

Hiking through the wilds of Glacier National Park, Kalispell photographer Bret Bouda sees much more than granite slabs reaching out to grasp the sky.

More than the impossibly blue, high-mountain lakes.

More than the fields of bear grass and glacier lilies.

Through the lens of his camera, Bret Bouda sees freedom.

"His enthusiasm for America is contagious, and his pictures reflect that," his friend Tom Esch said. "They reflect freedom."

Bouda is becoming well-known for his stunning and massive prints of Glacier Park. The Kalispell City Council recently hung a 14-foot print by Bouda in the council chambers, and Bouda has more giant canvases going up at Glacier Park International Airport.

His work is also on display at the Elusive Image Gallery in Kalispell.

"Freedom is a very strong word for me," Bouda said. "There is only one free nation by mankind, and it is the U.S. The Creator let me be born under a different regime, and that's why I feel so strong about how free and beautiful this country is."

Bouda grew up in Czechoslovakia under communism. As a young man, he was close to a spot on the

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country's Olympic team as a decathlete, but an injury kept him out of the 1980 games.

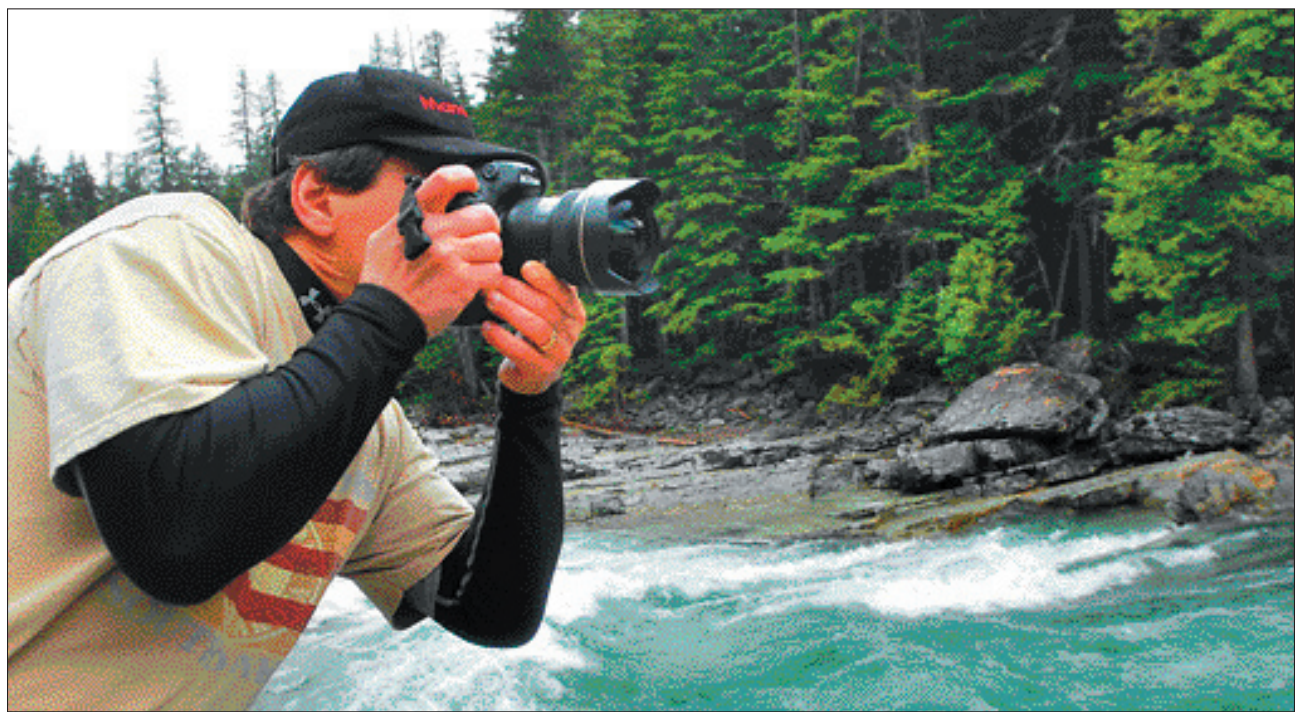
As a track and field star, he could have finished college and become a teacher and a coach, but that would have meant living under a regime he despised.

"I could not teach because I knew I would always be in trouble with the system," Bouda said.

A friend of his who worked as a journalist was facing persecution for not keeping in step with the party line.

With financial help from his brother, Bouda secretly began planning to defect.

In 1981, he bolted for West Germany and escaped the oppressive



Garrett Cheen/Daily Inter Lake

PHOTOGRAPHER BRET BOUDA shoots a Nikon D2xs on McDonald Creek in Glacier National Park on Tuesday. Bouda, who escaped Czechoslovakia in 1981, is a landscape photographer who specializes in panoramic and large-scale printing formats.

government of Gustav Husak.

If he had been caught, he would have been sent to a uranium mine, which was a death sentence for most people.

"I knew once I defected I would close that door for good," Bouda said.

While living in West Germany, Bouda learned how to speak German and attended a university. He earned his master's degree in construction. For the first time in his life, Bouda thought he was able to become his own man.

He quickly learned that in Germany, contractors are ruled by architects.

"I had a very good life and a very good income, but it was always their vision that I had to follow," Bouda said. "I had to move on."

After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, Bouda moved back to his home country and settled in Prague, where he started a development company.

His homecoming was not what he had expected. "I couldn't relate to my own family any more," he said.

Bouda's drive for independence clashed with his family, which had become used to dependence on a communist government.

Corruption within the new government was rampant, and Bouda found that politicians expected bribes to approve his development projects. By 1994, he'd had enough and left for Australia.

On New Year's Eve, he met the woman who would become his wife. She was an American visiting Australia, and he was a Euro-

pean wondering what the next chapter would look like.

Karen didn't speak German or Czech, and the only English Bouda knew was from British and American pop songs. While waiting for the new year to arrive, a friend helped translate their conversation.

A year later they married and moved to the United States.

Karen worked in the medical field and spent considerable time on the road. Bouda had enough money that he didn't need to find work any time soon. For two years, he traveled with her with his camera by his side.

"Every day was like a new dream," Bouda said.

He also began collecting books

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NATION/WORLD

Local photographer's work hangs in City Hall

PICTURE/From A6

on U.S. history. A book written just after the Civil War, which he bought at an estate sale, deeply affected him.

"It was eye-opening, the consciousness of freedom the founders had and why they did what they did," Bouda said.

In 2000, Bouda relinquished his German citizenship and became a U.S. citizen. He had a green card because he married an American, but when the couple's first son, Jamie, was born in 1999, Bouda said he wanted both of Jamie's parents to be U.S. citizens.

"I am strongly proud of it," he said. "If I hear the Czech national hymn, it's no big deal. If I hear the national hymn of the U.S., I get goose bumps. I can't help it. It's emotional for me."

The Boudas moved from Utah to Kalispell in 2005 with their two sons (Andrew joined the family in 2004). Bret had become a real estate agent, and Karen was still working as a moderator between pharmaceutical companies and doctors, but the quality of life in

Kalispell pulled them away.

After managing a local accounting business for a couple of years, Bouda chose to make photography his full-time profession in January. Technological advances in digital equipment and printers allows him to deliver a product that is entirely his own vision.

"In order for me to be a photographer, I need to be in control," he said. "I take it, process it on the computer and make the print. I get to put my vision on paper without fighting the system. It's the freedom in me."

Bouda has been an avid photographer since his childhood. He learned the art from his successful cousin, whom Bouda considers one of the greatest photographers of all time. His rapid rise as a photographer in Montana is the culmination of a lifetime of effort.

His unique ability to capture dramatic landscapes through a variety of techniques brings alive the majesty of Glacier Park in a two-dimensional format.

"He does justice to the park," Esch said. "There are other great photographers,

but there is something different about his images. They are the essence of light on rock and trees and ice and snow."

Bouda's photos of Glacier Park caught the eyes of Kalispell City Council members. The city is developing a new mountain range logo, and one of Bouda's photos of Lake McDonald was the perfect fit.

"Everyone that sees it loves it," Kalispell City Manager Jim Patrick said. "He does an incredible job of taking pictures. He's a true asset to the community."

Patrick said the city chose the photo because the park is turning 100 years in 2010 and it was appropriate to acknowledge that the city benefits from tourism generated by the park.

Bouda is also in working on a book called *Glacier Classics*, which will be a collection of black and white images. The small-scale book should be out in late

summer and is designed to be an inexpensive gift for people who want to share the park with their friends and family.

"For the price of a few lattes you can have these images that are classic," Esch said.

Bouda hopes that through his images he can help show people the rugged beauty — and freedom — of Glacier Park. Having visited many of America's famous parks, Bouda said none of them compare to Glacier.

"You could spend a week at most places and see it all," he said. "I hike 150 miles per year through the park, and I don't think I'll be able to see all of it in 10 years. I just have a passion for nature."

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