

Summer/Fall 2010

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*Guests to the lodge are encouraged to simply relax  
and soak in the views.*



*Spectacular Solitude*  
**HOLLAND LAKE**  
*in the heart of the Swan*

*By Lori Grannis*

**H**OLLAND LAKE – Like a faded screen star long past her close-up, a framed image of Holland Lake Lodge hangs just above a small corner secretary desk in its own rustic lobby.

It was taken in 1924 – the year the lodge was built. Scratched and faded now, the black-and-white cell immortalizes the original auberge as it was in the years before a fire swept through and destroyed it in 1947. It is the single remaining photograph of the dwelling in that era.

Proprietor Christian Wohlfeil purchased the lodge in

*Photos by Michael Gallacher*

2002, at the tender age of 25 years. Four years before, he was hired to manage the lodge for former owners. Twelve years later, he still can't imagine living anywhere else.

Holland Lake Lodge has seen plenty of owners in the last 86 years. Based on records, before Wohlfeil the average length of tenancy was about three years.

"I've heard that power didn't arrive in the valley until 1959, and that they didn't pave the highway until the 1960s," Wohlfeil says. "I think it was something like a two-day stagecoach ride from Missoula in the 1920s and 1930s, so

ownership (in those days) must have been difficult.”

**D**espite the probable travails of running a seasonal hideaway back then, Holland Lake Lodge has always been a functioning guest lodge.

The lodge itself features nine rooms that sit directly above the lobby and restaurant. Tucked beneath red matelasse quilts, upstairs guests awaken each morning to the smell of sizzling bacon, and most rooms provide an unobstructed view of the sunrise.

Six private cabins sit lakeside – each with a firepit and an inexhaustible supply of wood – and bear names like Wolf House, Moose Roost and Bear Lair. Most feature two queen beds and are dog-friendly – owing to long-broken ground by Silas, the resident 9-year-old golden retriever.

Wide-set eyes top a perpetual canine grin, eclipsed only by paw pads the size of small baseball mitts. On this afternoon, Silas shuffles impatiently from foot to foot, waiting to board a canoe for a chance at a mid-afternoon plunge.

**A**dirondack chairs huddle on the sprawling lakeside lawn like chatty girlfriends. These front-row seats provide guests unobstructed snapshots of majestic snow-capped ranges, and offer a lazy recline in full view of wildlife’s flurry.

Birds are abundant here – loons, cranes, starlings, eagles. On this afternoon, a pair of sharp-eyed eagles scan wind-rippled water for kokanee salmon, and cutthroat, bull and rainbow trout – all naturally abundant in this lake.

Just this morning, staff say, a guest bagged a 22-inch bull trout.

Otters, beavers, turtles and other lake-lubbers are also here – probably for the same reason guests are: the spectacular solitude.

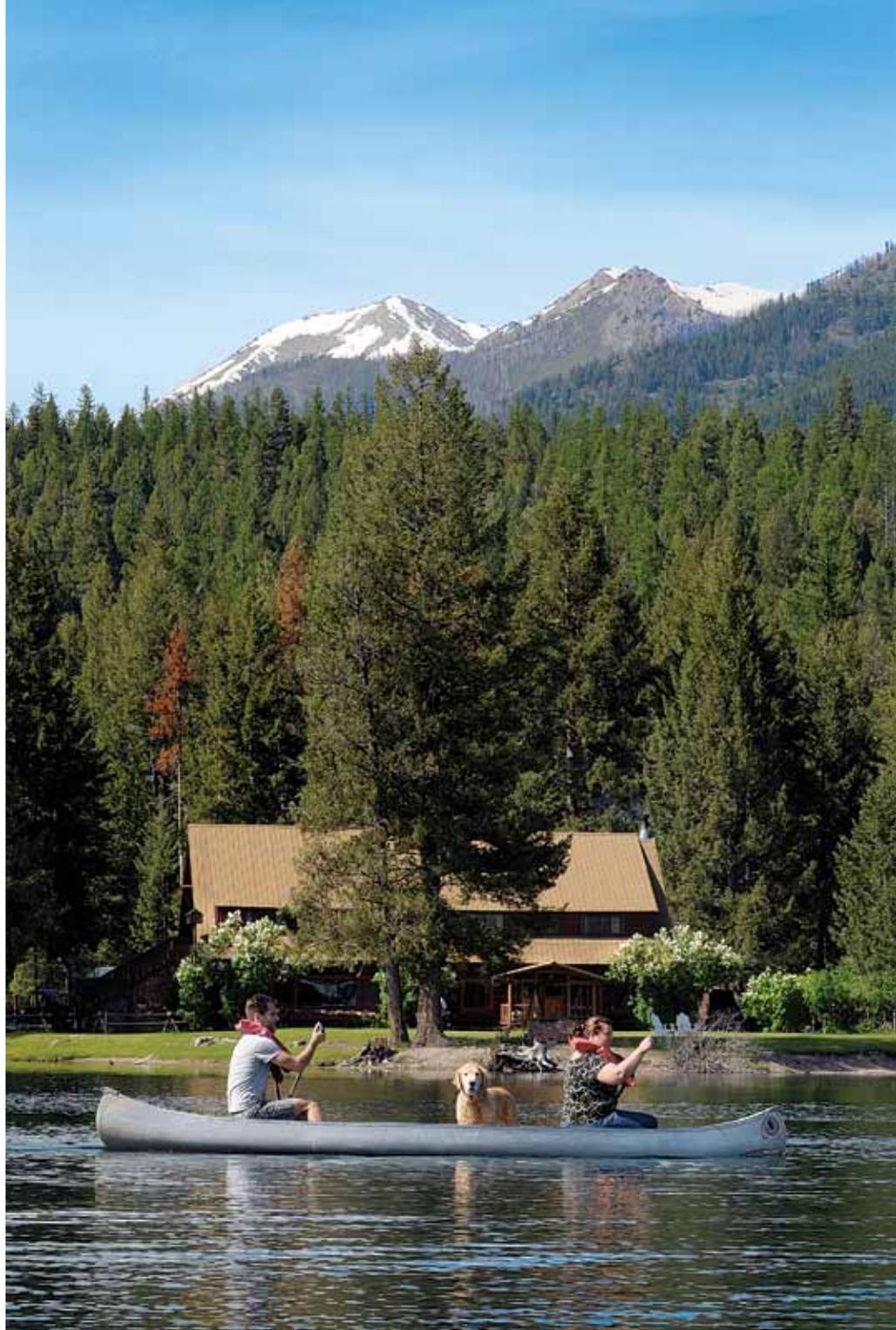
“Spectacular solitude” has become a tag-line Wohlfeil uses when describing both the lodge and locale, in print and in conversation.

Nestled between the Mission Range to the west and the Swan Range to the east, at 4,075 feet Holland Lake is something of a hidden jewel.

Beyond the lodge, Holland Falls appears a frothy bridal veil cascading over rocky cliffs. It’s a mere 1 1/2-mile hike to and from there, and another five miles beyond to upper Holland Lake.

**B**ut hiking is just one of several things to do here.

Canoes and kayaks come complimentary with cabin and lodge stays. A new fleet of single and double kayaks just arrived this year, according to Wohlfeil. Equine trail rides are available to guests for an additional hourly or



*Above: Whether it’s sharing a canoe with friends or hiking the numerous trails around the lake, the Holland Lake Lodge experience is all about solitude.*

*Right hand page from top (left to right): The cabins at the lodge are dog friendly.*

*Guests to the lodge are encouraged to simply relax and soak in the views.*

*Kasey Mahon enjoys a good book in the quiet of the main lodge.*

*Toasted pistachio-encrusted Alaskan halibut is just one of the many delicacies on the menu in the Holland Lake dining room.*

*The lodge has nine rooms in the main structure where guests wake to the smell of breakfast cooking in the kitchen below.*

*Executive chef Amber Lukas crafts most of her menu from scratch.*



half-day fee.

Most things here don't require quite as much energy, or commerce, though.

Views are all part of the package, as is lounging, reading, eating and other erstwhile pursuits.

When Wohlfeil took over the lodge in 2002, he converted nightly room rates to an "all-inclusive" American plan – merging a per-person night's stay, with three meals a day, in a double-occupancy rate structure. Per person lodge rates run \$125 per night; cabins rates are \$145.

Beyond magical views and a peaceful setting, the food at Holland Lake Lodge is one of the things that draws people here, Wohlfeil says, so packaging everything together as an "experience" just made sense.

From the decor to the food, the idea has been to create the most authentic Montana lodge experience possible for guests, he says – from the aesthetics of the lobby's wildlife mounts and river rock fireplace, to hearty food fit for dignitaries and campers alike.

"I'm always working on restoration projects throughout the property, but what we really try to do is rival the views here with service and good food," he says.

**E**xecutive chef Amber Lukas came to the lodge on the heels of a chef who departed early in the season in 2007. Once Wohlfeil got over the initial panic, he cast a wide net to find a replacement.

About 1,500 e-mails, a paragraph-long job description and a network of mutual friends later, Lukas contacted him, and was hired.

Now in her fourth year as kitchen chief, lodge loyalists have savored her tasty fare several times over: Spinach, corn and roasted garlic flan, toasted pistachio-crust Alaskan halibut, cabernet-marinated filet mignon and stuffed chicken pot pie in Marsala cream sauce are just some of her signature dishes.

A self-taught culinarian, Lukas' food rivals big-city menus, owing to her exceptional palate, and the meticulous crafting of almost everything from scratch. House-made vinaigrettes, sauces, herbed-and-spiced aioli, and painstaking beef demi-glace, mean guests and drop-in mealtime visitors are as well-fed as they are well-rested.

"To offer everything fresh and homemade is really special," says Wohlfeil. Fish is flown in fresh, he says, and all meats and fish are hand-cut in-house. Local produce is also bountiful here in

*continued on page 60*



Executive chef Amber Lukas has managed the kitchen for four years, offering guests and locals a varied menu featuring homemade recipes using fresh ingredients.

## holland lake

...continued from page 39

summer – as are tempting desserts.

As a detail in a Norman Rockwell painting, a lofty white cake sits magnified beneath a thick glass dome at the end of a vintage log bar. Nearly a foot tall, creamy

peaks are tufted with shredded coconut, and it is conspicuously devoid of a heavy wedge.

Layer cakes, cookies and homemade ice cream are all made to be gobbled daily after lunch or dinner – or with a slug of cold milk and a good book atop a lobby settee.

But cake is practically religion here.

The ephemeral timeline that marks the open and close of Holland Lake Lodge runs from mid-May to mid-October. For two months, guest traffic is light as surrounding foliage and wildlife awaken from spring to summer.

July and August bring weddings – 10 this year, and eight so far next year – along with family reunions and foreign guest lists to rival the United Nations.

In those few short months, visitors from France, Japan, Canada, England and countries beyond descend on the lake – all lucky to stumble on such a place, given the number of Montanans who have yet to see it.

When people ask Christian Wohlfeil how a man of 33 could own such a slice of perfection, he offers the short answer:

“I quickly tell them that if this place had privately owned land attached, Bill Gates or Oprah Winfrey would have already beaten me to it,” he laughs.

The long answer is that the prime real estate beneath Holland Lake Lodge is on perpetual loan,

through a special use permit. It’s all federal land. No private landholding is allowed on any stretch of shore surrounding this lake.

That’s what keeps the place so pristine.

Lucky for him, he says, since he considers this place the most stunning spot outside of Glacier National Park. And, oh yeah, \$12 million was out of his price range.

“Let’s face it, there aren’t many places you can walk out on a point, see two snow-capped mountain ranges, a stunning waterfall and virtually no development,” he says. “No other place where you can see all of that and then come inside for a gourmet dinner after.” ■■■

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