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Bigfork, Montana

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A sample of visitors to Bigfork completed a questionnaire regarding their visitation. Results show that most people are in Bigfork to vacation or for recreation and pleasure, and to participate in activities like dining, hiking, and shopping.

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Case Study Report 2020-3

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Abstract

This study was a collaborative effort between the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research and the community of Bigfork, Montana, to provide insight into the impact tourism has on rural communities in Montana. Paper surveys were completed in the community by 160 people. In addition, 15 surveys were completed online resulting in a total of 175 total completed surveys. Results show that of the visitors to the area 18% of respondents were residents of Montana (outside of Flathead County), and 62% were from out-of-state or country. Visitors spent an average of 7.22 nights away from home and 4.47 of those nights were in the town of Bigfork. Most spending in Bigfork was on rented home/cabin/room (\$57,242). Respondents to the survey reported a total spending of \$135,975 in the Bigfork area. Most respondents in Bigfork were in the area because they felt it was a charming small town, and also agreed that they visited Bigfork because it is relaxing, a scenic drive, and a vibrant small town. Results provide the Bigfork community with useful data for future planning, marketing/promotion, and understanding the visitor spending associated with visitation.

Executive Summary

Visitors to Bigfork were surveyed at the Whitewater Festival, 4th of July parade, Dragon Boat Festival, the Bigfork Village Market, and at the Bigfork Art & Cultural Center. The 15 surveys answered online were from the Marina Cay Resort, Islander Inn, and Flathead Lake Resort. Guests were given the link to the survey as they checked out. The respondents represented Montana residents (38%) and out-of-state (62%) visitors to the Bigfork area. The visitors make important economic contributions to the Bigfork area. The results of the study are worth considering for future planning within the Bigfork community.

- 96% of visitors who reside outside of Flathead County spent at least one night away from home. The mean number of nights spent in Montana was 6.64 nights; mean number of nights in Bigfork was 4.47.
- 39% of respondents who stayed in Bigfork reported renting a cabin/home or room, followed by 19% staying at the home of a friend or relative.
- More money was spent by these out-of-county visitors in rentals for cabin/homes or rooms (\$57,242), restaurant/bar (\$19,123), and retail goods & services (\$15,467) than other spending categories.
- 75% of respondents reported that they were spending for a travel group size of at least two or more people (including respondent). The average travel group size was 3.12 people (travel group spending size).
- Visitors were mostly travelling with immediate family (27%). Other group types with a high response were: couple (21%) & family and friends (17%).
- Respondents traveled with a variety of age categories in their group – the highest percentages were 55-64 years old (44%), 25-34 years old (36%), and 45-54 years old (31%). The average age was 47 years old.
- Visitors, whether on this trip or in past trips, were mostly in the area to dine (67%). Other activities with high response rates were hiking (66%) and shopping (61%).
- 35% of respondents indicated they planned to visit Bigfork 1-6 months before arriving and 22% decided to visit over 6 months before arriving.
- Visitors, whether on this trip or in past trips, were mostly in the area to visit or had visited Glacier National Park (77%). Other places that were frequently visited were a brewery/distillery (53%) and Flathead Lake State Park- Wayfarers Unit (49%).
- Overall, 88% (151 people) of visitors to Bigfork indicated that they were very likely to return to Bigfork, with the remaining 12% (20 people) of respondents indicating they were somewhat likely to return. Not a single respondent indicated that they were unlikely to return to Bigfork.

Study Implications

Current overnight visitors are mostly traveling in the area for vacation, recreation, or pleasure. In terms of activities, some are involved in dining, hiking, and shopping. In addition, visitors wrote that they liked the aesthetic beauty and charm of the town, which, along with the outdoor recreation opportunities and Bigfork's proximity to Glacier National Park, are excellent marketing topics for the area, particularly for visitors who are just passing through. If Bigfork were able to meet the demands of those visitors while maintaining their friendly, quiet, and small-town charm it might encourage these active travelers to stay a bit longer in town or visit at a more frequent

rate. It is recommended to review the respondents' comments from Appendix B to gain more insight into respondents' likes and dislikes of Bigfork.

Introduction

Bigfork, Montana, is located in south central Flathead Country, which is located in north central Montana. The position of Bigfork, with proximity to Glacier National Park, and scenic Highway 35 running through town is a popular spot for tourists. Bigfork boasts a uniquely picturesque Main Street with several blocks of locally owned businesses offering gifts, area art, and much more. Multiple restaurants, a playhouse, and various taverns round out this Northern city. Several camping/RV facilities are available, Wayfarers State Park is nearby, and there are hotels and motels so you can stay overnight less than an hour from your Glacier National Park adventure.

The purpose of this study was to provide an understanding of the characteristics of visitors to Bigfork, visitor spending in the area, and levels of satisfaction with different aspects of this community.

Methods

The Bigfork Chamber of Commerce took on the responsibility to coordinate the survey efforts with the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR). The survey instrument was designed cooperatively with Bigfork and distributed in Bigfork by this organization and volunteers. Surveys were distributed during the Whitewater Festival, 4th of July parade, Dragon Boat festival, the Bigfork Village Market and at the Bigfork Art & Cultural Center. In addition, links to the survey were provided to guests checking out from the Marina Cay Resort, Islander Inn, and Flathead Lake Resort. Surveys were dispersed from June through September of 2019. One hundred seventy-five completed surveys were obtained. No documentation of the number of refusals was recorded.

Limitations

As in all research, there are limitations to the study. Limitations for the Bigfork study included the dependence on business owners to ask visitors to complete the survey. Business owners are busy and distributing surveys is not their main focus, therefore a random sampling did not occur. In addition, ITRR personnel were not present during the data collection for quality control.

Results

Of the 175 valid responses to the residence questions, 38 percent (67 people) were from Montana and 62 percent (108 people) were from out-of-state (see Tables 1 and 2). Of all Montana respondents, 51 percent (34 people) were from Flathead County while 49 percent (32 people) were from other Montana counties. Of respondents from out-of-state, 9 percent (16 people) were from Alberta, Canada, 7 percent (13 people) were from Washington, 5 percent (9 people) were from California, and 5 percent (8 people) were from Texas (see Table 2).

Table 1: Residence of all Respondents

Place of Residence	# of total	% of total
Flathead County	34	19%
Other MT County	32	18%
Unknown MT County	1	<1%
Montana=67		
U.S. State	79	45%
Canada	23	13%
International	1	1%
Unknown non-resident	5	3%
Total all Residences	175	

Table 2: Out-of-State, Canadian, and International Residences

Place of Residence	# of total
Alberta, Canada	16
Arizona	2
British Columbia, Canada	1
California	9
Canada	4
Colorado	4
Florida	6
Hawaii	1
Idaho	4
Illinois	2
Iowa	1
Israel	1
Michigan	1
Minnesota	2
Missouri	1
Nebraska	3
Nevada	2
New Jersey	1
North Dakota	1
Ohio	4
Oregon	4
Pennsylvania	4
Saskatchewan, Canada	2
South Carolina	2
Texas	8
Utah	2
Washington	13

The mean age of respondents was 47 years old. Of those who were from outside Flathead County and responded to the survey, 133 people (96%) reported that they spent at least one night away from home. Of those nights spent away from home, the greatest percent of respondents (32%) spent ten or more nights away from home. The mean number of nights spent in Montana was 6.64 nights. The mean number of nights spent in Bigfork was 4.47 nights. A full breakdown of nights spent as well as results of all other questions in this survey can be found in Appendix A.

Expenditures

Spending information was asked of visitors who reside outside of Flathead County. They were asked to report their best estimate of the total amount of money they and their family/travel group (if applicable) spent in the Bigfork area in the following categories: accommodations, restaurant or bar, groceries or snacks, gasoline, guides or outfitters, shuttles or taxis, retail goods and services, and entertainment or recreation.

Table 3 presents the expenditure data of only the non-resident respondents (those who reside outside of Flathead County) who reported spending money in the categories. The mean expenditure of those who spent money for each category can be found along with the percentage of people who reported that they spent money in that category. The last column provides the total dollars spent by those respondents in each category. The total reported expenditure for respondents who spent was \$135,975.

Table 3: Expenditure Data: Expenditures calculated using only non-residents (those who live outside of Flathead County) who spent.

Expenditure Category	Mean expenditures of non-residents <u>who reported that they spent money in these categories</u>	% of respondents who reported spending money in each category	Total dollars spent in each category <u>by respondents who spent</u>
Rented home/cabin/room	\$1331.21 (n=43)	31%	\$57,242.00
Restaurant/bar	\$159.36 (n=120)	86%	\$19,123.00
Retail goods & services	\$198.30 (n=78)	56%	\$15,467.00
Groceries/snacks	\$146.80 (n=94)	67%	\$13,799.00
Gas	\$122.18 (n=81)	58%	\$9,897.00
Entertainment/recreation	\$175.91 (n=49)	35%	\$8,619.00
Hotel/motel/b&b/rental	\$427.75 (n=12)	9%	\$5,133.00
Campground	\$127.80 (n=25)	18%	\$3,195.00
Guide/Outfitter	\$343.75 (n=8)	6%	\$2,750.00
Shuttle/Taxi	\$750 (n=1)	<1%	\$750.00
TOTAL			\$135,975.00

Appendix A- Results

Q1. Are you a resident of Montana? n=175

38% Yes 62% No (skip to Q3.)

Q2. Do you reside in Flathead County? n=66

51% Yes (Skip to Q12. on back) 49% No (Skip to Q4.)

Q3. In what state, province, or foreign country do you reside?

See Tables 1 and 2.

Q4. Is this your first time visiting Bigfork? n=135

50% Yes 50% No

Q5. What reasons are you visiting the Bigfork area? (Check all that apply.) n=138

85% Vacation/recreation/pleasure 5% Just passing through 6% Business/convention/meeting

28% Visiting friends/relatives 3% Shopping

Q6. For this trip, how many nights will you spend away from home? n=139, mean=7.22

4% 0 (Skip to Q.10)	2% 1	11% 3	9% 5	8% 7	3% 9
	10% 2	9% 4	4% 6	7% 8	32% 10 or more

Q7. How many of those nights are in Montana? n=135, mean=6.64

0% 0	10% 2	16% 4	7% 6	4% 8	21% 10 or more
3% 1	15% 3	13% 5	7% 7	4% 9	

Q8. Of your nights in Montana, how many will you stay in Bigfork on this trip? n=135, mean=4.47

27% 0 (Go to Q.10)	5% 1	13% 3	11% 5	5% 7	1% 9
	12% 2	10% 4	4% 6	2% 8	10% 10 or more

Q9. While in Bigfork in which types of accommodation(s) did you stay ON THIS TRIP? (Check all that apply.) n=99

13% Hotel/motel/B&B	13% Private campground	4% Resort/condominium
39% Rental cabin/home	19% Home of friend/relative	1% Guest ranch
15% Public land camping	2% Second home/cabin/condo	2% Vehicle in parking lot

Q10. Please enter your best estimate of the TOTAL amount of money in US dollars you (and your family/travel group, if applicable) spent/will spend in Bigfork on THIS TRIP. If you did not spend money in a category, please leave it blank. (See Table 3 for expenditures)

ACCOMMODATIONS in Bigfork

Hotel/motel/bed & breakfast

\$

Campground

\$

Rented home/cabin or room

\$

FOOD in Bigfork

Restaurant/bar

\$

Groceries/snacks

\$

TRANSPORTATION in Bigfork

Gasoline/diesel

\$

Shuttle/taxi

\$

RETAIL/SERVICES in Bigfork

Retail goods/services

\$

Entertainment/recreation

\$

Guide/outfitting trip

\$

Q11. How many people does the above spending represent (including yourself, i.e., your travel group/family size)? n=139; mean=3.12

25% 1	10% 3	5% 5	3% 7	1% 9	4% more than 10
33% 2	12% 4	8% 6	1% 8	0% 10	

Q12. What option best describes your travel group? n=173

12% Self	27% Immediate family	17% Family/friends	1% Business associates
21% Couple	6% Extended family	8% Friends	8% Organized group/club

Q13. Please select all the ages represented in your group: n=173 for each age category

12% 0-5 yrs.	16% 11-17 yrs.	36% 25-34 yrs.	31% 45-54 yrs.	20% 65-74 yrs.
8% 6-10 yrs.	25% 18-24 yrs.	23% 35-44 yrs.	44% 55-64 yrs.	6% 75 and over

Q14. How long before this trip did you make plans to spend time in Bigfork? n=162

15% The day I arrived	14% 1-4 weeks before arriving	22% Over 6 months before arriving
14% 1-7 days before arriving	35% 1-6 months before arriving	

Q15. Please select the option that best corresponds with your level of agreement with each statement below.

I visit Bigfork because it has or is....	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Total respondents
A charming small town	1%	2%	12%	20%	66%	4.46	n=148
Relaxing	3%	3%	10%	26%	57%	4.32	n=148
A scenic drive	5%	2%	9%	28%	57%	4.30	n=142
A vibrant small town	2%	4%	17%	18%	59%	4.29	n=137
Close to attractions I'm visiting	6%	4%	9%	23%	59%	4.27	n=142
Outdoor Recreation	6%	1%	13%	22%	58%	4.25	n=151
Quiet	4%	8%	21%	29%	38%	3.90	n=136
Close of public lands	7%	6%	20%	29%	39%	3.87	n=135
Less crowded	6%	5%	32%	23%	35%	3.76	n=133
On my route	17%	8%	14%	21%	40%	3.60	n=132
Special Places to eat	12%	13%	32%	25%	19%	3.25	n=130
Shopping	16%	17%	33%	14%	20%	3.06	n=134
Where family/friends live	36%	5%	13%	14%	32%	3.01	n=133

Q16. On this trip as well as past visits, what places have you visited in the Bigfork area (check all that apply). n=162

33% Bigfork Nature Trail 25% Jewel Basin 53% Brewery/distillery
 36% Woods Bay 43% Art Gallery 49% Flathead Lake State Parks – Wayfarers Unit
 77% Glacier National Park 31% Bigfork Summer Playhouse

Q17. On this as well as past trips, what activities have you participated in during your visit to the Bigfork area (check all that apply). n=162

39% Camping 6% Horseback riding 3% Motorcycle touring 12% Golfing
 66% Hiking 3% Floating 37% Wildlife watching 61% Shopping
 27% Fishing 7% Hunting 16% Bird watching 4% OHV/ATV riding
 15% Bicycle touring 67% Dining 19% Mountain biking
 6% Guided Trip 56% Boating, Kayaking, SUP, rafting

Q18. What is your age? n=171; Range=18-82, mean=46.86

Q19. What is your gender? n=171

42% Male 58% Female

Q20. How likely are you to visit Bigfork again? n=171

88% Very likely 12% Somewhat likely 0% Unlikely

Q21. Please tell us what you liked about Bigfork.

See Appendix B

Q22. Please tell us what you did not like about Bigfork.

See Appendix B

Appendix B: Open-ended Responses

Q21. Please tell us what you liked about Bigfork.

A great small town. Relaxing and close to many different activities.
A lot of activity for a small, unique community
Access to Flathead Lake, charming town, close to Glacier NP.
All
All
All of the above
All, cute little town on the lake
Atmosphere
Atmosphere, attitude, location close to outdoor recreation
Atmosphere, great market. Arts festival coming up.
Beautiful and cute main town.
Beautiful lake, quaint town
Beautiful local campsite!
Beautiful scenery
Beautiful scenery, very friendly people!!
Beautiful small town :)
Beautiful, nice people, quiet
Beautiful, quaint, shopping
Beauty!
Being so close to the lakes, forest, the sky.
Calm cove
Car show
Charming town
Charming town!
Charming, lots to do
Class
Close to Flathead Lake, Glacier, and Whitefish
Close to Glacier
Cool small town outdoors
Cute downtown and beautiful scenery
Cute little town. Lively for its size
Dining, camping, swimming, plays, shopping, visitors center
Dope place, good folks, better beer
Doreen!
Dragon boat festival
Dragon Boat Races
Dragon boats!
Electric Ave. Especially the Kitchen Store
Everything
Everything
Everything

Everything
Everything
Everything (people)
Everything :)
Everything- view, small, friendly locals
Everything! The people, activities, weather, we love Wayfarers park as we can walk into Bigfork! It has everything a city has plus more!
Flathead Lake
Flathead Lake, Glacier, Wayfarers campground
Flowers, Yoga studio
Food, art, lake
Friendly town- many accommodating locals
Friendly, beautiful town and setting
Friendly, great weather, playhouse
Friendly, relaxing and nature always calling. And the visitors information is so informative and staff so friendly.
Friends!
Fun atmosphere, galleries
Fun events!
Good community, easy access
Gorgeous views, incredible weather and amazing friendly people
Great event and volunteers and organizers
Great Flathead location
Great shopping and small town life.
Great small town with a lot of recreational and cultural events going on.
Great town w/ great energy and sweet people
Great whitewater festival!
Have a home here. Live in WA
How homey it is
I grew up here! :)
I like EVERYTHING!
I really like the whitewater festival. It is the most fun weekend of the year!
Incredibly, friendly people, shopping and dining
It is perfectly nestled in the mountains-- the wonderful, darling people that I found
It's a beautiful part of the world! The weather, the people, the scenery!
It's a really cute town and the lake is nice and the whole are is beautiful.
It's beautiful
It's beautiful, and always welcoming. Beautiful fine art.
It's by the LAKE!
It's cute and has lots of cute little shops
It's magic-- love
It's small and welcoming. The community is fantastic and the outdoor recreation is stunning.
Just arrived
Just arrived but so far seems like a cute town with lots of things to do.
Just like it. Artist com.
Love the charm, shops, lake, and river

Love the local community
Love the small town, parade, art, restaurants, lake, location to Glacier, Whitefish, Missoula.
Love the walkability. Love the trail. Love the bars/restaurants
Mostly everything
My family lives here, but I love to play on the lake and rivers. Flathead Lake Brewing = Awesome.
Nice town
Nice vibe. Friendly folks.
Nice, vibrant outdoor town
Outdoor activities
Outdoors, scenic, friendly
Peace and quiet
Perfect small American town
Play house was excellent! Airbnb was quiet
Quaint town, good people
Quaint town. Quiet, Monday night village market
Quaint, cute
Quaint, friendly, closer to lake. Scenery is beautiful!
River, nature
Safe. Friendly. Fun. Beautiful. Love the nature. Wide variety of people. Huckleberries. Theater. Kick back and relax area
Scenery-- mt and lake
Scenery, wildlife, friends and family
Scenic and recreational area
Scenic drive on the lake, vibrant downtown with good business mix.
Scenic, hospitable
Small downtown - Lots of character. Market Monday - Food trucks/live band/artisans/friendly people
Small town
Small town with a lively main street
Small town, lake, playhouse
Small, beautiful, friendly
Small, friendly, state
Small, friendly, village market
Some nice galleries and food
Super cute little town
The AirBnB we stayed "The Patriot" is what makes us want to come back. The owners were amazing in keeping the place clean and close to everything
The ambiance, proximity to the lake, proximity to various activities, close to Kalispell for shopping, art galleries
The area was very scenic and our AirBNB was in walking distance of all sorts of food, nature walks, etc.
The Chamber president
The Dragon Boats!
The festival-- I was told about it in Polson so turned around and came back.
The friendly people, the lake
The historic part is charming. People we talked to are very nice. We happened to be at the food market and enjoyed the atmosphere and entertainment very much.

The lake, the town is beautiful
The scenery
The special events
The town was small and quiet. The area we stayed in had coffee and a few restaurants close by.
Town nice
Very cute town
Very cute, good shops
Very quaint and we participated in Dragon Boat
Very vibrant, proximity to nature
Vibe
Visiting family, scenery
Water - Outdoor - Charm - Slow pace
Water life Brew house Shops
We are looking to relocate
We enjoyed the parade on the 4th, the playhouse. Especially enjoyed our time at Wayfarers!
We like the charm of this little town. It's close to relatives in Kalispell and only a short drive away from Glacier National Park and Whitefish. Being righ
We live across the lake but we love our sister Bigfork!
We love everything about Bigfork! Just bought land here!
Weather, scenic, lakes
Well maintained, lots of shops/restaurants, family friendly

Q22. Please tell us what you did not like about Bigfork.

A little too touristy
All good, very nice
All good.
Almost drowning
Bars are too far away from each other
Better directions posted?
Bigfork is great - if there was one thing I'd like to see it'd be more dining options.
Can't visit often enough!
Closed too early
Coffee shops close Sunday...
Crowded
Crowded area for dragon boats
Crowds, no parking
Everything is great.
Everything was wonderful
Expensive food
Food selection and too far from Glacier
Gets a bit congested in summer and many downtown businesses were closed when we were there.
Getting too crowded
Grocery stores didn't have many options for goods.
Grow more land

Hard to find breakfast during the car show. Would like to see more places open serving breakfast.
Higher gas price?
I didn't know it's a cool place because I had just passed through on the highway
I love Bigfork
I wish it was easier for MT residents to camp at our state campgrounds. Maybe give MT residents 1st chance at reservations or something...
It is getting too exclusive
It is too far from Loveland!
It was a bit expensive coming from Canada.
It was quite the trek to get to Glacier National Park which was our main reason for staying in Montana.
It's been a great trip. Thank you!
It's pretty great. Outdoor/live music would be great
Just a comment! We have been coming for years and this was the first time we visited the Visitor Center, it would be great/better if you had a more visible sign/flag. We went there for the first time and had great service! Thank you!
Limited parking
Limiting to children
Loud music at the bar near campground
Love it all!
Love it too much
Maybe need more traffic lights
Miss the Tea room.
More dining options
More dining options. Very "touristy" Too many art galleries
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
N/A
Needs better restaurants.
No bike shop
No complaints so far.
No crosswalk across highway.
No prices on many crafts
No signage to/for whitewater festival
None
None
Not a really bike/walk friendly town
Not enough parking
Not enough Special Event parking
Not many shops
Not sure yet/ Liquor store

Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing
Nothing :)
Nothing I don't like yet.
Nothing liked it all
Nothing so far
Nothing yet
Nothing!
Nothing!
Nothing, it is fantastic!
Nothing, yet.
Parking
Parking
Parking
Parking can be difficult
Parking downtown
Please don't become a Bozeman of the North
Sometimes little too hard partying
Still have somewhat limited dining options
The rain!
The shops close early
The venue is too small for the Dragonboat Festival. Very cramped pretty disorganized. Maybe will be better next year
The weather at times.
Too busy
Traffic
We didn't have any dislikes on our visit.
What's not to like???
Wish there was a Nude beach

