



Illustration: PIET GROBLER

# Up close ... and into Chico

Between the bison, the lesbians and the beer, the big side of Montana has many surprises

**W**e were in America, on an open road, entering Big Sky Country, Montana. And we were on the hunt for hot springs. The sign ahead said left to Emigrant, right to Pray.

Hours before, we had escaped Yellowstone National Park after being warned that its ancient volcanic geothermal features were out of bounds for recreational purposes.

Yellowstone was like the convenience park of parks. Wildlife's Wal-Mart.

Even the animals seemed aware of their part in the game; bison and elk were so prevalent you would have thought they were employees working overtime.

Although Yellowstone was unparalleled in its scenic majesty, sharing this view with hundreds of tourists at the same time was like being in a mall. So we asked a park ranger who had metre-long blonde hair and skin so parched it looked like it had eroded, as to the whereabouts of the nearest user-friendly hot pools.

She told us about a "historically romantic" hot springs lodge, named "Chico" after a short Mexican man who belonged to a mining crew that settled there in the late 1800s to ward off Indians.

So after seven days of cross-country driving, my boyfriend and I left Yellowstone, crossing from Wyoming into Montana, until we came to Pray and headed to Chico in Paradise Valley. We checked in and were awarded white

## ACCIDENTAL TOURIST



Shani Raviv

towels by a man named Kodiak, who had eyes so blue they looked chlorinated and whose thin hair was plastered across the top of his head like a grey rainbow.

The sign behind Kodiak said "Stop Whining", which we did now that we were guests lapping up luxury at a renowned resort. A blackboard on the wall listed Chico's live music line-up at the saloon. Too bad we were too late for Too Slim and the Taildraggers, but too early for Dirty Shame. But we weren't at Chico to patronise their saloon, ride horses, do cross-country skiing or even go on dogsled adventures. We were there to soak.

On arrival Chico's 40°C outdoor hot pool was gleaming with large lesbians with small tattoos drinking bottles of beer. Skinny old men with dark sunglasses were lazing on luminous pink lilos.

Teenage boys in baggy shorts were jumping on floating foam noodles. A photographer was shooting a bride and groom at the deep end. The bride wore cowboy boots underneath her meringue dress and held onto her bouquet tighter than she held onto her groom.

Later the hot pool turned into a steamy fest, attracting characters as greasy as the saloon's barbecue pork-ribs special for \$13.95. Three men with goatees drinking Bud Light in cans were cavorting in the shallow end. The one kept screaming: "In the name of baby Jesus", before disappearing underwater and then re-appearing in some woman's cleavage.

Two raunchy couples making waves in the deep end were swinging. From far it looked like the brunette was suckling the blonde. And somewhere in the middle, three pale ladies sipping martinis through thin straws were accidental spectators of this B-grade porn and amateur wrestling.

Meanwhile, my boyfriend was trying to be inconspicuous by hiding behind a deck chair to cook a can of soup on the gas stove, and I was in the pool aimlessly floating on noodles. At midnight the pool attendant buttoned up his uniform and chased us all out because 100 000 gallons of water needed to be drained and refilled before morning.

The following day we got back on the open road and headed across Big Sky Country, drifters once more, but ones that had been drained and refilled by morning.