



Gem State Treasures

Discovering Idaho's
new recreation options

By Laura Stavoe

THE BRUNEAU RIVER sometimes glides, sometimes rushes, past the craggy basalt and rhyolite cliffs of Bruneau Canyon, which are around 1,000 feet tall in places—nearly twice as tall as the Washington Monument. Juniper trees dot the riverbanks; cliff swallows dart from the shadows into sunlight; and everywhere there is the scent of sage and the sound of water.

Less than a mile in, and I'm already spellbound. "On a lot of rivers, there's a gorgeous canyon on one section, maybe day four or five ..." I say to Jon Barker, owner of Barker River Expeditions, who is rowing our river raft. He finishes my thought for me, "Here you reach it on day 10 minutes."

And that gorgeousness never seems to end. During our expedition's four-day, 40-mile trip, the narrow desert canyon is always spectacular. The canyon walls look like they're made of pressed-together red-rock pillars—they evoke the folds of an accordion. But they're also filled with caves and crannies, ledges and knobs; they're decorated with yellow, pink and ivory wildflowers; and they're



splashed with the white-water froth of turquoise waves, making the canyon a dramatic work of art. It's hard to believe I'm only 60 miles southeast of Boise.

The scenery is not the only thing that takes my breath away. The technical rapids that interrupt serenely flowing stretches of river require the guidance of an expert rower such as Jon. In fact, Bruneau Canyon has one of the most notable stretches of Class IV white-water in Idaho: Five Mile Rapids, known for features such as boulders and narrow passages.

Jon, whose father runs a river-outfitting business in Central Idaho, first fell in love with this area as a boy, so when he grew up, he decided to operate trips on several rivers that run through it: the Owyhee, the Jarbidge and the Bruneau. Last March, Congress and President Obama confirmed Jon's appreciation for this region by designating 517,000 acres as protected wilderness and designating 316 miles of its rivers—including the stretch of the Bruneau that our expedition is running—as Wild and Scenic. The act divided the 517,000 acres into six

wilderness areas, one of which is the 90,000-acre Bruneau-Jarbidge Rivers Wilderness I'm exploring.

I've heard people call Bruneau Canyon "Idaho's Grand." Having floated through both canyons, I agree there is much to compare: thrilling white-water, bighorn-sheep sightings, starry desert nights and great hiking opportunities—to see blankets of lupine and caves 20 yards deep in the case of Bruneau Canyon. But while the Grand Canyon is, well, grand, Bruneau is intimate in its beauty—something equally appealing.

After 18 years of living in Idaho, it took an act of Congress for me to notice this piece of recreational gold in my own backyard. In part, this is because there are so many superb recreational experiences in Idaho: famous lakes such as Coeur d'Alene, Pend Oreille and Priest in Northern Idaho; a scenic river-side trail in Boise; blue-ribbon trout streams such as the Henry's Fork of the Snake River in Eastern Idaho; ski slopes in the central mountains; award-winning golf courses throughout the state; and hik-

ing, mountain-biking, horseback-riding and bird-watching opportunities almost everywhere. But my discovery of the newly designated wilderness makes me realize that Idaho has many new visitor options worth exploring, including a new Nordic-skiing trail-pass system, "voluntourism" activities, scenic drives, culinary experiences, and a historic lodge that's been revitalized and is better than ever.

Most people know about the Ketchum-Sun Valley area's exceptional alpine skiing. Sun Valley made history in 1936 when it became the first destination ski resort in the nation. But fewer are aware of the Sun Valley region's status as one of the top three Nordic ski destinations in the nation, based on kilometers of trails, along with the Methow Valley in north-central Washington and Lake Tahoe near Reno.

A new three-day trail-pass system—created last winter as a cooperative venture between the Blaine County Recreation District and Sun Valley Resort—gives me access to nearly 200 kilometers of groomed trails for only \$40.

I begin my exploration 25 miles north of Sun Valley at historic Galena Lodge in the Sawtooth National Recreation Area. The Galena Lodge resort is also home to a restaurant and ski-in yurts that can be booked for overnight stays (with meals delivered to your door via snowcat), and is a gateway to 50 kilometers of trails featuring breathtaking views of the Boulder Mountains. The trails are part of the 115 kilometers of trails in the North Valley Trails system.

I join six people who've traveled here from across the country, and we ski the 7.3-kilometer Gladiator to Horse Creek route. I find myself snowplowing my way down narrow tunnels formed by towering pines, reminded that Nordic skiing in the mountains doesn't mean flat, boring trails.

For day two of my pass, I explore some of the 40 kilometers of impeccably groomed trails at Sun Valley Resort. Normally I'm a classic-cross-country-skis kind of girl, but today I sign up for a lesson in skate-skiing, which uses shorter, lighter, faster skis, and my teacher turns out to be 2002 Olympian and former World Cup Nordic racer Tessa Westbrook. I'm rusty, but she's enthusiastic and patient, and soon I can move along the beginner stretch near the lodge.

Afterward, I eat lunch in the resort's new Nordic ski center, the Sun Valley Club, a 58,756-square-foot facility that opened this past winter and lives up to the resort's reputation for magnificent day lodges. Everything about the lodge is epic: the nearly floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the snowy trails and slopes, the three-story-tall stone fireplace, the wrap-around deck with heated pavers.

During the summer months, the Sun Valley Club serves as the golf clubhouse—it even has an indoor driving range. Also new at the resort is the White Clouds Golf Course, nine holes created on a mountain ridge that offers stunning views during a challenging round of golf. The first nine opened last year, and the final nine is expected

In addition to being famous for downhill skiing, the Sun Valley region is one of the country's top three Nordic destinations.

to be completed in about four years.

I don't have quite enough time to ski the public 30K Wood River Trail Nordic route between Ketchum–Sun Valley and the Hailey area south of here, but I head to Hailey on day three to ski the Quigley Winter Park trail system, which opened last winter. Quigley is all about family and community fun. I see cross-country skiers pulling into the parking area with kids, toboggans, dogs and picnic lunches. Quigley offers 13K of Nordic trails, plus snowshoeing trails, a small toboggan hill, a fire ring, and a spacious, lodgelike warming yurt with free hot cocoa and loaner sleds. Kids under 12 ski free.

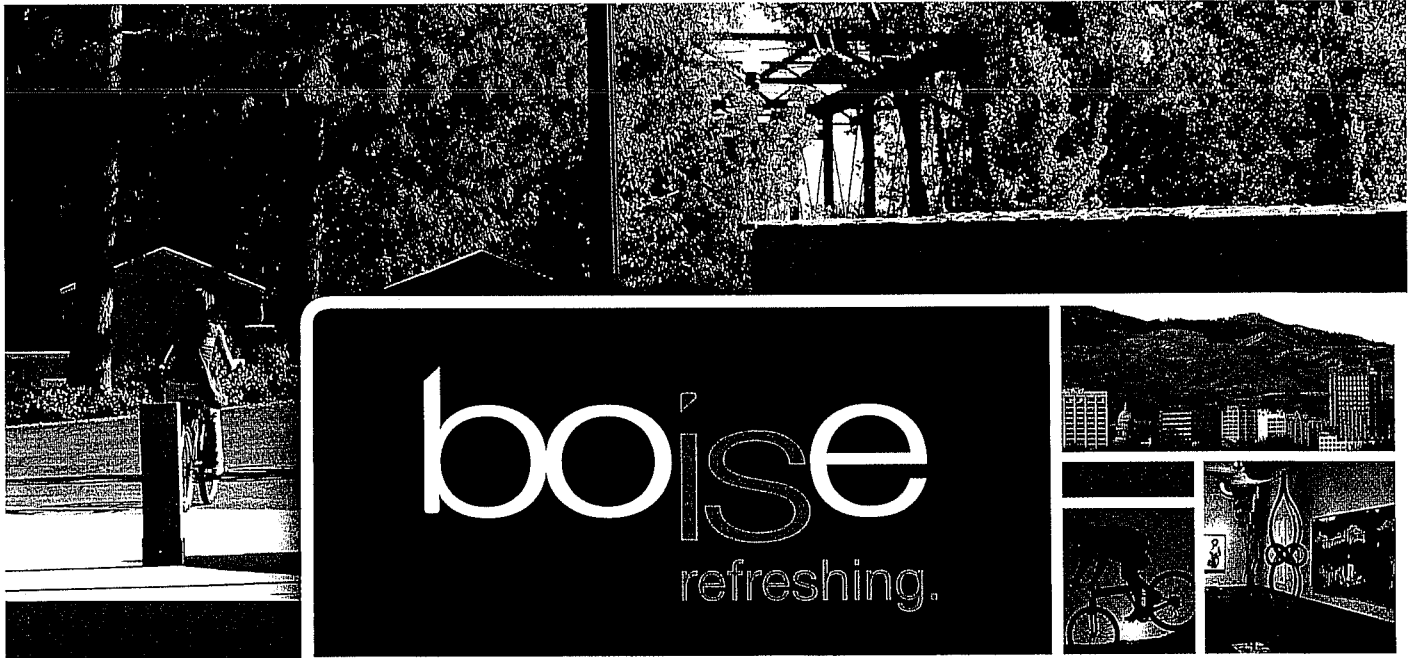
By the end of my stay, it's clear to me that the Sun Valley area deserves its status as a top Nordic ski destination, not only for its many kilometers of trails, but also for the many first-rate experiences those trails offer.

Sometimes what is new has to do with the way we travel. Volunteer vacationing is a growing trend nationally, and in January, Idaho Tourism launched a Web portal to make it easy for visitors to match their interests with great service opportunities across the state. I click on the Volun-tourism link at www.visitidaho.org to see a list of opportunities: work an aid station at the Ford Ironman Coeur d'Alene; clear brush on the Lolo Trail, the trail traveled by Lewis and Clark over the Bitterroot Mountains; help build sets and make costumes

for Garden Valley's Starlight Mountain Theater, about 50 miles north of Boise.

A link for the Nez Perce National Historical Park, which consists of 38 sites across the traditional homeland of the tribe in Idaho, Oregon, Washington and Montana, particularly intrigues me. I've long wanted to learn more about the park, which has 27 sites in Idaho. Some sites, such as the White Bird Battlefield, where the first battle of the Nez Perce War was fought, mark historic events. Others, such as the Camas Prairie that once bloomed with purple lilies whose bulbs were a major food source, offer insight into Nez Perce culture. Still others protect land features that play important roles in Nez Perce stories, such as the riverbank where Ant and Yellow Jacket argued over who had the right to fish for salmon. When they wouldn't stop fighting, Coyote turned them into a stone arch still visible today.

There are many ways for people to volunteer at the park. For instance, a retired teacher from Chicago teaches summer workshops about the connection of the Nez Perce to Lewis and Clark. I sign up to work for a day at the park's visitor center in Spalding, about 10 miles east of Lewiston. Alyse Cadez, education and volunteer coordinator at the center, assures me that while I might not be doing glamorous work, it will be helpful. She shows me a 20-minute video presenting some of the history of the Nez Perce and then takes me on a tour of the exhibits inside the museum.



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I learn that volunteering has its perks, including the equivalent of a “backstage pass.” I get to meet archivist Robert Applegate, who tells me which book about Nez Perce history he likes best for the lay reader: Alvin M. Josephy Jr.’s *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest* because of its thoroughness and because Josephy had the blessing of the Nez Perce. Then curator Bob Chenoweth takes me to the collection room, where he opens metal drawers filled with thousands of Nez Perce items—jewelry, clothing, baskets—not on public display.

When I begin my first assigned task—counting new books that have arrived at the center and need to be priced and placed in the gift shop—I ask Alyse what misconceptions people bring to the center.

“They think of Chief Joseph as a big war leader,” she says. “Actually, he was more like a commander-in-chief. Other chiefs made the day-to-day decisions about the troops. When he was in Indian Territory, he spoke to reporters at every opportunity, to get the information out about the plight of the Nez Perce and their desire to return to their homeland.”

After lunch the sun has come out, and I get a new role as wayside washerwoman. I’m entrusted with a pail of water and a backpack containing sponges, rags and a bottle of car polish. “Wayside” is another term for interpretive sign, and this job gives me the opportunity to explore much of the park. As I clean, polish and *read* the signs, I become aware of how much history can be envisioned by looking at the



COURTESY: NEZ PERCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

surrounding undeveloped hills and at the Clearwater River, which once carried throngs of salmon. For instance, a sign at a picnic area near the river tells how the Nez Perce used canoes to travel and fish on the river.

Road signs also play a role in another Idaho adventure, a scenic drive. When Bob Everhart, executive director of the Idaho Falls Convention and Visitors Bureau, lets me know that

“Voluntourism” provides opportunities to see and support natural attractions such as the Clearwater River in the Nez Perce National Historical Park.

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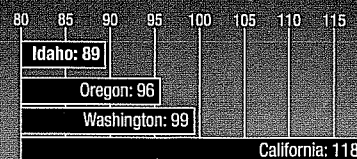
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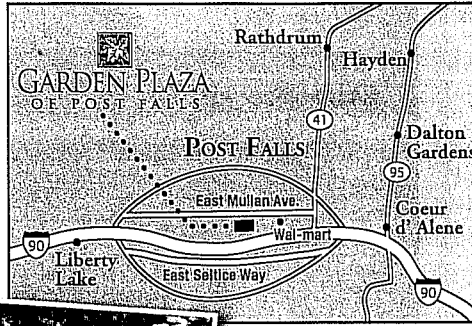
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one of the “Top 10 Scenic Drives in the Northern Rockies” is in Eastern Idaho, I’m not surprised. This region is one of the most beautiful in the country. A Website describing the Top 10, www.drivethetop10.com, is scheduled to launch this month as a cooperative effort by Idaho Tourism, the Idaho Department of Transportation and various Northern Rockies destinations. While perusing a preview version of the site, I learn that one of my favorite road trips has made the list: the Yellowstone–Grand Teton National Parks Grand Loop, which features the “quiet side” of Yellowstone and the Grand Teton range in Idaho before heading into Montana and Wyoming.

A few years ago, I took my twin sons, Gabe and Dylan, then age 11, on a four-day road trip along part of the 150-mile Idaho section. We connected with the route from Idaho Falls by driving east on Highway 26 and then driving north on Highways 31, 33, 32, 47 and 20, respectively. Highway 47, also a National Forest Scenic Byway, parallels the Henry’s Fork of the Snake, runs through rolling farmland and provides access to spectacular 85-foot Lower Mesa Falls and 110-foot Upper Mesa Falls.

Near the town of Island Park, on Highway 20, we drove along the rim of an ancient caldera and saw the same geology that created Yellowstone’s amazing natural features. Also stunning were views of the 13,000-plus-foot Tetons.

One of the boys’ favorite places was the Teton Aviation Center in Driggs, Idaho, on Highway 33, part of the National Forest Teton Scenic Byway. We toured planes built in the ‘40s and ‘50s, and then ate a bacon-and-eggs breakfast at the center’s cafe while watching small modern aircraft take off on the airstrip outside.

When the eat-local movement became the “new thing” a few years ago, Idaho had a head start. Small-plot family farms have been a way of life in Idaho for decades, including in the Northern Idaho panhandle. For instance, in Sandpoint, 2.5-acre Greentree Naturals, owned by Diane Green and her husband, Thom Sadoski, has been a certified-organic farm since 1992. Diane and Thom focus on growing specialty produce, including 37 types of salad greens, more than 60 culinary herbs, and a variety of squash, berries, garlic and flowers.

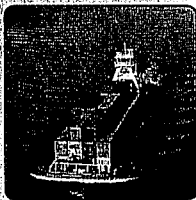
The couple have turned the farm into an educational resource for those who want to learn the practices of sustainable, organic farming, and they offer tours spring to fall, weather permitting. Visitors can also

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Many of Northern Idaho's fine-dining restaurants are also committed to spotlighting local ingredients. For instance, five-star Beverly's, located on the seventh floor of The Coeur d'Alene Golf and Spa Resort, overlooking the glistening blue water of Coeur d'Alene's namesake lake, specializes in Northwest cuisine, including meat from local ranches and produce from Idaho farms. A \$1.3 million renovation of the restaurant in 2005 resulted in a space that not only offers panoramic views of the lake but also a wine cellar showcasing a 30,000-plus-bottle collection. When family

members visited in 2008, my husband, John, and I made a reservation for just before sunset, and our group watched the sky and the water turn from blue to pink to purple while dining on tender Kobe beef from Idaho's Snake River Farms. By the time we shared huckleberry soufflé and chocolate molten cake, the water was reflecting the glittering lights of buildings surrounding the lake.

Idaho's Ketchum-Sun Valley area also is known for the quality of its cuisine, and the area's Food and Wine Festival is a celebration of culinary Idaho that attracts chefs and foodies from around the world. Dates for the 2010 festival are being determined.

In Southwestern Idaho, wine has been making headlines since the Snake River Valley became an American Viticultural Area in 2007. Most of the AVA is in Idaho and encompasses 22 wineries and 30 vineyards. Idaho wines have won notable awards and are served at restaurants throughout the state.

The resort town of McCall, about 100 miles north of Boise, is proving that sometimes old is the best new. When my sister and her family visited from Chicago this summer, I gave Army, her husband, Greg, and their two boys a tour of McCall because I was eager to see the new "old Shore Lodge." First opened in 1948, and built on the south end of Payette Lake, Shore Lodge has long been a favorite destination for Idaho families. The lodge closed in 1999 for remodeling and then reopened in 2002 as part of the exclusive Whitetail Club. Non-members could still stay there, but prices were steep, and many previous visitors felt the lodge had lost a lot of the comfortable atmosphere of earlier days. In August 2008, Idaho natives Joe Scott and Rich Hormaechea bought the club—including the lodge, the top-rated golf course and the residential development—and promised to return the lodge to the public resort we all knew and loved, including winter



COURTESY: SHORE LODGE

family-friendly room rates this year that start at \$99.

As soon as my nephews, Sam, 9, and Charlie, 8, got a glimpse of the lake through the picture windows in the lobby, I realized just how family-friendly Shore Lodge truly was. It was instantly apparent that their favorite Idaho attraction was the 25-foot-diameter inflated trampoline floating in Payette Lake in front of the lodge. We went for a swim.

My second realization was that Shore Lodge wasn't like it used to be 20 years ago when I first stayed here. It's better. There's new beachside dining, a remodeled pool area, more extensive spa services and guestroom balconies that offer views of Payette Lake and the Salmon River Mountains across the lake. I made a note to visit again in winter when the lodge offers special family ski/stay packages, including lift tickets, to beautiful, uncrowded Brundage Mountain, which has great powder runs through trees.

Under its new ownership, Shore Lodge is once again a favorite recreation destination.

As demonstrated by Shore Lodge, what's new in Idaho capitalizes on existing strengths that have made the state one of the most popular tourism destinations in the nation: spectacular scenery, miles of whitewater, millions of acres of wilderness lands, interesting Native American/Lewis-and-Clark history, and delicious local agricultural products.

A lakeside lodge reborn, wine-tasting and farm tours, a Nez Perce historical site, Nordic trails, and a Wild and Scenic River running through a desert canyon—all offer true Idaho experiences. ■

Writer Laura Stavoe lives in Boise.

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