Northwest Travel: Sawtooth Range

On the edge of the wilderness in remote central Idaho

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Stanley, ID -- My horse's name was Juan. He was a Spanish mustang who knew his way around the sides of mountains — in this case, Idaho's spectacular Sawtooth Range.

Juan and I were cautiously working our way up a 3½-mile trail to a rocky summit overlooking the upper Salmon River valley. We followed Pioneer Outfitters wrangler Nikki Wahl and photographer Barb Gonzalez through wildflower-rich meadows that framed Gold Creek. We ascended a trail lined with gangly aspens and larches to a rounded peak with panoramic views across one of North America's most remarkable mountain groups.

Surrounded by the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, the entire span of the Sawtooths spread before us. Forty-two peaks exceed 10,000 feet in elevation, climaxed by 11,635-foot Williams Peak. Nestled among these lofty mountains, I was told, are hundreds of alpine lakes, varying in size from 4½-mile-long Redfish Lake to tarns I could probably skip a rock across.

The Salmon River — the longest undammed stream in the lower 48 states — rose near Galena Pass only about 35 miles south of my perch. It would meander to the northeast then turn sharply west, through the foreboding Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, before joining the Snake River some 400 miles later in lower Hells Canyon.

Just two days before, in the last half-hour of our drive from Central Oregon to the Sawtooths, we had taken an arcing route around a major forest fire that erupted near Valley Creek, northwest of the regional hub of Stanley. A week later, it had grown to 23,000 acres and was far from contained. Luckily for us, winds pushed the fire north, away from the Sawtooths.

Although some haze settled on tiny Stanley, the main peaks of this western Rockies sub-range were free of smoke. According to the U.S. Forest Service, the Sawtooths have the purest air in the continental United States. Anything but a crystal-clear day would have been completely out of character.

As my gaze settled beneath the mountains on the Salmon River, shallow and meandering in its infancy, I picked out the corral from which Juan and I had begun this trek. Nearby, I spotted a hot-springs pool where I had soaked beneath the full moon a night earlier. To the

east of Idaho state Highway 75, I could easily see the buildings of the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch, the rustic luxury lodge that we were calling home for two nights.

Ranch life

The Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch began welcoming guests in 1930. Back then, it was a “club," an invitation-only oasis for elite Eastern urbanites who paid top dollar to spend a week or two hunting big game in the Wild West.

After it was purchased by cattle ranchers Ed and Ruth Bogert in 1951, the 878-acre ranch exited the lodging business for a generation. But the Bogerts' daughter, Rozalys Bogert Smith, returned it to the guest-ranch concept in 1976. Under new ownership since 2005, it remains a luxury guest ranch today.

“We like to provide a complete Western experience," said lodge manager Sandra Beckwith, who has been at the ranch since 1994. “It's not just log cabins and horses. We offer fine food, hiking, biking, fishing, and exposure to the incredible richness of Western culture."

The fine food includes gourmet dinners (wild sockeye salmon, veal steak) and breakfasts (huevos rancheros, Grand Marnier French toast) offered daily, as well as hearty packed-lunch sandwiches to carry guests through the middle of the day. The culture included live music four times a week, regular literary readings and natural-history presentations.

“Another piece of Western culture is independence and freedom," Beckwith said. “We don't want people tethered to the ranch. We encourage people to choose their own activities, and we present options to encourage them in this regard."

At first glance, a base rate of $375 per night appears to be an expensive investment for two people. But the price of $188.50 per person included three full meals that may have cost an extra $60 per person if the price were broken out. Figure in a guided trail ride, free mountain-bike rentals and other extras, including a natural hot-springs pool big enough for swimming laps, and suddenly that tab doesn't seem out of hand.

A renovation of the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch was spearheaded a few years ago by co-owner Courtney Kapp, a Philadelphia architect. The makeover included a historically sensitive upgrade of facilities in all four lodge rooms and a dozen original cabins, with two new cottages indistinguishable from their predecessors.

In all, the ranch — which is especially popular with families, including three-generational groups — accommodates 50 guests at a time. There's no cellphone service here in the Sawtooth valley, but the ranch lodge has a Wi-Fi connection.

Redfish Lake

Easily the most popular tourist destination in the 778,000-acre (1,215-square-mile) Sawtooth National Recreation Area is Redfish Lake. In the early afternoon of a hot midsummer

afternoon, the scene at the Redfish Lake Lodge, on the north shore, is a little like that in Seaside or Coney Island.

Many dozens of children and teenagers, most from the Boise area, gather on the beach and in the marina, paddle-boating, kayaking and throwing flying discs across the shallow water. When they tire of recreation, they gather at the burger joint outside the venerable 1929 lodge.

But Redfish hasn't always been “Beach Blanket Bingo"; it is usually a quiet fishing resort with motorboats and other craft readily available for rent. Indeed, the lake was named for the bright-red, spawning sockeye salmon that once found their way here by the thousands, seeming to turn the waters red. Today only a few endangered sockeye make the almost-900-mile journey from the Pacific Ocean, climbing to an elevation of 6,547 feet at Redfish Lake.

Fed by streams that run off Elk Peak, fortress-like Mount Heyburn and the Grand Mogul, Redfish has eight campgrounds around its shores and those of picturesque, nearby Little Redfish Lake. In addition to a general store, horse packers and rafting outfitters, it boasts a national recreation area visitor center that offers a full summer schedule of daily activities aimed at youth.

A 17-mile trail circles the lake, providing access to numerous other trails climbing to the plethora of smaller lakes high in the Sawtooth Range. Many of the trailheads may also be reached by launch from the Redfish Lake marina, saving precious steps for multiday backcountry adventurers. A backcountry pass, available at the lodge, is required for these trips.

Besides Redfish Lake, other good-sized lakes — Stanley Lake to the north, Pettit and Alturas lakes to the south — may be accessed by paved or graded, gravel-top roads.

The recreation area extends well to the east, as well, embracing the peaks of the White Cloud and Boulder mountain ranges nearly to Sun Valley. Abandoned silver mines and ghost towns are inevitable sights in these remote regions for travelers, many of whom do their exploring on horseback.

Tiny Stanley

Stanley sits at the junction of Idaho state Highways 75 and 21, where the routes between Boise, Sun Valley and Missoula, Mont., converge. It is as isolated a tourism hub as you'll find in the Pacific Northwest. The townspeople didn't even have electricity until 1956.

Officially — according to the “Welcome to" signs at the ends of town — the population is 63. That must be the number of year-round citizens, as the town requires at least a couple of hundred seasonal employees to run its motels, cafes, wilderness outfitters and other businesses catering to summer visitors. Those who stay year-round are hardy souls; the town averages 286 days each year with temperatures below freezing, ranking it as the coldest town in the lower 48.

The erstwhile “main drag," one block south of Highway 21, is a wide gravel thoroughfare called Ace of Diamonds Street. Its name refers to a long-gone casino and dance club that offered recreation to the trappers and silver miners who settled the community in the 1890s. There's not much on the street today: the rustic, log-construction Sawtooth Hotel, recently renovated; a couple of saloons (the Rod N Gun Club and the Kasino Club); a pizza joint; McCoy's Tackle & Gift Shop; the town post office and library; a real estate office in case you're in the market for mountain property; and the more modern High Country Inn.

The Stanley Baking Co. is a worthwhile breakfast-and-lunch stop; it is located around the corner from Ace of Diamonds on Wall Street.

Stanley's chamber of commerce/visitor center is on Highway 21 almost opposite Wall Street, and numerous other businesses cling close to the two main highways, both here and a mile downriver (northeast) in Lower Stanley.

One highlight is the Stanley Historical Museum, which occupies the 1933 Valley Creek forest ranger's cabin. Officially the headquarters of the Sawtooth Interpretive & Historical Association, the log museum (open daily in summer) has a fine collection of photographs and artifacts from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Yankee Fork

Many Sawtooth visitors miss one of the region's most compelling attractions when they don't continue east on Route 75 from Stanley 13 miles to Sunbeam Hot Springs, then head north up the Custer Motorway. It is easily traveled as far as the ghost town of Custer, 12 miles north of this point, although the final nine miles are graded gravel.

The swiftly flowing Yankee Fork joins the Salmon River at Sunbeam, tumbling down a hillside beneath the highway. In the late 19th century, the Yankee Fork was one of the richest mining districts in the United States. Today many of its sites are protected within the Land of the Yankee Fork Historic Area by the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation, which maintains an interpretive center at Challis, 42 miles northeast of Sunbeam.

Named by unsuccessful prospectors from New England, the Yankee Fork began to stir miners' interest after an 1870 discovery of placer gold on its tributary, Jordan Creek. A toll road from Challis opened in 1878 to deliver equipment to mining camps. Now called the Custer Motorway, the Challis National Forest road remains open today, an often-rough thoroughfare not recommended for trailers or low-clearance vehicles.

Custer was a boomtown that grew around the General Custer Mine with its vein of rich gold ore. A huge mill, built in 1880, processed 900 tons of ore per month and produced an estimated $8 million in gold before 1888. It kept operating until 1904, when diminishing ore values and rising production costs forced the mill to close. The population peaked at 600 in 1896, but by 1910, all had moved away.

Custer's halcyon era may be imagined today during a visit to the ghost town, which welcomes visitors Memorial Day to Labor Day. From the Custer Museum, once a schoolhouse, visitors may begin a walking tour of the town site. Outside, volunteers help visitors try their luck at panning for gold; most succeed in collecting a small amount.

Across the Motorway from the school, the historic Empire Saloon dispenses sarsaparilla from a bar that once sold considerably harder spirits. Nearby are several restored cabins, an old assay office, a blacksmith shop and a display of the types of stamp mills and other crushing machines employed at area gold mines.

Three miles downriver was the district's first major town, Bonanza. Established in 1877, it once boasted hotels, a newspaper office, a dentist, even a baseball field. But fires in 1889 and 1897 destroyed much of the town, and its residents moved elsewhere. Only a few log structures, most in poor repair, survive along with an intriguing cemetery a mile west of the site.

It was serendipity that I should encounter Bill Reid, who might be Bonanza's last man standing. Reid, who grew up in nearby Challis, had stopped by the homestead built by his grandfather, T.R. Kopp, and still maintained as a home. It stands opposite a decaying saloon and general store that Reid said his uncle had once operated, and behind which the ashes of his late wife had been scattered. “That's where I'll be someday, too," he said.

Reid said his father had been employed on the valley's most visible relic, a giant gold dredge that worked the Yankee Fork from 1940 to 1952. The 988-ton dredge worked its way upstream 5½ miles, leaving a trail of gravel and tailings behind it. It stands today beside the Motorway just north of Bonanza, just where it was left 60 years ago. But it has been restored, and welcomes visitors for self-guided tours.

Driving the route between Bonanza and Custer, I could imagine hardy prospectors of days long past, as they braved primitive trails on horseback. I thought that I might like to someday retrace those journeys.

I wonder if Juan would be up for the challenge.