

Idaho Offers a Playground for the Rocky Mountains

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by Terry Conway

Sixty miles north of Sun Valley you'll find more than 40 jagged 10,000-foot granite peaks of the Sawtooth Range. They provide a majestic background for leg-burning hiking and mountain bike rides, a horseback ride climbing steep switchbacks above a gorgeous mountain lake, or novice fly-fishermen standing thigh-deep in rushing streams learning how to cast for trout as long as your arm. Tired muscles can be eased with a starlight soothing soak in an outdoor natural hot springs pool at the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch.

It's easy to settle into a rhythm at the ranch nestled in the Sawtooth Valley. Rocking in hickory chairs on the expansive front porch in the late afternoon sunshine, guests take in the stunning panorama of the snowcapped peaks (they resemble a saw blade) that rank as one of America's great outdoor playgrounds.

'The Heart of Idaho'

The living history of the Old West mingles with the solitude of the ranch's 1,000 acres. Known as the "Heart of Idaho," this land is a mosaic of sparkling alpine lakes, aspen woodlands, sagebrush flats and rushing streams fed by an early summer snowmelt. The largest protected wilderness area in the "lower 48," it's as pretty as any national park, minus the crowds.

There are more cattle than people.

Captivated by the beauty of the Sawtooths, New York Frigidaire executive Winston Paul bought the ranch property as an invitation-only hunting club in 1929. A team of 60 workers snaked pine logs up the creeks to build the 8,000-square-foot lodge modeled after Yellowstone's Old Faithful Lodge. Masons crafted the floor-to ceiling fireplaces, while blacksmiths forged the door latches and wrought-iron trim.

Set at an elevation of 6,600 feet, the guest ranch was owned by an Idaho family for 50

years before a pair of couples, including financier Steve and architect Courtney Kapp of Philadelphia, purchased it in 2005. There are four guest rooms in the lodge and 17 cabins that surround it. Our cabin (No. 11) had plenty of room and modern amenities, like the Oakley stone in the showers. A handmade quilt covered the bed and firewood was stacked high alongside the cabin. Overnight temperatures plunge into the low 30s, so our fireplace blazed each night. A testament to its stature, the ranch earned a place on the National Register of Historic Places in 1995.

Activities on the blackboard

The staff posts activities and outings on a blackboard in the main lodge.

Mostly college students, they are friendly and knowledgeable, offering tips on an abundance of hiking, biking and horseback trails. There is also plenty of time to relax on the famous front porch or read by a crackling fire in the lodge. Guests truly get unplugged – there are no phones, televisions or radios in the rooms.

"The ranch embodies a sense of place, a sense of history in the old Western ranch tradition where ranchers extended gracious hospitality to travelers," according to ranch manager Sandra Beckwith. "It's an authentic western experience to explore the richness of the culture, the history, the natural world."

Just down the road we stop at the Sawtooth Fish Hatchery. As late as the 1950's, more than 4,000 sockeye salmon made the annual 900-mile pilgrimage from the Pacific Ocean to their spawning grounds in the Sawtooth Valley.

However, in recent years only a dozen or two have returned each year. In an effort to save the endangered fish the National Marine Fisheries Service established a local hatchery.

The facility traps, spawns, and raises spring Chinook salmon each year to release into Idaho waters. During the summer trapping season, visitors can view the trap being emptied every morning as well as adult Chinook in holding ponds. It's a great lesson in ecology.

Back at the ranch we unwind on the porch enjoying a glass of wine with the Jonekos family who are celebrating Stan Sr.'s 80th birthday. They arrived from Tucson, Denver and Los Angeles.

"It's a rustic yet luxurious surprise, the perfect destination for our family reunion," said daughter Staness. "The lodge has a wonderful sitting area, and the cabins are cozy and comfortable. We enjoyed superb meals, the cowboy musician and a fine glass of wine at sunset. It's heaven on earth for the Jonekos gang."

At 6:30 Andy hammers an iron rod back and forth in the triangular dinner bell and we all head for the main dining room. Chef Jim Roberts' meals with authentic roots and seasoned inspirations are an integral part of the ranch experience. Some favorites that evening were cedar planked Idaho Ruby Red Trout smeared with smoky tomato butter and jasmine rice, elk tenderloin with potatoes gratin and black currant gastrique, and the Niman Ranch Ribeye with blue cheese mashers and a Bing cherry demi-glace that was impossible to resist. A nice glass of Idaho Malbec from a well chosen wine list completed the meal.

Three nights a week the dinner event is outdoors featuring a Dutch Oven and a pair of sumptuous "surf and turf" BBQ buffets. After breakfast you can pick up a sack lunch to take on your day's outdoor adventure.

From the antics of a mountain stream that cascades through dazzling meadows to the bright-white puffy clouds in a big blue sky, once you've been to the Sawtooths, the words "untouched wilderness" will gain a whole new meaning.

For more information on Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch, 208-774-3544 or visit idahorocky.com