

# TRAVEL

Winter and summer retirement ‘research’ in Schweitzer, Tamarack, Boise and McCall paints a pleasant picture of down-home wholesomeness, outdoor adventures, rich cultural amenities and fine-tuned resort getaways



BENJAMIN MYERS PHOTOS

Clear skies at the North Bowl of Schweitzer’s Mountain Resort in northwest Idaho. Its 7,000 acres make it the largest ski resort in Idaho and Washington.

## Idaho checks out just fine

BY MARLISE KAST-MYERS

My husband, Benjamin, and I always travel with one eye open, winking at destinations that tease retirement dreams. Currently in our 40s, we still have time. Yet we’re planners by nature, aligned in our vision that the grass is, in fact, greener on the other side.

In the last two years, we’ve explored Tennessee, Wyoming and Colorado, turning travels into research trips with benefits. When I told Benjamin I wanted to “investigate” Idaho in winter, he gave me his blessing and said, “Invite me again when the fish are biting.”

And so this past winter, when Mammoth broke snowfall records, I bypassed the seven-hour drive and, instead, flew from San Diego to Spokane, Wash. Back in the ’80s, I, myself, was a Spokaneite. Ironically, not a whole lot had changed, I noticed, as I drove through the city en route to Schweitzer Mountain Resort. Just 1½ hours from the Spokane International Airport, the ski town is based in the rugged Selkirk Mountains of the northern Idaho panhandle.

Rumor had it that tree skiing was on point, prices were low and crowds were thin. Throw in steep hills, open bowls and lake views, and I was sold — at least for a three-day getaway.

Arriving after dark, I drove 11 miles up hairpin turns. As a SoCal beach girl, it wasn’t the road to Schweitzer that got me as much as the isolation. Pulling into the parking lot, I walked into Humbird Hotel and exhaled a sigh of relief. Other than the lobby light, it seemed the town had put itself to bed.

It was 10 o’clock.



Left, clockwise: Downtown Boise embraces its history.

Lake Cascade sits on the North Fork of the Payette River.

Plenty of space to relax at Humbird Hotel in Schweitzer.

The mountain resort had its own village, with most services available in Sandpoint, 20 minutes away. Within the village were a handful of restaurants, shops, a ski center and two hotels, including Humbird.

As Schweitzer’s newest property, Humbird was built with sustainability, design and practicality in mind. In addition to ski-in, ski-out access, rooms had boot dryers, gear hooks, humidifiers and equipment storage. The architecture paid tribute to the area’s logging history, incorporating heavy timber construction.

Until recently, condo rentals were nearly the only lodging option in town. The McCaw family changed all that in 2006 with improvements that lifted the resort out of bankruptcy. Giving them grooming freedom was the fact that Schweitzer’s 7,000 acres are not on National Forest Service land.

Their independence set them apart from the ski-resort pack — that is, until August, when they sold Schweitzer to Alterra Mountain Company — where it is now the 17th notch in Alterra’s ski-destination belt. Ikon Pass holders can officially add Schweitzer to the list of 50 mountains where they can hit the slopes with one card.

Regardless of backing by the big boys, Schweitzer still has plenty of bragging rights. As the largest ski resort in Idaho and Washington, it has 10 lifts, 300 inches of snowfall and nearly 3,000 acres of skiable terrain.

But stats are one thing. Experience is another.

And so, it began. Strapping in, I looked around, reliving my solitary arrival the night before. There were no lines and so few people that I had trouble finding someone to follow. The South Bowl was socked in thick, triggering vertigo

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Activities are plentiful year-round at Tamarack Resort. In the summer: mountain biking, paddleboarding and hiking, and the fish are biting in Lake Cascade.

## IDAHO • Boise is a city committed to its rich past, cultural future

FROM E11 that left me touching the ground for direction. Having snowboarded for decades, never had I experienced such loss of perception. From the lift, a skier hollered, “Head to the North Bowl. It’s clear.”

He was right. For two days, the sun smiled on me, begging me to lose myself in the thick of powder chutes, mellow cruisers and gladed stashes. Point-and-drop options were endless.

At the basin, I boarded Stella, Idaho’s only six-passenger lift, which kept me on rinse and repeat until my thighs burned and my shins bruised. Void of mountain ego and lift lines, it was easy to lose track of runs and time, stopping only for summit lunch at Sky House.

That evening, I ventured into Sandpoint, the nearest town with breweries, shops, 40+ restaurants, and over 9,000 residents. I sampled local beers at Laughing Dog Brewing and MickDuff’s Brewing Company on Lake Pend Oreille — Idaho’s largest, with 111 miles of shoreline.

Back at Humbird, I headed to Crow’s Bench, the hotel’s restaurant serving Alpine-inspired venison tartare, elk loin and Wiener schnitzel. Two beers deep, I ordered a charcuterie board and phoned my husband, Benjamin.

“So, I think I’m in love with Idaho. You promise we can come back when the fish are biting?”

Fast forward to summer, and we were on our way to Boise. This time, we would expand our “research trip” to five days and three destinations: Boise, Tamarack and McCall. A flight delay had us landing in Boise with just enough time to grab dinner at our hotel, The Avery.

Perhaps “grab” is an understatement. During our time in Idaho, our meal at The Avery’s Brasserie was the best of our trip. Grilled ceviche, sole meunière, dry-aged côte de boeuf and pistachio soufflé all had something to do with that, along with chef Cal Elliott.

A Boise native, Cal worked his way from an Alaskan fisherman to a Michelin star chef at his New York restaurant, Rye. At the rollout of the pandemic, Cal and his wife, Ashley, went “all in” by returning to their Boise roots to restore The Avery.

Dating to 1910, the elegant hotel has served as a cigar lounge, a department store, a movie theater, a boxing ring and an entertainment venue. Vacant since the 1960s, The Avery has new life as Boise’s only historic boutique hotel.

In less than 24 hours, we were hooked on Boise — not just because of The Avery, but because of the city’s commitment to its rich past and cultural future. We tasted it over paella and bocadillos in The Basque Block, where an entire



The Cove spa in McCall, Idaho, brings the outdoors inside with its immersion pools.



Grilled ceviche at The Avery’s Brasserie in Boise, under the care of a Michelin-starred chef.

community of descendants cling to tradition. We felt it on our walk along the Boise River Greenbelt and Freak Alley’s street art. We saw it in the face of locals supporting small-town businesses like barbershops, bookstores and The Record Exchange.

In a city of 237,446 people, there was an air about Boise where fast food, mass transport, potatoes and big government were out; while farmers markets, bikes, community and beards were in. It was like pre-boom Seattle and Austin, only with a lower cost of living and a greater potential for success.

That low-hanging fruit wasn’t limited to Boise. It was spreading throughout the state to Tamarack Resort, the second stop on our itinerary. Located in Southern Idaho, we pinned this under-the-radar counterpoint for its lake location, where we heard the fish were biting. Beyond Horse-shoe Bend, we passed gun shops, a coin laundry, corner cafes, beauty salons and steepled churches named after Grace and Hope.

The closer we got to Lake Cascade, the closer we got to nature. Meadows, streams and rivers framed

our route, giving way to tackle shops, wet dogs and banked kayaks. Scattered in open spaces were red barns, cattle ranches and humble homes where barefoot children spun on tire swings alongside American flags. Hand-painted signs announced yard sales, fresh eggs and the Huckleberry Festival.

Perhaps mundane for many, these small-town visions were my summer salutation, a tip of the hat from Tamarack welcoming us to the good life. Located 90 miles from Boise, this independent, all-season destination sits on 3,500 acres with plenty of room for growth.

In 2021, Gabriel Navarro purchased the flailing resort under his real estate development company, MMG Equity Partners. Along with his brother and brother-in-law, the privately owned investment firm expanded the resort, opened Osprey Meadows Golf Course, and is adding a marina. Their biggest win, some might say, was recruiting top tiers in hospitality, starting with executive chef Eric Aldis.

Over dinner at The Reserve, the self-proclaimed “Good ole Texas boy” rolled out scallops with pork belly,



Old-school charm prevails at The Avery Tavern.

trout almondine, wagyu filet mignon, bison tenderloin and truffle-topped fingerling potatoes. The huckleberry ice cream made us feel local, as did his firm handshake — something he did at every table.

Overseeing Tamarack’s culinary scene, chef Eric says, he’s living out his “purpose” to inspire a team to dream big. This mindset went beyond the kitchen, extending to The Spa, where director Julie Stauts forages huckleberry leaves, wild yarrow, oxeye daisy and herbs for spa treatments.

She, too, was drawn to Tamarack, for its energy as much as its potential. Beyond Lake Cascade, there’s a shift, she says, credited to nearby mineral springs, Crystal Mountain, and sacred land from Native American tribes.

Whatever it was, there

was certainly a peace about Tamarack — a calmness I felt mountain biking through the forest, paddleboarding on still waters, and hiking the slopes below Tamarack Express, the chairlift.

During guided fishing, Benjamin felt it casting his line on Lake Cascade and reeling in over 20 perch, trout and bass.

In winter, the mountain transforms into a powdery playground with access to corduroy groomers, open bowls and gate-accessed backcountry on 2,000 acres. For now, we would inhale what was left of summer.

From our balcony, we watched as couples danced and children ran free to live music by Jeff Crosby. He sang about Idaho and the “endless mountains and reservoir, the red tail foxes and liquor stores.”

And there they were, the fortunate who discovered where the grass was greener and the air smelled of wildflowers, raindrops and waffle cones; a place where Instagram reels weren’t topics of conversation, but rather those quicksilver moments in nature.

“It’s wholesome, isn’t it?” Benjamin said.

Indeed it was, and only more so in nearby McCall. As the final stop on our Idaho adventure, McCall welcomed us with small-town vibes and lakefront shops selling milkshakes, books, hardware and leather goods. Passing cars were strapped with kayaks, and everyone seemed to stroll as if their destinations were unknown.

Nestled in the Salmon River Mountains, the town was founded in the late 19th century by the McCall family, who traded horses for a cabin on 160 acres of land. They established a school, saloon, post office and hotel, and with further growth came the historic Shore Lodge in 1948.

With an old-money aesthetic, our hotel of choice beckoned with whisky in the lounge overlooking Payette Lake. Beyond valet and cocktails were amenities like shuttle service, a golf course, private marina, movie theater, cruiser bikes, pool and spa. We took advantage of the latter three — in that order — pedaling our way through Ponderosa State Park to Narrows Overlook. We counted more deer than people, feeling far from home but close to perfection.

Some 3,500 residents obviously shared our mindset, waking up to lake views and capitalizing on three nearby ski resorts. In McCall, it was easy to live in the present, content in the moment whether we were gazing at the lake or dining at sunset.

We did both that evening at The Narrows Steakhouse, boasting over 500 wines and waiters who doubled as knife concierges. Before the journey home, we swam in the pool and grabbed sandwiches at The Cutwater with tables so close to the water, you could feed the fish.

We spoke of Idaho — starting with my winter escapade in Schweitzer, and our summer splash across Boise, Tamarack and McCall. What started out as retirement research turned into a “very possible” pin on our “someday” map.

One where progress is moving in the right direction; where kids run free with wet-tailed dogs; where bearded strangers sing about their homeland; where the fish are biting; where deer look you in the eye and eat your grass ... which, ironically, happens to be greener.

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