

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

This Small Idaho Town Is the Perfect Winter Getaway — With Hot Springs, Excellent Skiing, and an Idyllic Yurt Where You Can Snowshoe to Dinner

Here's everything you need to plan a cozy winter vacation in McCall, Idaho.

By Jennifer Prince, January 8, 2024



PHOTO: JENNIFER PRINCE

Many states conjure up specific images when you hear their names. For example, my mind wanders to redwoods when I hear California and mountains when I think of my home state of Virginia. Before I traveled to Idaho, the first thing that came to mind was [potatoes](#), but the state did an excellent job altering my opinion. I'm not sure if it was while I was soaking in hot springs during a snowstorm or [skiing for the first time](#) that I fell in love with McCall, Idaho.

While my husband and I plan on returning someday, the state holds a special allure that keeps calling people back. That's what happened to longtime resident Lisa Whisnant. When driving through the state, McCall was simply a stopping point to grab a sweet treat and enjoy the beauty of Payette Lake. "McCall was always on my radar," she says. "I thought, maybe someday I could come and live here." A few years later, the opportunity arose to become a [whitewater rafting](#) guide with [Canyons River Company](#) in McCall.

She jumped at the chance and has invested in the community for the past four decades. Chris Weber, a [local fishing guide](#), has only been in McCall for three years, but the draw was the same for him. What began as fishing trips ended with a permanent move to the area. "It's a world-class fishing destination surrounded by beautiful mountains," he says. "It's better than anything in the picture books." Although you may not be looking to relocate, the vast amount of outdoor activities — think snowmobiling in the winter and hiking in the summer — may encourage you to visit and stay, even if only for a little while."

TOP 5 CAN'T MISS

- Center your time by reserving a lakeview room at Hotel McCall, situated in the heart of downtown.
- Pack your gear and test your skills while fishing for perch in Lake Cascade during any season.
- To experience extreme temperatures, book a guided snowmobiling excursion and take a trip to Burgdorf Hot Springs.
- Book dinner at Blue Moon Yurt to enjoy food cooked over open coals.
- Peruse pre-owned wares at various thrift and consignment stores like McPaws and McCall Sports.



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Best Hotels and Resorts

Hotel McCall

With its first guests arriving in 1904, [Hotel McCall](#) is conveniently located to anchor your stay in Idaho. Its 20 rooms range from accommodations appointed with two queen-size beds to coveted lakefront condos, including ADA-accessible and pet-friendly options. Relax at the spa, plunge into the indoor pool, and dine at the on-site fusion restaurant.

Tamarack Resort

Whether you're traveling with others or visiting solo, [Tamarack Resort](#) has accommodations to fit groups of varying sizes. "Tamarack is constantly building new hotels, and with its ski resort atmosphere, they have really good lodging," says Weber. I stayed in a ski-in, ski-out room, but you could also opt for a privately owned chalet.

Burgdorf Hot Springs

If you're looking to unplug in the wilderness, add [Burgdorf Hot Springs](#) to your itinerary. Keep cozy in a room outfitted with a woodstove (firewood included), or sweat it out in the summer

as cabins lack electricity. Although it's rustic, Weber says staying at Burgdorf is something many of his fishing clients rave about.

Shore Lodge

[Shore Lodge](#), which lies on Payette Lake, is a paradise for water recreation. Rent a stand-up paddleboard, golf the 18-hole course, or roam on a complimentary bike. "It's always fun to go to the Shore Lodge in the summer and sit by the water and have lunch," says Whisnant. Winter is also an active time, as guests can soak in the hot tubs or borrow a pair of snowshoes and explore.



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Best Things to Do

Ski on powder-filled mountains.

One of the largest draws in McCall is skiing. "If you like houses covered in two feet of snow and fresh powder to ski on, McCall [offers] a good lifestyle," says Weber. Glide down one of the 50 pillowy-soft trails at Tamarack Resort and stop at the slopeside Mile High Cantina for a brew. Enjoy other snow-centric activities like skiing, snowboarding, and tubing at [Brundage Mountain Resort](#), a favorite of [Bella Kitchen](#) owner and longtime resident Lisa Wood. "In the winter, we ski at Brundage as often as possible," she says.

Book a guided fishing expedition.

[Ice fishing](#) was one of my most memorable experiences in rural Idaho. Visitors flock to McCall to brave the cold while luring fish to their lines. "The first time I came to Idaho, we fished for perch in Lake Cascade," says Weber. According to him, the best fishing of the year happens in May and June, when the fish are itching to bite. He adds, "It's as good as it gets, and you really can't do anything wrong."



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Snowmobile to soak in hot springs.

One of the best ways to experience the full impact of the snow is by booking a guided snowmobile tour with [CM Backcountry Rentals & Adventures](#). Snow gear ensures you stay heated while whizzing through Idaho's stunning landscape. Stop for comfort food at the [Secesh Stage Stop](#), where the walls flutter with dollar bills. Then, soak in the naturally heated [Burgdorf Hot Springs](#), surrounded by panoramic views of the snowy hills.

Forage for mushrooms.

Unofficially named the official food of McCall, mushrooms are abundant when warm days pair with cool nights. "Spring is a great time for mushroom hunting," advises Wood. "This fall, the mushrooms were plentiful, and we could just wander around our neighborhood to find some

beautiful boletus mushrooms." Local chefs such as Gary Kucy, who curates the menu at [Rupert's at Hotel McCall](#), often include locally sourced mushrooms in seasonal dishes.

Best Shopping

Gallery Fifty-Five

Part emporium, part exhibit, [Gallery Fifty-Five](#) is a cooperative space where you can purchase souvenirs or stock your gift closet. "Gallery Fifty-Five is a great place to see all the creative talent our area has to offer," says Wood. Here, local artists display everything from handcrafted jewelry to paintings.

McPaws Thrift Store

Whether you need to get your pet fix — adoptable animals are in store — or pick up pre-owned snow gear, [McPaws Thrift Store](#) is the place to go. "I love that the shop supports animals in need or looking for a home," says Whisnant. It's located downtown and was one of my favorite shopping stops in McCall.

Bella Kitchen

Opened in 2002 by Wood and her husband, [Bella Kitchen](#) is an ideal spot for stocking your kitchen or picking up a wine opener. If you enjoy lovely stationery, peruse Rifle Paper Co.'s goods.

McCall Sports

Shop the new and pre-loved sections at [McCall Sports](#) to find the perfect recreational gear. "They sell lots of secondhand skis and bikes," says Weber. "It's one of the coolest stores I've ever been to."

Backcountry Boutique

"I love [Backcountry Boutique](#) for great clothing and gifts," explains Wood. Head to this store to grab a pair of alpaca socks for snowmobiling or chat with locals. This locally owned shop also has a toy nook for the younger set.



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Best Restaurants

Flight of Fancy

You may want a quick breakfast when heading to or from Tamarack Resort in nearby Donnelly. "Donnelly has a cute little bakery called [Flight of Fancy](#)," says Whisnant. The grab-and-go menu includes everything from satiating breakfast sandwiches to sweet treats, but you can, of course, stay a while as this eatery resides inside a charming house. If you want to try a bakery in McCall proper, Whisnant suggests [Stacey Cakes](#).



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Blue Moon Yurt

Although it isn't a restaurant per se as it's only open seasonally by reservation, the idyllic [Blue Moon Yurt](#) invites visitors to snowshoe in the woods to dinner. Whisnant often daydreamed about opening a business to have a steady job in the winter while creating a sense of community. "The food scene came out of river guiding," she says. Whisnant and her crew of river guides prepare the meals over open coals and serve dinner inside the yurt.

Salmon River Brewery

When planning where to eat in McCall, you'd be remiss if you didn't stop by the local brewery — recommended by all three of our local experts. "We visit [Salmon River Brewery](#) regularly for great pub food," says Wood. My husband and I stumbled upon it while walking downtown, and I concur that fabulous comfort food and tasty brews await inside its rustic atmosphere.

Ragazza Di Bufalo

Twenty minutes south of McCall in Donnelly is [Ragazza Di Bufalo](#), Weber's first restaurant choice, especially when he has cause to celebrate. "It's about \$100 a couple, but it's fantastic Italian cuisine," he says. "When you walk in, you feel like you're in a high-end restaurant." The

bison lasagna includes local meat, or you can savor Idaho trout with an almond crust to satiate your appetite after a long day on the slopes.



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Best Time to Visit

There's no wrong time to visit McCall, so center your vacation around your preferred to-do list. If you shy away from the cold, a winter itinerary filled with exhilarating snowmobiling, skiing, and ice fishing may not be your ideal trip. But rest assured a host of activities await warm-weather lovers.

Spend a few days white-water rafting, golfing, boating on the lake, or hiking to stunning vistas in the summer. McCall beckons outdoor lovers in every season. "It's a winter wonderland, but it's also a place where people come for the summer," says Whisnant. According to her, McCall has always "been this place that has supported recreation." So, no matter when you go, be prepared to immerse yourself in nature.

How to Get There

As Whisnant says, "It's Boise's backyard," so flying into Boise (BOI) and renting a car is the easiest way to travel to McCall. Although the drive is around 2.5 hours, watching the bustling city streets give way to mountains dotted with evergreens makes the journey worthwhile.

Several major car rental companies, including Budget and Enterprise, have stations inside the airport, simplifying the process.



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How to Get Around

Renting a car means you'll have an easy way to navigate the area, though there are other choices. Using a sports rental, like a snowmobile or motorboat, is also a creative way to get to know the area. If you stay at Hotel McCall, you can explore on foot. "You can walk everywhere," Whisnant says of the downtown area. In the winter, you can rent snowshoes at Gravity Sports to ensure you can safely move in the ice and snow.