

Is This The Prettiest Town in America?

By [Steve Winston](#) | February 7, 2013 8:30 AM ET



Sandpoint is sandwiched between the Selkirks and the lake. Courtesy Idaho Department of Commerce-Tourism

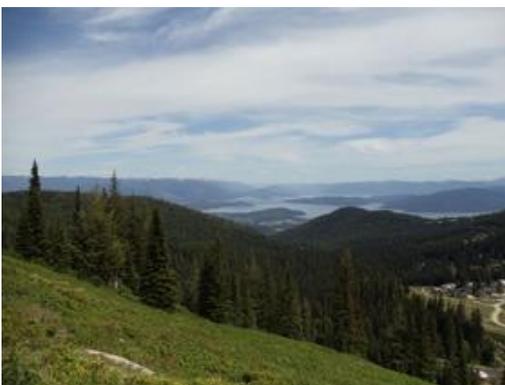
In the summer of 2011, the people in a *USA Today/Rand McNally* survey named Sandpoint, Idaho, "Most Beautiful Small Town in America." It's easy to see why. Sandpoint is a charming old Northwest village in the Idaho Panhandle, forty miles from the Canadian border.

As you cross the "Long Bridge" over Lake Pend Oreille ("pond-a-ray"), surrounded by the snow-capped Selkirk range, a colorful village of restored wood and red-brick buildings awaits on the other side.

Its backdrop is magnificent - the 8,000' Selkirks, and the 43-mile-long lake (named by French traders for the ear ornaments worn by local Indians), dotted with beautiful coves and inlets.

Sandpoint is a slice of Americana. There's an independently-owned book shop (yes, they still exist here!) called The Corner Book Store, one of those cramped, maze-like places where you could easily spend an afternoon. And the classic 1927 Panida Theatre (short for PAN-handle and IDA-ho), built as a vaudeville house in 1927, is still used for movies, live theater, and concerts today.

At the Pend Oreille Winery, you can enjoy live music, award-winning wines, good food, and great conversation with owners Steve and Julie Meyer. And just outside of town is Laughing Dog Brewery, where Fred and Michelle Colby produce award-winning craft beers (in a brewery named after their dog, Ben).



Overlooking Sandpoint is the Schweitzer Mountain Ski Resort, where you can hike or take the scenic chairlift ride up to the top of Schweitzer Mountain (6,400'). Here, standing by a sign marking the Continental Divide, you can see three states (Idaho, Montana, and Washington) and two countries (the U.S. and Canada). And you can see, as well, enormous Lake Pend Oreille in all its majesty.

From Schweitzer Mountain, you can see into Canada. (Courtesy Steve Winston)

Western Pleasure Guest Ranch is an authentic working ranch with 1,100 acres of horses, cattle, deer, elk, and moose, run by the same family since 1940. The ranch has four authentic log cabins, and six guest rooms in the Main Lodge, all filled with Native Northwestern blankets, rugs, pottery, and carvings. Even if you don't stay here, you can play cowboy for a day, riding through pine forests and verdant meadows.

The Bird Aviation Museum & Invention Center is an unlikely attraction for this distant corner of Idaho. The brainchild of local inventor Forrest M. Bird, it's filled with aircraft and cars dating as far back as World War I.

Back in town, you can cruise on the lake with Lake Pend Oreille Cruises. And the Farmer's Market, Wednesdays and Saturdays in summertime, is overflowing with local produce and crafts.

There are also some excellent restaurants here. At the Schweitzer Mountain Ski Resort, Mojo Coyote Café offers great Mexican food and homemade baked goods for breakfast and lunch, while Chimney Rock Grill has a setting of casual Northwest elegance and great fish and local specialties. Back in town, a restaurant called 41 South overlooks the lake, serving upscale ambience and good food. And Trinity at City Beach overlooks Sandpoint Beach and the lake, with dining indoors and out.



To really understand what makes Sandpoint, Sandpoint, though, you have to get out on the miles of great hiking trails. On the Gold Hill or Mickinnick trails, the silence and the wildlife and the see-forever vistas are memorable.

At Sleep's Cabins, right on the lake, you can watch the sun make its way into the Northwestern horizon on a summer evening, dappling the water in shades of pink, purple, and orange.

A local resident on a lazy day. (Courtesy Steve Winston)

And when it finally sets, replaced by a thousand stars against a black-velvet night, you'll know why Sandpoint was named "The Most Beautiful Small Town in America."