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Idaho's Lake Country



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TRAVEL

AND RECREATION

OUTDOORS

Idaho's lake country

Make a summer escape to the
West's most beautiful lakes

BY CAROLINE PATTERSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BROWN CANNON III

The lakes of northern Idaho—Coeur d'Alene, Pend Oreille, and Priest—are deep, blue, and busy. Scooped out during the Ice Age, the lakes now float yachts and kayaks. On the green shores, towns draw visitors to high-end resorts, restaurants, and lakefront bicycle trails.

Each lake has its legend: Native Americans told stories of monsters in Coeur d'Alene Lake; another monster, the Pend Oreille Paddler, is rumored to inhabit Lake Pend Oreille; and Priest Lake is linked to 1920s actress and filmmaker Nell Shipman, who established a wilderness movie studio in what is now Lionhead State Park.

And each lake has a distinct personality. As my family (husband, son, and daughter) and I discover, Coeur d'Alene Lake is bustling with boaters, golfers, and resorts. Further north, Lake Pend Oreille is grayer and deeper, and easygoing Sandpoint, on its northern shore, provides a more intimate, small-town experience. Square in the panhandle, Priest Lake offers calm water, thick cedar forests, and seclusion—with huckleberry pie to boot. ▶44

Cool and blue: Priest Lake is the least developed of northern Idaho's trio of lakes.

Clockwise from top: Pilot Grant Brooks parks his seaplane on Coeur d'Alene Lake; on Priest Lake, fire warms the dusk; Hill's Resort cabins are tucked into the woods; their interiors glow with Wild West charm.



Logging mills to links: Coeur d'Alene Lake

When French trappers came through this area about 200 years ago, they called the native people *Coeur d'Alene*—"awl heart"—so impressed were they by the tribe's sharp trading skills. Eventually, Coeur d'Alene the town became known for logging and mining, and for more than a century it was a gritty place. No more. Now the lake and the town draw golfers and boaters from Seattle and Los Angeles. As my kids and I bicycle the 24-mile North Idaho Centennial Trail, which runs along the lake, we see a shoreline dominated by the 18-story Coeur d'Alene Resort, with its 3,000-foot-long, geranium-lined boardwalk and yacht-filled marina. There's also an 18-hole golf course with a floating green at the 14th hole.

Down at Coeur d'Alene City Park, a carnival atmosphere prevails: A man in a muscle shirt walks a Pekingese dog, a bride and groom pose for pictures, and families, like ours, dip their feet into the cool water. At nearby Independence Point, we board the *Coeur d'Alene* to tour the 25-mile long, 120-foot-deep lake as the breeze whips our hair and osprey dive into the water. (Another option is to see the lake by air, on one of Grant Brooks's seaplane tours—these include 20-minute flights over Lake Coeur d'Alene, and longer trips over Lake Pend Oreille and other nearby lakes.)

We end our day sauntering along Sherman Avenue (named for General William Tecumseh Sherman, the namesake of the fort that is now City Park), with its art galleries and espresso shops. We are tempted by the Huddy burgers at Hudson's downtown, but daunted by the crowds—so instead we choose a lake view and slow-roasted prime rib at the tony Cedars Floating Restaurant.

Lake Pend Oreille: art galleries, kayaks, and a restored theater

Forty-six miles north of Coeur d'Alene on U.S. 95, we cross the



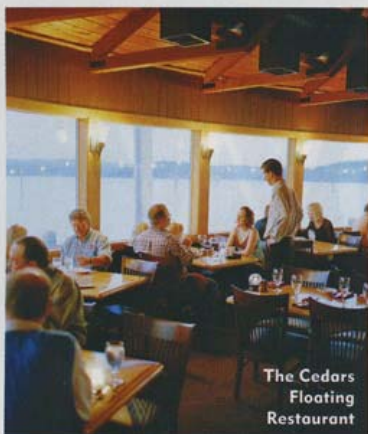
2-mile Long Bridge into Sandpoint, at the northern end of 43-mile-long Lake Pend Oreille. Some think French trappers named this lake for the ear pendants worn by the Kalispel Indians; others think the name describes the lake's hook shape. We drive through downtown Sandpoint, which, with its boutiques, espresso shops, art galleries, and restaurants, has the mellow atmosphere of a university town without the university. These days Sandpoint is most famous for Coldwater Creek. The women's clothing company is headquartered here and has a store in town; nearby are the shops of Cedar Street Bridge, Sandpoint's answer to Florence's Ponte Vecchio. I slip off to do some shopping while everyone else goes for a leisurely swim at City Beach. That evening we have dinner at Hydra, a small house turned restaurant, then see a series of short animated films at the restored 1927 Spanish mission-style Panida Theater. Renovated thanks to the hard work of Sandpoint residents, it's one of the most beautiful little movie palaces in the West.

To see the lake the next morning, my kids and my husband board the *Shawnoese* riverboat at City Beach. I choose a quieter alternative: a kayak tour with Jason Wiley of Full Spectrum Tours. As we paddle, the Selkirk and Cabinet Mountains shimmering in the distance, it's hard to imagine the violence of the Ice Age floods that scoured out this 1,150-foot-deep lake. I dip my paddle in and out, and I'm reminded of the lake that Sandpoint native Marilynne Robinson describes in her novel *Housekeeping*—of water that seems “spread over half the world.” This is a vast lake indeed, a fact recognized by the Navy in World War II, when it tested submarines in the deep water near today's 4,000-acre Farragut State Park. That evening, as sunset stains the lake red and boaters pull up to the marina, we dine on crab-stuffed buffalo carbonade at the Floating Restaurant in Hope. ▶48



Clockwise from top: view from Hill's Resort; kayaking just off Lake Pend Oreille; cycling along the Coeur d'Alene River; dinner at the Sand Creek Grill.





The Cedars Floating Restaurant

Hiking and stargazing at Priest Lake

We continue on to Priest Lake, the most northerly and least developed of the three. The 25-mile-long waterway is actually two lakes connected by a 2½-mile river known as the Thoroughfare. On the lower lake's Luby Bay, we pull into Hill's Resort, with its forest cabins, 18-hole golf course, and views of the Selkirk Mountains. Owned by the Hill family since 1946, the resort has hosted generations of families. "Each year," says owner Teri Hill, "people arrive in the lobby, look out at the lake, sigh, and say, 'I'm home.'"

Once accessible only by boat, the area exudes a woody tranquility: The 26,000-acre lake stretches before us, surrounded by forests of cedar and hemlock through which deer glide ghostlike, the silence interrupted only by the sound of the occasional motorboat.

We check into our cabin, hang up our bathing suits, and settle in for a week of inner-tubing, beachcombing, and hiking in the nearby Roosevelt Grove of Ancient Cedars. That night, we sit down to mesquite-seared tenderloin with wild mushroom-Cabernet sauce at the resort's dining room, then walk back to our cabin. Water laps placidly against the lake's shore, the air is pine-scented, the night sky bright with stars, and we, too, feel that we have come home. ✪



Idaho lakes

Daytime temperatures warm to the mid-80s, but keep a sweater handy, as temperatures can drop to the 60s at nighttime. For more area information, contact the chambers of commerce in Coeur d'Alene (877/782-9232), Sandpoint (800/800-2106), and at Priest Lake (888/774-3785).

Activities

COEUR D'ALENE LAKE

Brooks Seaplane. 20-minute, 40-mile flight over Coeur d'Alene Lake. \$50, \$25 ages 11 and under. City dock at Independence Point, City Park, Coeur d'Alene; www.brooksseaplane.com or 208/664-2842.

Coeur d'Alene Lake cruises. 90-minute to 6-hour tours. Depart from Coeur d'Alene Resort (for guests) or Independence Point (see above). From \$18. www.cdaresort.com or 800/688-5253.

North Idaho Centennial Trail. A 24-mile, multiuse recreational trail along the Spokane River. www.northidahocentennialtrail.com or 208/699-2224.

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Pedal Pushers Bike Shop. Bike rentals \$12 for two hours. 101 N. Coeur d'Alene Ave., Harrison; www.bike.northidaho.com or 208/689-3436.

LAKE PEND OREILLE

Coldwater Creek. The flagship store of the women's clothing retailer is right near Sand Creek. First and Cedar Streets, Sandpoint; www.coldwatercreek.com or 208/263-2265.

Full Spectrum Tours. Kayak rentals and tours of Lake Pend Oreille and Priest Lake. From \$25 for two hours. 321 N. Second Ave., Sandpoint; www.kayaking.net or 208/263-5975.

Lake Pend Oreille Cruises. The 9-mile daily lake cruise covers area geology and history. From \$17 for a 90-minute tour. Departs from Sandpoint City Beach dock; www.lakependoreillecruises.com or 208/255-5253.

Panida Theater. Film festivals and live performances. Thu-Sun. 300 N. First Ave., Sandpoint; www.panida.org or 208/255-7801.

Dining

The Cedars Floating Restaurant. Yellowfin sashimi and views of Coeur d'Alene Lake. \$\$\$; dinner daily. 1 Marina Dr., Coeur d'Alene; 208/664-2922.

The Floating Restaurant. Pork tenderloin saltimbocca at a lakeside marina. \$\$; lunch Mon-Sat, dinner daily, brunch Sun. At Hope Marine Services, State 200, Hope; 208/264-5311.

Hudson's Hamburgers. Five generations of Hudsons have worked at the 18-stool lunch counter. \$; breakfast and lunch Mon-Sat. 207 Sherman Ave., Coeur d'Alene; 208/664-5444.

Hydra, Sandpoint's Original Steakhouse. Feta-crusted artichoke hearts and seafood fettuccine. \$\$; lunch Tue-Sun, dinner daily. 115 W. Lake St., Sandpoint; 208/263-7123.

Lodging

Coeur d'Alene Resort. Typical hotel rooms as well as lakeview suites with fireplaces. 337 rooms and suites from \$149. 115 S. Second St., Coeur d'Alene; www.cdaresort.com or 800/688-5253.

Hill's Resort. Cabins and condos. Hill's Restaurant (\$\$\$; breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily) features pork back ribs and huckleberry pie. 52 rooms from \$150 per night or \$1,325 per week. At Priest Lake; www.hillsresort.com or 208/443-2551.

Inn at Sand Creek. Three suites, two of them with four-poster beds. Sand Creek Grill (\$\$\$; dinner daily) offers triple-crusted halibut. From \$125. 105 S. First Ave., Sandpoint; www.innatsandcreek.com or 208/255-2821.

Sleep's Cabins. Six historic lakeside log cabins with kitchens. From \$145. 231 Lakeshore Dr., Sagle (2 miles south of Sandpoint); www.sleepscabins.com or 866/302-2122.