

Northern Delights

BY CRAI BOWER



Finding **IDAHO**'s winter
splendor in every direction.

on

the Idaho panhandle, spring invites the adventurous to raft and kayak myriad waterways, torrid with snowmelt; summer unfolds along some of North America's best golf courses, as well as various hiking and biking trails; and fall lures anglers — rod, reel, and tackle box in hand — to world-class rivers and streams.

As with the other seasons, winter here plays right into the hands of the recreationally inclined. The area gets more than 300 inches of snow annually, has mountains galore, and there are amenities aplenty — everything from après-ski gathering spots to spa rejuvenations. So pack your winter coat and take a journey to one of America's less-famous panhandles, where the towns of both Hope and Blanchard make great bases from which to explore northern Idaho on these five wonderful day-trips.



Schweitzer Mountain draws skiers of all skill levels.

DAY-TRIP #1:

Schussing Schweitzer Mountain

It's easy to overlook Schweitzer Mountain Resort, especially with so many relatively close Northwestern ski destinations — glitzy Sun Valley is to the south, and massive Whistler is up and over on Canada's west coast — from which to choose. I know because I bumped it off my itinerary for years. What a fool. Having skied everywhere out this way, I can state with certainty that this 2,900-acre ski hill ranks among the region's top-three mixed-ability terrains, and is as fine an intermediate-focused hill as you'll find anywhere on the continent.

Blue runs dominate the landscape, which spreads out stunningly above Sandpoint and Lake Pend Oreille below. But beginners and experts won't lack territory either, with wide-open runs such as Midway and the Teakettle Trail for the novice, and the South Bowl Chutes and Wayne's Woods to tease out the most experienced skier.

Though the almost half a mile of vertical drop and the top elevation of 6,400 feet take my breath away every time, what I like best about Schweitzer is its determination to remain true to its local roots with eateries such as the Outback Inn, a low-key sandwich-and-chili hut at the bottom of the Outback Bowl; and the adjacent Stella chair, a fun-filled lift where riders emerge from a barn (complete with a steam engine!) straight out of Disney's Country Bear Jamboree.

Schweitzer also provides a "park and chill" base destination, where you'll find live music on the weekends at Taps Lounge, wine tasting at Gourmandie, and Pucci's Pub, a great neighborhood joint set in the heart of the village.

Though a small town, Sandpoint offers big-city amenities, including galleries, theater, and a lively culinary scene.



DAY-TRIP #2:

Backcountry Exploration

Part of the appeal of the Panhandle is the population's general friendliness and cooperation. And nowhere is this spirit better displayed than between Schweitzer Mountain and Selkirk Powder Company, a separate entity that operates an awesome snowcat skiing program out of an A-frame cabin at the top of Schweitzer's Great Escape quad chair. While some resorts treat the local cat operation as persona non grata, Schweitzer actually supports it by providing adventurous skiers a lift to what could be considered their competition.

Powder hounds certainly will find the thousands of western-aspect (i.e., dry and fluffy) snowy acres just as friendly. Skiers typically tackle 10,000 to 14,000 vertical feet of untracked lines in a day.

Those interested in a different type of ride might try joining a Selkirk

Powder snowmobile tour. Sledheads can explore about 400 miles of trails spread out over a whopping 186,000 acres in Priest Lake State Forest, one of the most popular snowmobiling terrains in America, due in part to the aforementioned 300 or so inches of snow that pile up every year.

DAY-TRIP #3:

Mellowing out in Sandpoint

Every time I visit Sandpoint, I wish it were my hometown. It's just one of those places. Everything I need to live — and live well — is here: good theater, excellent restaurants, great pubs and wine bars, and unencumbered access to outdoor recreation. As a bonus, the residents are among the most interesting and kindest folks I've encountered in the region. I find them to be an eclectic bunch who could live anywhere, but choose here.

Nestled on the banks where the Pend Oreille River meets Lake Pend Oreille, galleries including Art Works

and the Ross Hall Collection line 1st Avenue, though an aesthete could discover another 20 or so studios throughout town. Pend d'Oreille Winery combines gallery space with Sandpoint's finest wine-tasting experience. My favorite anecdote here involves watching people arrive with milk jugs to fill with the house Bistro Rouge, which is also the name of the on-site tapas cafe. For a frothy beverage, I trod a few blocks to Eichardt's Pub, Grill & Coffee House, where local handcrafted ales are served, as well as, without a doubt, the best burgers in town.

Western classic and cool contemporary offerings dance the two-step throughout Sandpoint, from taking in a show or concert at the historic Panida Theater to cheering the skijoring competitors during the annual Winter Carnival. Never heard of skijoring? I'll put it this way: The event's tagline reads "one horse, one skier, one rope." Not surprisingly, the culinary scene

here is impressive, too. Try The Bistro's Double R Ranch natural filet, a vegetarian grill at Forty-One South, or the cioppino at Trinity at City Beach.

DAY-TRIP #4:

Mining Silver Mountain

If Schweitzer Mountain doesn't always get the respect it deserves, then Silver Mountain Resort is mostly an afterthought. But what you lose in skiable acreage, you gain in snow quality and some of northern Idaho's most intriguing history. Really, though, it's still pretty tough to just dismiss 1,600 acres of terrain and 2,200 feet of vertical. Unless, of course, you're more interested in mining lore than making turns.





At the Coeur d'Alene Casino, there's plenty for nongaming guests to enjoy, including excellent locally sourced cuisine.



fastFACTS

RESORT DIRECTORY: IntervalWorld.com or pages 118 and 120

CLIMATE: Don't expect the thermometer to travel too far north of the freezing point during December, January, or February.

INTERVAL TRAVEL: IntervalWorld.com

RENTAL CAR: Recommended

CONTACT: Schweitzer Mountain Resort, schweitzer.com; Selkirk Powder Company, selkirkpowderco.com; Art Works Gallery, sandpointartworks.com; Ross Hall Collection, rosshallcollection.com; Pend d'Oreille Winery, powine.com; Panida Theater, panida.org; Sandpoint Winter Carnival, sandpointwintercarnival.com; The Bistro, innatsandcreek.com/bistro.html; Forty-One South, 41southsandpoint.com; Trinity at City Beach, trinityatcitybeach.com; Silver Mountain Resort, silvermt.com; Crystal Gold Mine, goldmine-idaho.com; Coeur d'Alene Casino, cdacasino.com.

VISITOR INFORMATION:

Idaho Division of Tourism Development
208.334.2470
visitidaho.org
visitnorthidaho.com
coeurdalene.org

**MAKE AN EXCHANGE OR
PURCHASE A GETAWAY AT
INTERVALWORLD.COM.**

Kellogg, hometown to Silver Mountain, and nearby Wallace remain two of the West's most picturesque settlements, living museums to an age of railroads and miners — and all the appropriate accompaniments: brothels, saloons, and fantastic tales. Just strolling Wallace's Bank Street sidewalk takes you back in time, especially since local hero Harry Magnuson had every façade declared a national landmark to thwart the U.S. government's attempt to run Interstate 90 through the middle of town.

If you really want to experience a bit of history, head to Kellogg's Crystal Gold Mine for a tour. It's open year-round, and is a relatively easy — but still exciting — underground journey for the entire family.

DAY-TRIP #5:

Escape to Coeur d'Alene

The city of Coeur d'Alene has become a travel darling of the Northwest, even if it's more summer-focused than winter. Still, there's good shopping and dining along Sherman Avenue, which runs east to west, where it runs right up to Lake Coeur d'Alene. Take a scenic cruise tour of the lake; you'll have to bundle up, but the opportunity to observe wintering bald eagles and other wildlife is worth it.

A recent development, though, is actually about 30 minutes down the road at the Coeur d'Alene Casino, where even nongaming guests will enjoy the outstanding Ts'el'usm Steakhouse and Hn'ya' (pq'i'n'n A Gathering Place, both of which serve locally sourced cuisine that is as delicious as the names are hard to pronounce.

Since first mining my own adventure nuggets here, and throughout the entire northern Idaho region, I've returned as often as possible, and have always found that the people genuinely enjoy hosting visitors. The combination of rural lifestyle and urban sophistication matches my vacation needs perfectly. As an angler, golfer, hiker, cyclist, and skier, I'll visit this region in any season, but the convenience of the airport in Spokane, Washington — with flights to and from most of the West's major cities — and the abundance of fresh powder snow draw me every winter. I know that once I touch down, I'll never find traffic jams on the road or lines at the ski lifts. See you here! ■

Travel writer Crai Bower contributes to more than 20 magazines, newspapers, and websites. He also appears as a travel commentator for NPR, CBS, and American Forces Radio.