

Essential Idaho
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When Lewis and Clark trekked across America's uncharted interior two centuries ago, they had no idea what they'd find. Woolly mammoths? Cannibals? Volcanoes? They were ready for anything. But when they crossed into what is now Idaho, they nearly met their match. Struggling over the Rocky Mountains, they were trapped by snowstorms and forced to start shooting their horses for food. "I have been wet and as cold in every part as I ever was in my life," William Clark complained. They made it through, but remembered the passage as the most difficult leg of their trip.

Idaho has kept a low profile ever since. The state's public image is a vague and slightly forbidding amalgam of rugged terrain and climatic extremes, with a population of suspicious and uncommunicative ranchers, renegades, and militiamen – all of them armed. For those who know Idaho, the state's minimal visibility is a good thing and has allowed it to remain an untamed American wilderness. Yes, the mountainous backcountry can be daunting. But with the right guide, these expanses are an arena for a wide variety of adventures based on five simple ingredients: frontier towns, plunging white water, impassable Rocky Mountain peaks, high-altitude airstrips, and trout-filled rivers. Throw yourself into the mix, and you'll discover Idaho pleasures that Lewis and Clark never quite managed to find.

No. 1: Town

Idaho mountain towns are a haphazard affair. Take Stanley, population 70. The more sophisticated houses on its unpaved streets are made of logs. The rest look as though they were hammered together from pieces of scrap by cabin fever-crazed yokels.

Given the beauty of the looming Sawtooth Range and meandering Salmon River, and the fact that booming Sun Valley lies just 60 miles down the road, you might think more people would want to live here. But you wouldn't be taking into account the severity of the winters: temperatures have been known to get down to 58 below. During the summer, though, 20 outfitters operate here, guiding trips as far away as Hells Canyon and the Owyhee River. The Plum assignment is rafting the Middle Fork of the Salmon. From the put-in at Boundary Creek to the takeout at Cache Bar, the Middle Fork runs 100 miles of Class III and IV white water right through the heart of the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, whose 2.4 million acres make up the largest contiguous designated-wilderness area in the Lower 48.

Rafting is what I've come for, but Stanley doesn't have much in the way of accommodations, so I'm staying nine miles south of town at the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch, a relic of Depression-era Americana with a sweeping view out over a sagebrush plain to the Sawtooth mountain range. My log cabin comes with a rustic stone fireplace and basic pine furniture – a homey old-school vision of the American West.

After checking in, I head back to Stanley and hit the center of the rafting universe, the Kasino Club. Underneath its rough-hewn timbers, the bar is jammed with glowingly healthy men and women, a fashion parade of billed caps, sunglasses, fleece vests, and technical outdoor wear.

I soon learn that, since it's the beginning of June, I'm about 10 days early for the main rafting season. Two more weeks and the town is going to be packed, and from then on the guides will work nonstop until Labor Day. Right now they're champing at the bit, ready to get at the river. Everyone who's anyone is here. "When are you leaving? Monday? I bet at least one of your guides is here," someone tells me. "Who are you going with?"

"Hughes River Expeditions," I say.

"Good outfit – Jerry Hughes has been running the Middle Fork for twenty-seven years. Pipé! Over here!"

A friendly blond woman, solid as a plank, comes over to introduce herself. "Oh, you're going to have fun," Pipé says. "It's big water."

Really? How big?

"the last time the river was this high we flipped two out of the three boats going over Velvet Falls. The water was going so fast, it took us a couple of miles to fish out all the clients and gear."

Hmm. And why, I ask, is it called Velvet Falls?

"It's a waterfall that's so quiet, you can't hear it above the noise of the river," Pipé says. "Not until you're over it"

No. 2: River

I tell myself that flipping over isn't so bad. Sure, the water may be 44 degrees, and the 10 mph current could hurl you with fatal force against the jagged rocks. But a soupcon of risk is all part of the white-water experience.

The next morning at nine I get on a bus for the hour-and-a-half ride from Stanley to Boundary Creek. During the trip the sky grows progressively darker; as we arrive the clouds release a drenching rain. The guides unload the baggage and we scramble to put on our layers; thermal socks and underwear, wet suits and booties, then rain gear. "Remember," says Traves, our avuncular lead guide, "no cotton. Cotton kills. It'll drain the heat from your body and sap your strength."

When I climb into the boat, my wool socks instantly soak up the freezing water from the bilge. But who cares about being wet and cold anyways, if I'm about to go hurtling through a watery boulder field? Just last month, two rafters died on Marsh Creek, a tributary. "Are you scared?" asks the woman sitting across from me.

“Yes,” I reply.

Chewie, a mountain of a man with an Abe Lincoln beard and Hawaiian-print baggies, looks us over. “You guys aren’t ready,” he says, wearing the faintest of smiles.

After an agonizing delay as the last of the gear is stowed and lashed down, we push out into the current. Traves coaches us through a crash course in river paddling: forward, back, left back, right back, stop. The boat rocks and spins dead ahead the current dips into a hole and rears up nearly vertical, spitting a cockscomb of spray. We smash into it and an icy wave topples me into the bilge, still frantically trying to paddle. “Okay,” Traves calls, “We’ve got our first rapid ahead. It’s a long one, so don’t fall out!”

The river straightens into a tumbling ally of standing waves, churning eddies, and swirling, sucking holes. Before there’s time to think, we’re crashing through the thick of it, furiously paddling and back-paddling, surging over crests and plunging down. Waves keep throwing me into the bilge and I keep scrambling out, chopping at the water with my oar. “*Stop!*” Traves yells. We’re through. We sit there on the raft’s pontoons, dripping and panting, as the rocky canyon walls glide placidly past.

Damn, that was fun. The sun has come out, the temperature has climbed, and the dark canyons have broadened to sagebrush valleys. It’s starting to feel like a vacation.

“*Forward!*” Traves calls. We paddle to the edge of the current and ground the raft. The expedition’s four other rafts haul up alongside, and the guides trek down a trail along the river’s edge. I follow and find them standing on the bank a few hundred yards below, staring at a four-foot shelf of water. Velvet Falls.

After some discussion the guides head back to the boats and out onto the water. We round a bend and it comes into sight, an innocuous-looking dip in the river. “*Forward!*” Traves hollers. Paddles fly. “*Left back!*” We swing past a boulder. “*Forward!*” Digging manically into the water, we creep toward the shore, the waterfall boiling to our right. “*Forward! Forward!*” The hull drops, bounces us back up. As we hit an eddy and turn around, I realize: we’re over the falls. Exhilarated and exhausted, we raise our paddles and clack them together Three Musketeers-style, whooping.

By the time we stop that afternoon to set up camp, the sky is nearly cloudless blue. The smell of warm dried grass blows down the valley. After we pitch our tents the crew stokes a fire and cooks dinner under the fading sky. The fine quality of the food – grilled salmon, corn bread, stir-fried vegetables – is magnified by hard-earned hunger and the vast, unspoiled setting.

After dinner Chewie plays the banjo while the rest of us get into the beer. We sit and stare at the fire, satisfied. We’re alive. We feel great. We deserve to feel great.

No. 3: Air

Two days later I'm sitting in a meadow 70 miles downstream, waiting to be airlifted out. The rest of the expedition is fording downriver for two more days, but I'm heading to Johnson Creek valley. Since the Frank Church is a wilderness area, motorized transport is technically forbidden. But when it was designated in 1980, all the existing forest service airstrips were grandfathered in, aircraft being the only practical way to bring people and supplies deep into the wilderness.

I'm sunning myself on a rock, listening to the gurgle of the river, when I hear a faint drone to the west. At first it's hard to pick out the speck moving against the summer-browned peaks. It draws nearer, descending, and I can make out the distinctive high wings of a Cessna. As it crosses over a bluff on the river, the plane catches a downdraft; it lurches, trembles, and finally touches down on the rough grass strip.

The engine dies, a metal door swings open, and a burly, bearded man climbs out. He introduces himself as Barry Bryant and tells me to get in. He turns the plane, gunning the engine; as we gain speed the Cessna suddenly pulls free of the ground. Below us the river's rolling surface falls away.

"I've been flying in the backcountry for thirty-seven years," Barry tells me as we car back up the valley. The mighty river, which has so dominated my life over the past few days, is reduced to a thin rivulet wedged into the foot of the mountains. The craggy peaks that loomed overhead are below our wingtips now, stretching in ranks as far as the horizon. All around, no towns, no roads, no houses. Idaho is even wilder than I thought. From the road, the state seems relatively unspoiled; from the air, you can see that vast reaches are completely deserted.

At 9,000 feet we skim over the mountain ridges. We're surrounded by forested hills and snow-clad peaks, their highest ponds still frozen, a mummified bluish white. It's possible no human being will stand on their banks this year, or maybe this decade, or maybe ever. As we fly along, Barry describes the various drainages to me – what creeks run into what forks – but all I can see is a wrinkled blanket of geology. We turn and start to descend into Johnson Creek valley.

No. 4: Mountains

We're met at the grass airstrip by Diana a woman with a big smile and a big truck. After Barry takes off again Diana and I drive down the dirt road that runs alongside Johnson Creek through the narrow bottom of the valley to Wapiti Meadow Ranch, which first opened its doors to guests 80 years ago. It's nearly as remote today as it was back then; getting to a paved road means a 17-mile drive on dirt track. Apart from Diana and Barry, who own the ranch, only two families live in the valley.

We follow the winding course of the river and then cross it on a wooden bridge that leads to a cluster of outbuildings arrayed along the edge of a natural meadow. "Moose and elk come to graze here," Diana says as she helps me unload my gear into one of the ranch's four cabins. Inside, my two-bedroom unit feels like a miniature version of my

grandparents' house, with re-room wood paneling, seventies Colonial-style furniture, a woodstove, and an embroidered wall hanging that reads HAPPY HEARTS MAKE HAPPY HOMES. *Copies of Bugle: Journal of Elk and the Hunt* are stacked on the coffee table. It's exquisite kitsch, minus the irony. And who wants irony in this setting, with rugged wooded ridges rising steeply on either side and the roar of the snowmelt-swollen creek for mood music?

The pleasures of life in the mountains haven't changed much over the years: hunting, fishing, riding, hiking. The next day I saddle up and ride out across the meadow into the timber with Cody, a 20-year-old cowboy from Emmett, Idaho. We traverse lush meadows, moving along the edge of the valley, through thickets of lodgepole pines and across the streams. Cody's border collie, Ty, runs up and down the path in front of us, sniffing out prairie dogs and marmots.

We come upon a tricky bit of trail along the side of the hill; Cody suggests I keep my toe tips in the stirrups and jump away to the uphill side if my horse starts to tumble. He does have to scramble a bit in the rocky, dry soil, but fortunately stays right-side up. We stop for a picnic lunch on a forested bench overlooking the river, then leave the horses and scramble up to a scree field where someone has placed an old tin bathtub at the foot of a natural hot spring.

On the way back to the ranch we pause on a bluff with a view of the Johnson Creek valley. Before us lies a majestic vista: a broad, limpid river, its gravel bed twinkling beneath the swift current, laid out under an epic mountain sky. Below us, a pair of steelhead trout as long as my arm undulate in the crystalline flow.

No. 5: Fish

If Idaho were a religion, trout-fishing would be its sacrament. "Idaho has some of the finest dry-fly fisheries in the world," says my cousin Jamie Glasgow, who likes fish so much that he became a trout ecologist, and likes Idaho so much that he married an Idaho Falls girl. "People here are passionate about trout. They don't see fishing as a means to an end. They see it as an aesthetic experience.

The most storied trout streams are the Henry's Fork and the South Fork of the Snake River, both in eastern Idaho. So after a few more days at the Wapiti Meadow Ranch, I fly with Barry back to Stanley, pick up my rental car, and drive 250 miles southeast. It's time to get serious about fishing.

My bunk for the night is at the South Fork Lodge, a hideaway built by Mark Rockefeller right alongside one of the most productive stretches of trout water in the state. As the sun goes down I settle in on the terrace for a drink, watching the trout rise to feed in a honey hole a few yards away, before retreating inside the futuristic silo-shaped mail lodge for a meal in the cavernous dining room.

The next morning, I wake early to meet my guide, Darren Puetz, 29. “I’ve never had anyone not catch a fish,” he says as I help him put our drift boat into the water. “There are four of five thousand trout per mile of this river.”

We ease our boat into the current. It’s been a while since I wielded a fly rod, and my technique is a mess. When I try to undo an incipient snarl by twirling the lure around the rod, I only make the situation worse.

“Fly-fishing is like golf,” Darren says, trying to be helpful. “It has a rhythm.”

It makes no difference whether my line is in a knot or in the water; I’m getting no nibbles. It’s early in the season, and the water is still too cold for trout to think seriously of feeding. I don’t really care – for me fishing is just an excuse to sit around in a beautiful place and listen to the sound of running water.

The lazy flow of the Snake is peaceful compared to the Middle Fork of the Salmon. We drift along, stones passing eight inches under our keel. A few miles down we enter a canyon, and for the next 14 miles we drift through a dramatic and otherwise inaccessible landscape. On both sides, eroded layers of lava, remnants of past cataclysms, stand at the top of steep green slopes like battlements. The river, Darren tells me, is a favorite of Vice President Dick Cheney’s, who visited just two weeks earlier. Apparently, when he comes there are sharpshooters posted for his protection along the canyon rim.

Finally I hook a couple of fighting rainbows, handsome fish with lurid purple streaks down their sides. As with sunsets, only nature could make something so garish yet so beautiful. Then I land a cutthroat, bearing the telltale slash of crimson at its gills. By the time we arrive at the haul-out at the end of the canyon, my total is two cutts, a whitefish, and a rainbow – one-tenth what a decent angler could do later in the summer.

I drive back toward Central Idaho on a road that passes along the trough of the Snake River Plain. This is potato country, bedded with the rich loam that has done so much to build wealth for the state.

Then the land becomes suddenly, disturbingly dark. A smattering of black boulders amid the sage gives way to an endless rolling carpet of volcanic rubble. I’ve happened upon Craters of the Moon National Monument, a 75-square-mile landscape of lava and cinder. I pull over into the visitors’ center, where an ever-looping audiovisual show explains how 15,000 years ago, a hot spot in the magma underneath Idaho blew out a massive caidera 30 miles across. The hot spot has been migrating eastward ever since, exploding again and again, punching a chain of giant holes in the Rockies. It’s still down there. Its M.O. is to blow every 2,000 years – and the last time it did was 2,100 years ago. You do the math.

“Before the next eruption,” the audio says, “is a great time to visit Craters of the Moon!”

Thanks Idaho, I think, as I head back to my car. I’ve had my fill of adventure for now.