

AN *Idaho Gem* AWAITS IN THE SAWTOOTH

The Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, speaks to the best of Idaho with reverence for its history, and passion for its future. By Sabina Dana Plasse

Sun Valley's connection to the expansive valleys that run north and south from the region gives residents, visitors and travelers an opportunity to immerse in Idaho at its very best. The Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch can be an extension of the Wood River Valley experience by driving 50 miles to the north on a scenic route through the Sawtooth National Recreation Area. It is an authentic lodge offering a western experience for guests who want to unplug and take advantage of adventures either hiking, biking, trail riding, fly fishing, whitewater rafting, or exploring the region's natural wonders. The 900-acre ranch is the epitome of comfort, escape, and adventure, and each day culminates on the porch.

Built in 1930 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the accommodations at the ranch provide modern comfort and historic charm. Prior to becoming one of four Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch owners, architect Courtney Kapp was captivated by the setting as a guest and frequent explorer in the Sawtooth Mountains. Since the purchase of the ranch in 2005, she has been engaged in a comprehensive renovation project for the property with two local talents, architect Gretchen Wagner and Sawtooth Valley Builders. Kapp's goal is to renovate while using local materials to connect guests to a uniquely Idaho world.



BUILDINGS WITH STORIES

"Guests experience the architecture as part of the ranch," she said. "Preserving the history through renovations is a way to maintain the intimate relationship between the physical structure and the natural environment. It speaks to the authenticity of the Western experience. You can see it all from the porch: site sensitive structures that belong in the backdrop of majestic mountains."

Kapp highlighted that the logs used in the construction were cut, snaked, skinned, notched and assembled on the property at the height of the Depression. A forge and hydroelectric plant were set up as well as a tented community for the workers.

"The logs and the ironwork seem to be integral to each other; there is remarkable harmony in these elements," Kapp said. "The sound the latches make when you open the porch doors into the lobby is the sound of being at the ranch."

White-bark pine branches, sourced from surrounding mountaintops, were used for chandeliers in the lodge, and holes were drilled for clear glass light bulbs. On the porch, pine tree trunks with partial branches support the roof, serving as another example of how simplicity resounds with character. Many guests feel this character while viewing the stunning vista of the Sawtooths, a view that rivals any remarkable mountain range and is often punctuated with evening lightening shows and remarkable sunsets.

"Besides the lodge, our guest cabins were a high priority for renovation," Kapp continued. "Our goal was to use local, authentic materials that speak to the history while upgrading the comfort of each accommodation. We raised ceilings in the bathrooms, installed sliding barn doors, enlarged showers using stone from Oakley, Idaho, added rainfall showerheads, used authentic divided-light windows, and provided state-of-the-art beds and mattresses. In our quest for local materials, we loaded kids in the back of our ranch truck and drove around the property picking up pasture stones for the fireplaces. They were instructed to find the ones with the orangey moss for character."

CORRALLING LOCAL FOODS

A critical part of the ranch experience is the exceptional dining. The food not only has ties to tradition, but it has made the ranch a culinary haven. "The chefs here appreciate our completely remodeled kitchen and the access we provide to local, organic food," she said.

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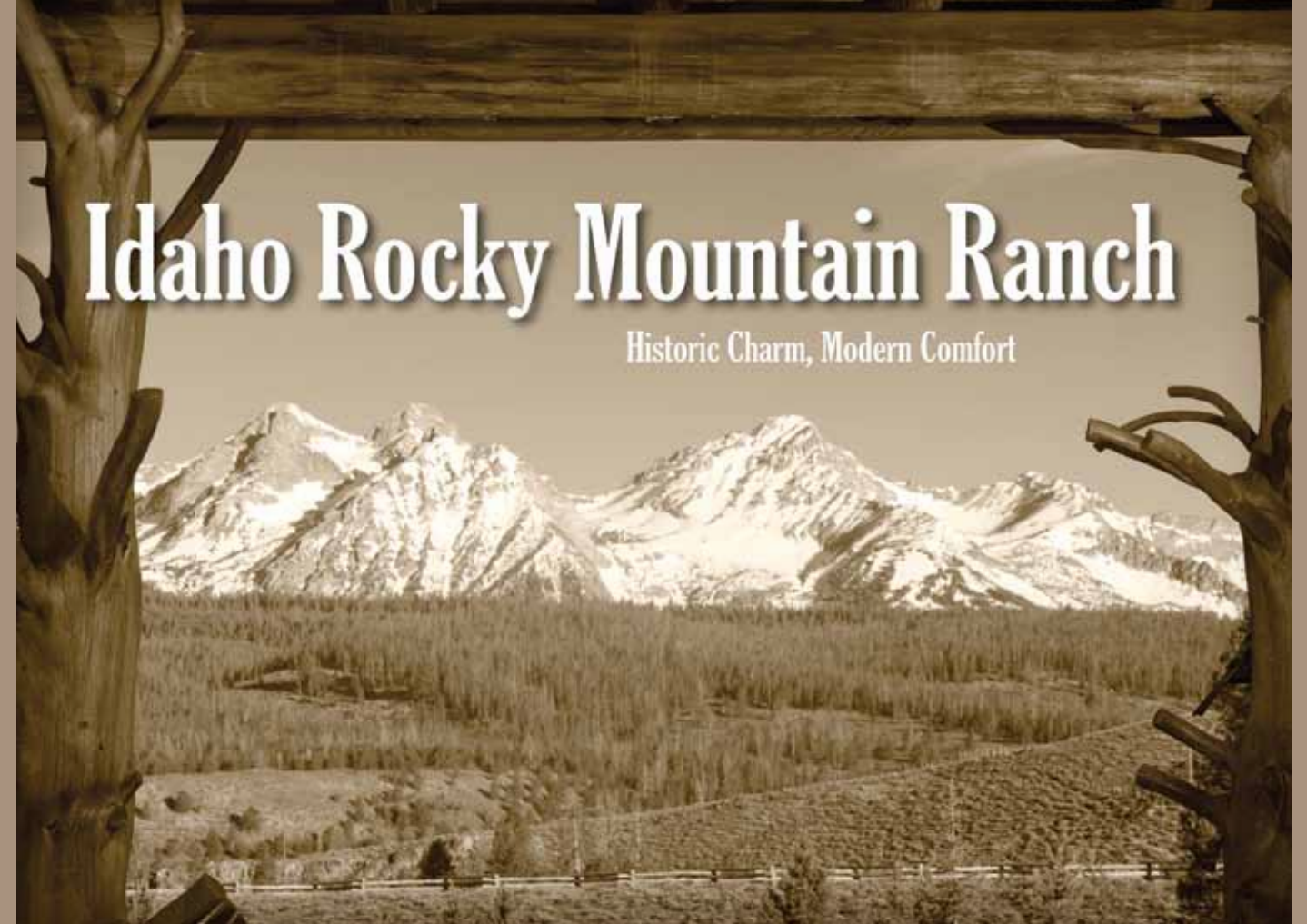
– Courtney Kapp, Co-owner and Architect

“Each chef at the ranch brings new ideas and menu items. The national movement for healthy food fits easily with our interest in authenticity. We bring in Hagerman fruit and vegetables, Lava Lake lamb, local trout, and, of course, Idaho spuds of every variety. We even have morel mushrooms harvested from the nearby Fisher Creek burn area. It’s hearty Idaho food served with care and attention.”

To complement the food, the ranch has focused on a creative wine and beer list. Whether requesting a custom bottle of Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch pinot noir or a Kilt Lifter brew, the bar is centrally located. Kapp decided to bring the original 1929 Frigidaire out of storage to a place of honor in the lobby, and she had Gretchen Wagner design a bar around it. It is paneled in slate from a Carey, Idaho, schoolhouse, and a staffer chalks the menu on it every day. Similar to the bar design is a new outdoor barbecue pit with a 10-foot, wood-fired, iron smoker. The serving counter for the pit is used for ribs, chicken, brisket, and a variety of summer salads on cookout nights. All the newly designed elements are in keeping with the integrity of the more than 80-year-old logs.

“We’re very close to being done with the renovations of the lodge and guest accommodations,” Kapp said. “Constant replacement and upgrades for sheets, towels and food service items are ongoing, and we’re always tinkering with retail selections. The next architectural focus is on the lower ranch.”

The upper ranch is in the tradition of great western guest lodges; whereas, the lower ranch houses the infrastructure—the tractors, boats, horses, and barn. Other amenities include a hot spring pool, staff housing, and a workshop. It is also the access point for fishing the Salmon River and wildlife viewing. The lower ranch has a rich history with a unique microclimate, geology, and hydrology. A former owner even used the barn to breed specialty cattle, which he named “Rokmor,” an acronym that Kapp has reinstated for current projects.



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ACTIVITIES WORTHY OF UNPLUGGING

The ranch is proud of its history and its ability to take care of guests in an individualized fashion. There is an incredible diversity of activities that brings a variety of travelers to the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch. Honeymooners, academics, scientists, athletes, and families of all ages congregate here. It has been commended for unplugging teenagers from gadgets and creating a sense of place. A concierge assists guests in choosing activities each day and makes the arrangements. At the end of the day, the ranch's natural hot spring, which feeds directly into a swimming pool, is where guests can indulge in a soothing swim or soak.

Special packages for standard cabins include breakfast, packed picnic lunches, and dinner, as well as amenities such as mountain bikes, hiking trails, a stocked fishing pond and access to the Salmon River. Throughout the summer, the ranch offers twice-weekly mountain bike clinics, horseback riding, a weekly fly-casting clinic, and a weekly hike with Sawtooth Mountain Guides.

The ranch also has wine events, photography workshops, women's fly-fishing rendezvous, and fly-tying clinics. Author John Rember presents a history of the region during fireside chats throughout the summer. As for the kids, there are special dinner activities and a Junior Ranger program with a naturalist. Ranch dinners feature fine dining in the lodge, outdoor barbecues, and a Monday evening option to ride a wagon pulled by draft horses to a meadow site for a Dutch oven dinner. Musical entertainment is local talent, and many have won international acclaim for their work but choose to live in this part of Idaho.

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