

Your Own Private Idaho
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National parks have their charms, but solitude is not one of them. I've walked in Wyoming's Tetons, where trails can feel like a Starbucks queue, and I've trudged up paths in Montana's Glacier with a gaggle of tourists, all of us yelling "Hey bear!" in case Mama Grizzly should be lurking around the next bend.

That doesn't happen in the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho. In fact, you may be more likely to meet a bear than another human.

I was sold on the area during my first visit there a couple years ago, when we huffed and puffed up 8,000 feet of peaks. On the way we met only five other hikers – one of whom was a baby riding on his father's back. At the top, we faced a sparkling lake overhung by a sheer expanse of granite on one side and a wildflower meadow on the other. Snow-frosted peaks lay ahead in the distance. Now, this was hiking.

Two thousand feet below was home base: little Stanley, Idaho, pop. 100, looking like so many Monopoly houses flung out alongside the glittering blue ribbon of the Salmon River.

Stanley sits about 60 miles north of – and a world away from – tony Sun Valley (where there are lots of people). It's a rough-and-ready town thrown up at the junction of Stanley Creek and the Salmon more than a century ago by trappers and hopeful gold prospectors.

Today it's a convenient jumping-off place for whatever outdoorsy pastime appeals in the surrounding 217,000-acre Sawtooth Wilderness. You can do everything you'd do in the great national parks of the West – hike mountains with spectacular scenery, cast into a clear trout stream, take a white-knuckle rafting or kayaking trip down river rapids – but without the crowds.

The town offers a range of lodging, including several comfortable and reasonably priced motels as well as acres of campgrounds tucked in among the moraines and woods around Stanley. There's also a general store, a couple of outdoors shops, a handful of restaurants, some bars, a bakery, an airfield, a library and a dozen or so outfitters eager to guide anglers, rafters or horseback riders.

Hikers can, of course, operate without guides. All we need are well-marked trails, hot showers, firm mattresses and good food and wine at the end of the day. Stanley delivers on all counts. I've sampled in-town accommodations, which were economical and had kitchens and good restaurants nearby. But my first choice is a guest lodge south of town called the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch.

Built as a hunting lodge in 1930, the log structure is on the National Register of Historic Places and looks as if it hasn't changed much over the decades. In the lobby, comfortable leather chairs cluster around a roaring fire in a big stone hearth. Cozy guest cabins are spread out around the grounds, and a front porch faces the broadside of the Sawtooths and one of the West's prize views. On a June

Sunday, when friends and I arrived for a return visit to the lodge, an inch of snow had fallen, so enjoying that view from a porch rocking chair meant first wrapping up in one of the dozen or so quilts stacked near the front door for just such chilly occasions.

“Many of our guests live very busy lives,” said lodge manager Sandra Beckwith. And many of them, as we did, find something special and unusually quite simple in the world of Stanley. “One of our guests told me he would get up just to go outside in the middle of the night and look up at the stars,” she said.

Although every room has a fireplace and full bath, the ranch proudly touts that there are no telephones or TVs in the 21 rooms. There is only one courtesy phone for guests, tucked away behind a wood stack just off the lobby. The only Internet connection is a snail-like king on a computer in the laundry room next to the inn’s spring-heated pool.

Although billing itself as a guest ranch, the Idaho Rocky Mountain Ranch will not organize the day for you. “We’re here and we’ll make suggestions,” said Beckwith. “You have the opportunity to select your own adventure.”

Tom Tuttle, one of a group of Alexandria friends who gathered at the inn for a few days after a June wedding, is a practiced fly fisherman, so he, his wife, and a friend hired a guide and headed off to see what the Salmon had to offer. “Unlike a lot of eastern rivers, the Salmon’s very accessible,” he said. “It’s an easy river to wade and fish, even without a guide.”

Every mile or so, there are “sportsmen’s access” signs that invite anglers to the river shore. Unfortunately, in the remaining chill of June, the fish appeared to be still hugging the deeps, and when my group went out, no one caught anything. But Tom said he suspected July would bring better fish.

Most guests at the ranch don’t seem to miss scheduled activities and fill their time just fine, either with suggestions posted on a message board each day, such as a visit to the local hatchery, or by hiking one of the trails around the property. Judging from the conversations around the inn’s 10-seat dining room tables in the evenings, most people hike, and guests are eager to share with each other the day’s latest trail discovery.

To encourage walking, the lodge takes orders for boxed lunches, which include sandwiches ranging from peanut butter and jelly to smoked trout. It also provides every guest with a list of 14 nearby day hikes, descriptions of each and a rudimentary map of the area. (The serious hiker should equip himself with a topographic map, available at outfitter stores.)

Sawtooth treks are visually rewarding. Although the steep stream valleys are deeply forested, plenty of clearings provide almost vertical sight lines up to spires and crags that are high enough to put a crick in your neck. The area boasts 50 peaks over 10,000 feet high. Yet there is something for every hiker, from nearly flat walks to sheer switchback scrambles that will leave you gasping. One of the most rewarding walks begins at the far end of Redfish Lake, a glacier-scooped body of water with campgrounds, cabins, a lodge, and a sandy beach for swimming or renting canoes and kayaks.

We also took a motorboat “shuttle” to the end of the lake and walked up the Redfish Lake Creek trail, making sure we turned around in time to hoof it back and meet the shuttle again at 4:30 p.m. If we’d had another couple of hours, we could have attempted a 2,000-foot climb to Alpine Lake, one of the 300-plus mountain lakes that hang high in the crags.

On a previous visit a couple of years ago, a friend and I tackled one of those switchback climbs up to Sawtooth Lake, elevation 8,430 feet. Once we reached 7,800 feet, the trees dropped away and we were in the midst of alpine meadows crossed by rocky streams. Wildflowers – crimson, gold and white – were everywhere, with the surrounding peaks in shades of gray, beige, even purple.

The lake shimmered in the sunlight. We hiked to its end and found another tarn, just over a slight saddle. A lone tree gave us some shade and shelter as we ate our sandwiches and gorged on the view.

That day, after our descent, with every muscle screaming ouch, we indulged in one of the Stanley area’s greatest treats – a soak in Sunbeam Springs. Idaho abounds in hot springs, and just north of town, along the Salmon and near the gold-rush ghost town of Custer, hot springs gush out of the river bank and into the Salmon’s icy water. Over decades, visitors have arranged stones for sitting and soaking along the shallows. If you begin to feel poached in one of the soaking pools near the shore, you can move to another stone-circled pool farther out into the river, where the cold water mixes with the 110-degree spring water, for a little relief. And again – no crowds.

We stretched out, wiggling our sore toes, began to feel our knees again. It doesn’t get much better than that – even in Idaho.