

Sun Valley Idaho

A Resort for all Seasons

STORY BY DIANE COVINGTON-CARTER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROL WALLER

Soft snowflakes fluttered as I stepped off the plane at the tiny, friendly airport in Hailey, Idaho (population 9,463). I breathed in the fresh mountain air and I could feel the spaciousness—just trees, snow, and sky as far as I could see.

It was my first trip to The Wood River Valley, which encompasses the towns of Hailey, Ketchum, and Sun Valley, Idaho. As our hotel shuttle traveled on the snow-covered two-lane road to the nearby town of Ketchum, I relaxed and let go of the bustle of travel and opened to something new, and special.



The Shoshone, Bannock and Lemhi Native American tribes originally inhabited the area but retreated in the mid to late 1800s, when sheep ranching, and lead and silver mining brought in European settlers. In the early 20th century, Ketchum captured the title of the second-largest sheep exporter in the world, just behind Sydney, Australia.

But by the 1930s, Ketchum had become a sleepy little town. All that changed in 1936 when Averell Harriman, Chairman of the Board of the Union Pacific Railroad, purchased a 4,000-acre ranch and built the Sun Valley Resort, the first destination ski resort in North America. He filled trains with East Coast and Hollywood celebrities and imported Austrian ski instructors to teach them to ski, which some skeptics viewed as 'hurtling themselves down steep mountains on wooden planks'. Union Pacific's engineering department even solved the problem of getting skiers up the hill (beyond a rope-tow). They created the first one-person chairlift, inspired by equipment used to transport bananas onto ships.

Marilyn Monroe, Ingrid Bergman, Gary Cooper, and Lucille Ball were among the famous who came to experience the excitement and lure of the new Idaho resort. Ernest Hemingway arrived in 1939, drawn by the beauty, and 64 years later a visitor can still feel the pull of the wide-open spaces he fell in love with. (In 1939, the population of Idaho came in at half a million. Now it is just under two million, the seventh lowest density state in the US.) Hemingway took his life there in 1961, just days before his 62nd birthday.

Ketchum feels vibrant and bustling now, full of shops, art galleries and excellent restaurants. The old railroad right of way serves as a cross-country ski trail in the winter and bike path the rest of the year. I came to write about winter sports, but discovered that this area of tiny towns, huge mountains, dark night skies and bright blue expanses during the day offers year-round outdoor fun and adventure, relaxation, and culture.

Here's what's magnificent all year round:



First, there is no need to rent a car. The free buses and hotel shuttles have bike and ski racks, and most hotels will drive you around. Plan to look up at the night sky and watch for shooting stars. Sun Valley became an "Idaho Dark Sky Reserve" in 2017, which means it is one of the most amazing places to see the wonders of the night sky in the world.

Visit museums, art galleries, and, of

course, do some shopping. But the real draw is the great outdoors.

Fall Colors

As the leaves on the aspen and cottonwood trees turn vibrant red, yellow, and orange, revisit the Wild West, and celebrate Labor Day Weekend at Ketchum's Wagon Days. During this festive weekend, enjoy the "Big Hitch Parade" highlighting vintage carriages, stage-

coaches, carts and even a 20-Mule Team pulling historic wagons, the grand finale. This popular event recalls the town's founding during the mining era and hails as one of the biggest non-motorized parades in the US.

"Trailing of the Sheep" celebration:

Since the 1800s, sheep migrate each spring from the southern plains to the Wood River Valley's mountain pastures. In October, the "Trailing of the Sheep" marks the sheep herds'



return to the plains further south for the winter, passing through the towns of Ketchum, Hailey, and Bellevue.

The festival celebrates the local history of sheep ranching, reflecting the diverse cultural heritage of the region. At the center are the sheep, but Cooking Classes, lots of delicious food, a Folklike Fair, Sheep Dog Trials and a Wool Fest are just some activities that round out the fun.

27th Annual Trailing of the Sheep Festival, October 4-8, 2023.

Winter Fun

Sun Valley became famous for its winter sports and still holds that distinction for downhill skiing at Bald Mountain, which my husband enjoyed. I experienced the joy of the wide-open spaces, snowshoeing at Billy's Bridge in the Sawtooth National Recreation Area near Sun Valley and cross country-skiing at the Sun Valley Nordic Center, the golf course during the other seasons.

For year-round pleasure, the award-winning 20,000 square foot Spa at Sun Valley Resort now offers New Moon and Full Moon well-being rituals, in addition to all the other sumptuous spa services.

Spring Activities

The end of the skiing season brings vibrant and colorful wildflowers throughout the valley, and along the cross-country and snowshoeing trails. For biking enthusiasts, close to 400 miles of singletrack open, along with 30 miles of paved trails. Add in three golf courses, a Wellness Festival, horseback riding, tennis, pickleball, and the opening of the Fly-fishing season for Idaho trout, and you'll never run out of fun.

Summer

In addition to all the spring activities, add in Yoga on the Mountain, parapenting, paddle boarding and kayaking, hiking, whitewater rafting, outdoor concerts, and writer's conferences.



Photo by Diane Covington-Carter



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Summer 2023 welcomes back "Sun Valley on Ice" featuring medal-winning headline skaters and the 'Sun Valley on Ice' cast. Future figure skaters can enjoy the Sun Valley Figure Skating School all at the Sun Valley Lodge.

Places to Stay

The Limelight Hotel:

This award-winning, 99-room hotel sits right in the center of Ketchum, walking distance to all the restaurants, shops, and activities, includes breakfast and even welcomes dogs.

The super friendly staff, besides shuttling you around town, will sign you up for the use of an electric Audi for two or four-hour stints, complete with snowshoes and a pass for Galena Lodge in the winter. Or you can jump on cruisers and fat tire bikes for an open-air jaunt.

The bountiful breakfast, included fresh pastries from a local bakery, eggs, fruit, and any other breakfast item you could want, a complete spread. Stroll through the lobby in your thick terry-cloth robe to enjoy the heated pool and hot tub or check out the gym. In the lobby restaurant, with live music many nights, we enjoyed tasty chili, and polenta and meatballs. Other diners dug into delicious-looking burgers and pizzas.

The Knob Hill Inn:

In chilly weather, when you enter this intimate and cozy inn, a crackling fire greets you first, then a smiling staff member. You can stroll to the center of Ketchum from this 29-room inn or take the local free bus or the inn's shuttle. Dogs are welcome.

Our favorite menu items at the Inn's restaurant included the burger, and the fried chicken, which came with popovers and honey butter. Then the warm berry cobbler with vanilla ice cream for a perfect dessert. Your stay includes breakfast, a pool and a jacuzzi. Their shuttle service will drive you around town and to and from the airport. It's just a short walk to the Ketchum Cemetery and Hemingway's grave, usually covered with gifts—

whiskey bottles, cigars, pens, flowers, and notes. The inn serves cookies and snacks in the afternoon, a perfect pick-up after all the outdoor fun.

"We are a small hotel and guests come back year after year. If we recognize the last name, we'll upgrade them for the same price," said the assistant manager, Sthefany Seegott. "We get sold out. We'll text the guests if the room is ready early. If they bring their car in the winter, we clean the snow off each morning for them. Guests like those small details."

The Historic Sun Valley Lodge:

The lodge has been called "the heart and soul of Sun Valley." And no visit to the area would be complete without enjoying its elegance and beauty. From the greeting of the doorman to the lofty ceilings and expansive windows looking out into the natural beauty, the feeling is 'wow, this is something special'.

The lodge underwent a complete renovation in 2015, sparing no expense to enlarge the 108 guest rooms, adding modern amenities and a 20,000-square-foot spa. Yet it retained the feeling of a timeless, world-class hotel. The photos that line the halls attest to the hotel's history and importance. Hollywood legends, presidents and politicians, dignitaries, Ernest Hemingway, and other writers, all enjoyed the elegant ambiance. In Hemingway's photos, he sits at his Royal typewriter working or dines with friends and Hollywood stars.

He completed For Whom the Bell Tolls in room 206 and I was able to visit the "Celebrity Suite" devoted to his memory, on the second floor, filled with photos and a Royal typewriter. The room felt spacious and serene, like he could have walked in and sat down at the typewriter at any moment. The hotel provides a shuttle to and from the airport and around town and free buses run regularly. Guests can choose from five different eateries in the village surrounding the Lodge, from the casual Konditorei to the elegant Ram restaurant.

We enjoyed a scrumptious 'pancakes with berries' breakfast at the Konditorei and the Heritage Menu at the Ram. The Ram has been serving diners since the resort first opened in

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1937 and is one of Sun Valley's finest restaurants. In 2015, the resort took it down to its studs for a remodel yet retained its original rustic charm. Our Heritage menu featured dishes from the restaurant's many years of culinary excellence. That evening offered Pork Tenderloin Schnitzel from 1982.

The soft melodies of Pianist Larry Harshbarger, who has been playing old-time favorites on the baby grand piano at the Ram for 43 years, provided a relaxing ambiance.

Celebrities still come to Sun Valley, but the local, laid-back vibe allows them to relax and enjoy the area. "We leave them alone, we respect their privacy," several locals told me. "And don't tell anyone how great it is here."

After eight days, I could see their point. Nature rules there, with a capital N. And they'd like to keep it that way. We left The Wood River Valley refreshed and relaxed. We came for winter sports, but discovered a Four-Season Resort that we will return to, to enjoy and discover the other three seasons.

IF YOU GO

- <https://visitidaho.org/>
- <https://valleychamber.org>
- www.visitsunvalley.com

