Vibrant Boise

Recreation, culture and craft drinks in Idaho’s growing capital

By Buddy Levy
Visitors take a spring hike in the Boise Foothills.
From the fourth-floor window of our downtown boutique hotel, we watch the lights of Boise blink and flicker like beacons, sparkling with possibility. In the four decades we’ve been visiting the city, we’ve witnessed a gradual but steady metamorphosis, from a rural-feeling state capital to a colorful and modern city pulsing with art, culture, eclectic eateries, and civic devotion to green space and community.

Four times a year (we try for one visit per season), my wife, Camie, and I make a trip to Boise, and we’re always delighted by something new. Boise annually makes many “top cities in America” lists in categories ranging from livability and work-life balance to urban adventuring and hippest city. Lonely Planet, in its “Best in the U.S.” round-up, cited Boise as the No. 2 destination to see in 2018 (second only to California’s Redwood Coast) and described Boise as “what cool looks like before the rest of the world has figured it out.” Well, we figured it out a long time ago, and Boise’s cool keeps us coming back. After years of visits—and taking into consideration the city’s newest offerings—we’ve developed a list of some must-sees and must-dos in Boise.

OUTDOOR RECREATION

Recently, Camie and I strolled down the paved foot and bike path known as the Boise River Greenbelt. The winter’s deep snowpack high in the mountains had created big flows on the Boise River. Black cottonwood seedlings—with their rust-red stems and serrated green leaves, sprang from the sandy soil. Northern flickers and chickadees flitted and chirped, perched in the mature cottonwood branches above us. As we walked, luxuriating in the warming morning sun, we could see snow-capped peaks of the Boise Mountains past the Boise Foothills to the northeast. Continuing on, we saw a fox that had come to drink from a slow-swirling pool at the river’s edge.

The 25-mile urban pathway along the Boise River is one of the major draws and defining features of the city. The path is available for walking, cycling and skating, and provides easy access to Boise’s spectacular, varied riverside parks. Two of our favorites for recreation are Bernardine Quinn Riverside Park, where we can kayak or stand-up paddleboard in the river and fish in 22-acre Quinn’s Pond; and the Boise Whitewater Park, with adjustable wave features and wave pools available to the public. We love to watch the surfers and kayakers play in the waves, and rent watercraft ourselves from Idaho River Sports and hop in.

On nearly every trip to Boise, we also go to the fabulous foothills, with their more than 190 miles of interconnected trails and paths. Some of the trails wind across neighborhoods before linking to public lands, providing adventure for everyone. There are designated trails for dog walkers, equestrians, mountain bikers, hikers and runners. On all Boise area trails, visitors should stay on designated paths and avoid wet or muddy trails.

When Camie and I were younger (and very fit because we were running marathons and racing on mountain bikes), we enjoyed some of the more difficult, steep loops, but now we are just as content doing family-friendly nature hikes,
such as the 2-mile Crestline Trail #28. This connects to Kestrel Trail #39A and Lower Hells Gulch Trail #29 to provide a terrific feel of the foothills. I love the sweet scent of sage, the views of the city spread out into the high desert of the Treasure Valley, and wildlife sightings such as mule deer, coyotes, and various owls and other raptors.

Another outdoor-adventure must-do in Boise is Bogus Basin—a nonprofit mountain recreation area less than 20 miles from downtown. Recent improvements have added to Bogus Basin's already awesome appeal as an alpine and Nordic ski spot. There's now a mountain coaster called the "Glade Runner," with more than three-quarters of a mile of serpentine excitement; a bungee trampoline that (with harnesses and ropes) allows kids to bounce nearly 20 feet in the air; and a 32-foot tall rock-climbing wall.

A lesser-known outdoor gem is the Oregon Trail Reserve, a 77-acre system of walking paths in Southeast Boise. Visitors can view remnants of the Oregon Trail, including the Kelton Ramp, a steep trail dating to the early 1860s that cuts through rimrock of the Boise River (hiking on the ramp itself is not recommended). Kelton Ramp is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

ARTS AND CULTURE

Boise's natural outdoor bounty is complemented by its vibrant arts-and-culture scene. Last spring when Camie and I visited, we were struck once again by the wealth of fine public art (about 80 site-based public art installations and counting) that has been commissioned around downtown. The city's commitment to public art runs deep and is evident nearly everywhere you look, from the stunning 2017 installation by artists Dwayne Carver and Zachary Hill called Cottonwoods—seven 24-foot-tall weathering steel structures reminiscent of a cottonwood grove, publicly funded and located at the City Hall Plaza—to Freak Alley, a downtown outdoor gallery with rotating murals.

Art and culture converge beautifully in Boise's famous Basque Block (Grove Street between Capitol Boulevard and Sixth Street), the central gathering place for the more than 10,000 members of the Boise-area Basque community. Some are descendants of those who came to Idaho in the 1880s to work as shepherders, or of those who fled Spanish dictator Francisco Franco's reign in the mid-1900s.

Don't miss the Basque Museum and Cultural Center, which is dedicated to preserving, perpetuating and promoting the Basque culture; see art installations such as Cottonwoods, located in the City Hall Plaza; and walk among Freak Alley's artistic murals.

LODGING

The Modern Hotel and Bar: The chic boutique hotel is located in the heart of the downtown Linen District (just a block away from Big City Coffee and Cafe, another Boise must-visit). The Modern features 39 rooms and four apartments outfitted in Midcentury Modern appointments. Features include walking and biking access to downtown, a bar and restaurant with innovative dishes such as braised collard greens, duck confit and "Beet-balls," fashioned by James Beard Award-nominated chef Nate Whitley.

Hotel 43: Urban chic, named for the 43rd parallel in the 43rd state. Stylish rooms and suites with striking views of the Capitol Building and the Boise Foothills, just a few minutes' walk from Jack's Urban Meeting Place (JUMP) and The Grove Plaza. Hotel 43 also has its own gourmet restaurant, Chandeliers Prime Steaks & Fine Seafood.

The Grove Hotel: Luxury accommodations, with 250 contemporary rooms, appointed in white-and-green color schemes. Great location right next to CenturyLink Arena (concerts, Steelheads hockey). Dine at the delicious Trillium Restaurant, which serves breakfast, lunch and dinner. The hotel also boasts the illuminated public art piece River Sculpture, by artist Alison Sky. — B.L.
Basque history and culture. Originally established in the 19th century Cyrus Jacob/Uberaaga boarding house in 1965, the museum expanded in 1993 and has rotating exhibits that include photographs and artifacts.

Visitors also can enjoy Basque foods and drinks at Bar Gernika, which serves Kalimotxo, a beverage made with cola and red wine.

For an entirely different and wholly modern experience, spend a few hours at Jack’s Urban Meeting Place (JUMP). It’s a six-story, 65,000-square-foot nonprofit creative center that comprises a vintage tractor collection; an urban park, complete with multiplayer slides; an outdoor amphitheater; and a dance studio and high-tech classrooms for programming such as dance, cooking and improv.

Camie and I took a country swing dance class during our last visit, alternately laughing and cringing at our “technique,” which we could see in the mirrors of the light-filled Move Studio.

Outside at the JUMP Park, I played around on “The Climber,” a three-story pyramidal net structure that was challenging, tiring and really fun. Camie surprised me by braving the five-story “Spiral Slide,” a twisting corkscrew chute that took her from the top of the park to the bottom in a matter of seconds.

An exciting new Boise venue is the James Castle House. The cultural center, opened in 2018, was once owned by Idaho-born artist James Castle (1899-1977). Born deaf in the town of Garden Valley (about 50 miles northeast of Boise), Castle began drawing at an early age and was entirely self-taught. He worked with found items—scrap paper, cardboard boxes—on which he created “soot drawings.” The house features ongoing exhibitions of the artist’s life and work.

FOOD AND BEVERAGE

In 2000, Bardenay in Boise—which describes itself as the first restaurant/distillery in the United States—served its first cocktail, created with rum made on the
Boise

premises. Unfortunately, Camie and I missed opening night, but we’ve dined there many times since, and it has always delivered for us: excellent food paired with in-house distilled spirits.

It’s fun to follow the distillers’ recommended pairings. Last time, Camie paired her Capellini Pomodoro with a Negroni (Bardennay gin, Campari and sweet vermouth, with an orange twist). I complemented my charbroiled salmon with a Bardennay house martini, served with Lillet Blanc French aperitif and Basque olives. Sublime.

Over the last two decades or so, Boise has fully established itself at the forefront of the adult beverage industry, and a handful of artisanal spirits distillers have popped up recently in the area. They are typically family-owned, use locally sourced ingredients and produce premium, small-batch products. For instance, 8 Feathers Distillery uses grains and artesian well water from Weiser, Idaho, about 75 miles to the northwest, to produce stellar whiskies and bourbons. The distillery uses local corn to make Idaho Moonshine, which is finished in uncharred barrels.

Yeah, Boise is cool. And getting cooler all the time. I always look forward to revisiting classic favorites and discovering new ones, and enjoying all the city has to offer. 🍦

Freelance writer and book author Buddy Levy lives in North Idaho. For more information about Boise recreation, see boise.org and visitidaho.org.

Alaska Airlines (alaskaair.com) provides regular service to Boise (BOI).