



# Boise: An Idaho Oasis

*You won't find many couch potatoes in Boise, a popular destination for travelers seeking phenomenal outdoor recreation and sophisticated downtown culture.*

STORY BY PATTI MURPHY

IT WAS A COOL SUMMER MORNING and the open-air Boise Tour Train bumped along Warm Springs Avenue, a historic neighborhood lined with Queen Anne-style homes and sprawling green lawns. As our driver explained how the homes here were heated by geothermal water pumped from 3,000 feet below ground, there was something else that seemed to me quite unique—homeowners were having coffee on their front





THOMAS LEE/BOISE CVB

porches and waving and smiling at us, a bunch of tourists on a bus.

A few months later I moved to Boise, and that friendliness was just one of the pleasant surprises awaiting me as a new resident of the “City of Trees.”

More than 200,000 people live in Boise (pronounced “Boy-see” not “Boy-zee”), a city that cuddles up to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, a year-round playground for the outdoor enthusiast. During certain times of year, it’s possible to play a morning round of

golf, go fly fishing in the Boise River at lunch, then make a quick trip up the hill and ski in perfect powder that afternoon.

The city also boasts a dynamic cultural scene, including a vibrant art and music community, museums, history, and enough ethnic dining choices to satisfy the well-traveled palate.

Legend says that Boise got its name in 1833, when U.S. Army Captain Benjamin Bonneville led an expedition to the area. After traveling long distances across the dry plains, the French-born captain was stunned to behold the area’s cottonwood tree-lined river and exclaimed, “Les bois, les bois, voyez les bois.” (The trees, the trees, look at the trees.) Thus the origin of the name Boise and its moniker “City of Trees.”

### *Eat, drink, be a Boisean!*

The soul of the City of Trees is its downtown, where distinctive 19th- and early-20th-century architecture mingles with contemporary office buildings. Pedestrian-friendly streets lead to music-filled pubs, intimate restaurants, trendy boutiques, and funky specialty shops. Turreted historic hotels are now chic condos, and sidewalk patios line the streets, creating a casual, friendly atmosphere.

The center of downtown is the Grove Plaza, host to community celebrations throughout the year. Summertime also brings the expansive outdoor Capital City Market along Eighth Street, where shoppers wander from booth to booth and stock up on fresh produce and crafts, sample local wines, and listen to music.

The compact downtown area boasts more than 120 pubs, coffee shops, and restaurants, many of which use ingredients from local farms and

ranches. And because Boise has one of the largest Basque populations in the world, a visit to the local Basque restaurants should definitely be on your list of things to do. The Basque Block on Grove Street has two Basque restaurants, a market, a community center, a historic boarding house, an underground handball court, and the only Basque museum in the U.S.

For a hearty lunch, try a lamb grinder sandwich and a plate of croquetas at the casual Gernika Basque Pub and Eatery, or a bowl of Indaba Gorriak (red bean and chorizo soup) at Leku Ona across the street. Tour the Basque Museum, where you can learn more about this ancient culture, and then stop into the Basque Market where you can purchase cheese, tapas, and wine to take with you. Epi’s, a nationally famous Basque restaurant, is located in the suburb of Meridian about 20 minutes away. Delicious home-cooked food and a family atmosphere make it definitely worth the trip.

The Snake River Valley produces award-winning wines rivaling the best of surrounding states. Several wineries are within a short drive of downtown Boise, and a custom tasting tour can be scheduled through Idaho Winery Tours. Or, in the downtown area, head over to the 8th Street Marketplace, where Snake River Winery has set up a tasting room. For beer lovers, Boise has some excellent breweries and TableRock Brewpub, Boise’s first microbrewery, is located just a few blocks up Capitol Boulevard.

At night, downtown bustles. Jazz lovers go to Chandler’s Steakhouse on Grove Street to enjoy live jazz, famous steaks, and a cool blue-lit lounge. For



Julia Davis  
Sculpture.



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Paddleboats in  
Julia Davis Park.

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Ste. Chapelle Winery.

COURTESY BOISE CVB



Idaho Anne Frank Human  
Rights Memorial.

COURTESY BOISE PARKS & RECREATION

live rock and country music check out Humpin' Hannah's or Pengilly's, both on Main Street.

### Get outdoors

One of Boise's most beloved spaces is the Boise River Greenbelt, a 23-mile-long, tree-lined pathway that follows the river through the heart of the city. You can access the Greenbelt from any downtown park and enjoy a walk that might include sighting a bald eagle, wild turkey, great blue heron, beaver, mink, deer, or fox—and always lots of waterfowl.

The Greenbelt connects several unique riverside parks known as the "Ribbon of Jewels." Julia Davis Park, on the east side of Capitol Boulevard, is home to Zoo Boise, the Boise Art Museum, Idaho State Historical Museum, Idaho Black History Museum, picnic areas, and a formal Rose Garden with more than 2,000 varieties.

A short walk downstream takes you to Ann Morrison Park, and a bit further is one of Boise's true treasures, Kathryn Albertson Park, a unique natural sanctuary for resident and migratory wildlife in the heart of downtown.

A popular summer pastime is a leisurely float down the Boise River. The 6-mile trip from Barber Park east of town to the take-out point in Ann

Morrison Park is generally easy and slow, but does include a few areas where floaters must navigate small rapids and waterfalls. Tubes and rafts can be rented at Barber Park, and shuttles provide transportation back to your vehicle.

If wilderness hiking or biking is more your style, the Boise Foothills are right outside downtown. Miles of trails offer varying terrain for hiking, biking, wildlife viewing, and dog walking. Popular trails include Hulls Gulch, which can be easily accessed at Camel's Back Park on 13th Street, and Military Reserve trails, found just northwest of downtown at Fort Street and Mountain Cove.

### Get indoors

As mentioned, Julia Davis Park is home to many Boise attractions. A good starting point is Zoo Boise, home to more than 200 animals from Asia, Africa, and America. Children especially enjoy the Small Animal Kingdom, where they can get up close and personal with small critters such as meerkats and Fennec foxes.

Many of Boise's museums are clustered together in Julia Davis, and a Boise Museum Pass gives you access to all at a reduced rate. The Idaho Historical



Basque Center.

COURTESY IDAHO TOURISM



Museum explores Idaho from prehistoric times through the fur trade, the gold rush, and pioneer settlement to the present. Next door, the Idaho Black History Museum is dedicated to telling the story of African American culture as an essential part of Idaho's diverse heritage. And a few steps away, the Boise Art Museum features regional and national exhibits and a permanent collection emphasizing Northwest artists.

A short walk along the Greenbelt brings you to the Idaho Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial. Here, a bronze sculpture of Anne peeks out from the window of a sandstone wall, and ponds and fountains surround a 180-foot curving wall of quotes from humanitarian leaders.

The Morrison Knudsen Nature Center, a few miles from downtown, is a unique walk-through wildlife habitat. Also near downtown are the Idaho

Botanical Gardens and the Old Idaho Penitentiary, which visitors may tour and learn more about the 13,000 prisoners that it housed starting in 1872.

One of the most popular natural museums is the World Center for Birds of Prey, about a half-hour drive from downtown. Exhibits and demonstrations give visitors a close-up look at a variety of raptors such as falcons, eagles, condors, and more.

## Art and culture

Boise's arts, culture, and music scene is eclectic and easily accessible. On First Thursday, wander downtown in the evening to enjoy galleries and shops. One of the most popular summer activities is the Idaho Shakespeare Festival, where patrons bring a picnic dinner and enjoy live theater performed under the stars in an outdoor amphitheater next to the Boise River.



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Idaho Shakespeare Festival.

Boise has two downtown movie theaters that make going to the cinema a true movie-going experience. The intricately appointed Egyptian Theatre opened in 1927, and is said to be the country's best remaining example of Egyptian-revival style. A few blocks away, at The Flicks theater, enjoy the in-house café's food and libations while watching the movie.

### **Beyond Boise**

The beauty of Boise is that it's close to some very special places. For example, Idaho boasts 3,000 miles of whitewa-

ter—more than any other state in the lower 48—and some of the finest white-water in the state can be accessed in a quick 45 minute drive north from Boise.

In winter, excellent skiing, snowboarding, snowshoeing, and tubing are just a 16-mile drive up the hill at Bogus Basin Mountain Recreation Area. Brundage Mountain ski area in McCall is just 100 miles north, and the world-famous Sun Valley Ski Resort is a mere two-and-a-half-hour drive to the east.

As you can see, Idaho—and Boise—aren't just about potatoes anymore. ■

## When You Go

### GETTING STARTED

#### **Boise Convention and Visitors Bureau**

(800-635-5240; [www.boise.org](http://www.boise.org))

### MORNING BUZZ & BREAKFAST

**Flying M Coffeehouse** Art, music, great coffee, and baked goods in a funky, eclectic setting.

(208-345-4320; [www.flyingmcoffee.com](http://www.flyingmcoffee.com))

**Goldy's Breakfast Bistro** A perpetual

"Best of Boise" winner. (208-345-4100;

[www.goldysbreakfastbistro.com](http://www.goldysbreakfastbistro.com))

**La Vie En Rose European Bakery & Bistro**

in the historic IdanHa Hotel. (208-331-4045;

[www.lavieenrosebakery.com](http://www.lavieenrosebakery.com))

### LUNCH & DINNER

**Chandlers Steakhouse** at Hotel 43.

(208-383-4300; [www.chandlersboise.com](http://www.chandlersboise.com))

**Cottonwood Grille** Northwest cuisine and one

of the best patios in town, on the Greenbelt.

(208-333-9800; [www.cottonwoodgrille.com](http://www.cottonwoodgrille.com))

**Donnie Mac's Trailer Park Cuisine** Comfort

food, from the Double Wide Cheeseburger to the

Junkyard Dawg. (208-384-9008;

[www.donniemacgrubs.com](http://www.donniemacgrubs.com))

**Gernika Basque Pub & Eatery** (208-344-2175;

[www.bargernika.com](http://www.bargernika.com))

### SPECIAL TREATS

**Boise Fry Company** Fries are king; everything else

is on the side. Try the Bourgeois: fries, cooked in

duck fat then sprinkled with black truffle salt. Beef

and bison burgers too. (208-495-3858;

[www.boisefrycompany.com](http://www.boisefrycompany.com))

**The Chocolat Bar** High-quality artisan chocolates

made by hand. (866-383-7771;

[www.thechocolatbar.com](http://www.thechocolatbar.com))

**Westside Drive In** Check out the Ice Cream

Potato: a mound of vanilla ice cream shaped like a

baked potato, rolled in cocoa powder, split down

the middle, drizzled with chocolate sauce and topped with whipped cream—a sweet Idaho spud.

(208-342-2957; [www.Cheflou.com](http://www.Cheflou.com))

### LIBATIONS

**Bardenay** Full-service restaurant and bar that

distills its own handcrafted gin, vodka, and rum.

(208-426-0538; [www.bardenay.com](http://www.bardenay.com))

**Bittercreek Alehouse** 39 drafts and more.

(208-345-1813; [www.bittercreekalehouse.com](http://www.bittercreekalehouse.com))

**Red Feather Lounge** Next to Bittercreek, this

stylish lounge serves seasonally and locally

inspired food and new interpretations of classic

cocktails. (208-429-6340;

[www.redfeatherlounge.com](http://www.redfeatherlounge.com))

**Grape Escape** Small wine bar in the heart of

downtown. (208-368-0200)

**TableRock Brewpub** (208-342-0944;

[www.tablerockbrewpub.com](http://www.tablerockbrewpub.com))

### ARTS & CULTURE

**Basque Museum & Cultural Center**

(208-343-2671; [www.basquemuseum.com](http://www.basquemuseum.com))

**Boise Art Museum** (208-345-8330;

[www.boiseartmuseum.org](http://www.boiseartmuseum.org))

**Discovery Center of Idaho** (208-343-9895;

[www.scidaho.org](http://www.scidaho.org))

**Egyptian Theatre** (208-345-0454;

[www.egyptiantheatre.net](http://www.egyptiantheatre.net))

**Idaho Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial**

(208-345-0304; [www.idaho-humanrights.org](http://www.idaho-humanrights.org))

**Idaho Black History Museum**

(208-433-0017; [www.ibhm.org](http://www.ibhm.org))

**Idaho Botanical Garden** (208-343-8649;

[www.idahobotanicalgarden.org](http://www.idahobotanicalgarden.org))

**Idaho Shakespeare Festival**

(208-336-9221; [www.idahoshakespeare.org](http://www.idahoshakespeare.org))

**Idaho State Historical Museum** (208-334-2120;

<http://history.idaho.gov/museum.html>)

**MK Nature Center** (208-334-2225;

<http://fishgame.idaho.gov/cms/education/mknc/>)

**The Flicks theater** (208-342-4222;

[www.theflicksboise.com](http://www.theflicksboise.com))

**Trey McIntyre Project** (877-867-2320;

[www.treymcintyre.com](http://www.treymcintyre.com))

**Zoo Boise** (208-384-4260; [www.zooboise.org](http://www.zooboise.org))

### LODGING

**Hotel 43** (800-243-4622; [www.hotel43.com](http://www.hotel43.com))

**Idaho Heritage Inn Bed & Breakfast**

(800-342-8445; [www.idheritageinn.com](http://www.idheritageinn.com))

**Leku Ona Basque Hotel** (208-345-6665;

[www.iparagon.com/lekuona](http://www.iparagon.com/lekuona))

**Owyhee Plaza Hotel** (800-233-4611;

[www.owyheepiazza.com](http://www.owyheepiazza.com))

**The Grove Hotel** (208-333-8000;

[www.grovehotelboise.com](http://www.grovehotelboise.com))

### OUTDOORS & MORE

**Bogus Basin Mountain Recreation Area**

(208-332-5100; [www.bogusbasin.org](http://www.bogusbasin.org))

**Boise Trolley Tours**

(208-433-0849;

[www.boisetrolleytours.com](http://www.boisetrolleytours.com))

**Idaho Winery Tours**

(208-890-6627;

[www.idahowinerytours.com](http://www.idahowinerytours.com))

**Whitewater Rafting**

([www.visitidaho.org/whitewater](http://www.visitidaho.org/whitewater))

**World Center**

**for Birds of Prey**

(208-362-3716;

[www.peregrinefund.org](http://www.peregrinefund.org))

