

## AllWays USA

### Rocky Mountain wanderings

By Roger St. Pierre

Remember all those wonderful movie scenes, with those rollercoaster blacktop roads heading die straight towards the slowly-setting sun?



#### Roger St. Pierre



Long-serving travel writer Roger St. Pierre has visited 130 countries round the world but regards himself as a USA specialist,

with Delaware the only one of the 50 states yet to feel his footfall. He has a special love for the Old West, fostered by all those Hollywood westerns he saw as a boy.

Welcome to America's great west – the land of cowboy legends, Indian heritage and wide open spaces – where all you need for a wonderful holiday is a hire car, a credit card and a good map. The United States is jam-packed with wonderful sights – both natural and man-made.

But for me the major joy of an American road trip is not these things but the bevy of colourful characters you meet en-route.

### Long and winding

There I was, driving halfway up the long, winding 8,429 ft Teton Pass that would take me from Idaho across the state line into Wyoming when ahead I spotted a man pushing a shopping trolley bedecked with two large stars-and-stripes flags.

His name proved to be Ray Brown, a retired schoolmaster, and the business card he gave me revealed that he was engaged in "A walk across America supporting American history, the Constitution and the bill of Rights"

Staying in touch with his family by laptop and mobile phone, this fascinating character was both making a political point and fulfilling a dream he'd had from childhood.

I'd actually found characters aplenty from the minute my flight from Chicago had touched down in Boise, the state city of Idaho and cited as the most remote urban area in the USA – the nearest cities of any size being Salt Lake City (336 miles southeast), Spokane (379 miles north), Reno (425miles south) and Portland (430 miles west).

That leaves lots of wide-open country to explore in-between. The pioneer spirit lives on in these hills and eccentricity seems a natural lifestyle choice where cowboy bots and Stetson hats are the de rigueur dress code.

### Boise is no backwater

But while it's at the heart of a recreational and scenic wonderland, Boise is no backwater.

Founded as an army outpost in 1863 it is now home to approaching 215,000 people (616,500 in the metropolitan area) and houses the corporate headquarters of several Fortune 500 companies.

There's a thriving arts and cultural scene, spacious parks, lots of trees, a vibrant downtown, numerous good restaurants and bars, abundant street art, an imposing Capitol building and, wait for it, the largest Basque community outside Spain.

That's why I was in town: to attend the unique Jaialdi International Basque Culture Festival – the largest such event in the world.

Michael Flatly eat your heart out! Communal Basque dancing proved to be like 'Riverdance' on speed. They really should take it on a world tour.

The Basque sports, with lots of manic speed wood chopping, hay bale pitching and 20 more competitive challenges were spectacular too.

## A heritage celebration

This colourful heritage celebration, held in the last week of July each year, involves the America-wide Basque American community, from toddlers up to the amazing 105-year-old Luciana Aboitiz Garatea, and attracts a large contingent from the old country.

Also taking place in Boise at the same times was the 34th Idaho Shakespeare Festival, a week-long programme of open-air presentations of works by the Noble Bard and other playwrights.

I attended a superb Theater Under The Stars performance of Oscar Wilde's 'An Ideal Husband' – and yes, the all-American cast did managed to get the upper-class English accents spot on!

This lighthearted comedy centres on a weekend in the country and a financial fraud, which was on the point of being revealed when, as if on cue, a real live wild skunk skittered across the – stage eliciting the impromptu quip "I smell a skunk" from the lead actor and thunderous applause from a delighted audience. You couldn't have stage-managed it!

There's a trolleybus guided tour of downtown while a walking tour of the city revealed both its wealth of public art and its role as a vibrant culinary capital.

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

A highlight was a visit to the first-rate Red Feather eaterie to visit their basement worm farm, where the wiggly creatures are raised by Dave Krik and his team, not for the plate but to help enrich the soil for the organic production of herbs and vegetables.

## Far to Fork

'Farm to fork' is the new catchphrase in this region and a short drive out of town brought me to Meadowlark Farms where Janie Burns grows crops and animals organically for strictly local consumption.

Idaho is world-renowned for its potatoes but they are just one of many abundant crops, with wine production becoming increasingly important. The latest Idaho Wines brochure ([idahowines.org](http://idahowines.org)) lists 29 active wineries, with more coming into production as time rolls by.

Nestled between the Rocky Mountains and the winding Snake River, Idaho's wine regions nurture their grapes with a moderate climate, limited rainfall and a consistent growing season.

Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Viognier and Riesling are among the varietals now being grown.

At Basque Market I got to sample the signature paella and met with writer Alan Minskoff and Paul Hoseros, who presented me with an autographed advance copy of their superb new book on the wines of Idaho.

I also got to sample what is claimed to be the world's largest burger – but that's a whole different story!

And then it was time to pay a return visit to the superb World Center Birds of Prey to see the magnificent and extremely rare California Condors at close range.

I had certainly started my Rocky Mountains' visit on a high and that set the tone for an amazing week on the road, with every fuel or food stop introducing me to some new character or other, from vacationing New Yorkers and weekend cowboys, itinerant photographers and mile-eating cyclists.

I left Boise on a rollercoaster blacktop highway that seemed lifted from a Hollywood movie. It led me towards the high mountains, the Yellowstone National Park and that iconic tourist draw, the Old Faithful geyser, which spurts its plumes of superheated water and steam well over 100 ft into the air on cue every 90 minutes or so.

Each eruption lasts from one and a half to five minutes. Between 3,700 and 8,400 gallons of water are expelled from Old Faithful at each eruption with water temperature at the vent reaching 204°F (95.6°C).

Idaho claims to be the whitewater capital of the US while Wyoming is a mecca for all manner of summer and winter sports, with Jackson Hole a world-renowned leisure resort.

An amazing 97 per cent of the 2,697,000-acre county is public land.

Despite having a year-round population of just 20,000, Jackson has a world-class arts, theatre, dance, music and film scene – and it's brim full with painters, art photographers, sculptors, poets, bearded bikies and latter-day hippies – each ready to regale you with wit and tall stories.

Though totally commercialised, Jackson still has the flavour of the Old West, except it's Harleys rather than horses that are today lined up outside the numerous eating places and watering holes.

A short drive outside town I found the National Museum of Wildlife (+1 307 733 5771, [wildlifeart.org](http://wildlifeart.org)).

Founded in 1987 and housed in an impressive red sandstone gallery clinging to the hillside, the museum showcases more than 550 artists and in excess of 5,000 catalogued items. I could happily have wandered its galleries for hours.

It was the lure of the open road that eventually dragged me away. A major historic landmark travelled by thousand of westward emigrants during the mid 19th Century; the arrow-straight 7,760 ft South Pass is today a lonely, lightly travelled highway.

This is the very epitome of the fabled 'Big Country'.

Now known simply as I-80, this was once the Lincoln Highway, the first road to join the east and west coasts of America, running from New York's Times Square across the vast prairies and through the Rockies all the way to San Francisco's Lincoln Park, earning it the epithet 'The main street across America'.

Taking a short detour off the main road down a dirt track for three or four dizzyingly switchback miles I came upon the unlikely named Atlantic City, a one-time mining encampment that somehow managed to avoid becoming a ghost town.

Here you'll find the Miner's Delight Inn B&B, whose atmosphere-laden bar features a superb selection of single malt whiskies.

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

Swapping yarns with the locals I was tempted to stay all afternoon. I carried on though to another one-horse town: Elk Mountain – a handful of tree-shaded houses clustered around a shallow creek.

The eponymously named 12-bedroom Victorian-styled hotel there is run with passion by English-born couple, Susan and Arthur Prescott. Locally sourced produce – American country cooking with European flair – is the cornerstone of their offer and the rooms are charming.

Arthur is another of those great Rocky Mountain characters, having previously lived in Sweden, Switzerland, Bahrain, Jordan, Belgium, France, Texas and California before moving to Wyoming in 2006.

Working along the way for multinationals and small companies too, he's been in real estate, financial services, research, fashion, consulting and lecturing and is now a passionate hotelier and, with Susan, a great ambassador for his adopted state.

The final day of my 800-mile journey took me on through Laramie, Cheyenne and other pioneer towns whose names leapt off the pages of the Western yarns I read as a child.

I could have driven north instead to Devil's Tower, the volcanic plug featured in 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind'. Whichever way I headed I knew I'd find both scenic splendours and intriguing characters aplenty.

## Getting to the Rockies

Denver, with a wealth of direct transatlantic flights is the obvious gateway to Wyoming and Idaho or you can get closer by hubbing to Boise and other regional airports via Chicago, Charlotte, New York, Atlanta and other US entry points.

## Accommodation

**Red Lion Boise** : [www.redlion.com](http://www.redlion.com): Conveniently located for the airport.

**Teton Springs Lodge & Spa** : [www.tetonspringslodge.com](http://www.tetonspringslodge.com): 22 ultra luxurious 3m 4 and 5 bedroom wooden cabins, 25 miles from downtown Jackson Hole.

**Old Faithful Inn, Yellowstone** : [www.yellowstonenationalparklodges.com](http://www.yellowstonenationalparklodges.com). Massive 100-year-old wooden built construction right next to the geyser. The restaurant is cavernous, the food hearty American fare.

**Snake River Lodge & Spa** (888 367 7625, [snakeriverlodge.rockresorts.com](http://snakeriverlodge.rockresorts.com)): In the shadow of the Tetons – spacious rooms, a classy restaurant and extensive leisure facilities, including golf.

**Alpine House Inn & Spa** : [www.alpinehouse.com](http://www.alpinehouse.com) : Tucked away in a quiet Jackson Hole backstreet – superior boutique hotel accommodation.

**Historic Elk Mountain Hotel** : [www.elkmountainhotel.com](http://www.elkmountainhotel.com) : British run but a slice of traditional America, an early Edwardian wooden delight built in 1905 and furnished appropriately/ It's beautifully located in a tiny hamlet.

## Where to eat

**Boise: Bittercreek Alehouse/Red Feather Lounge** 246 North 8th Street. Next-door neighbours and under the same management. Colossal wine list, Including Idaho's own increasingly popular vintages.

Western classics utilising locally sourced produce "Cage-free and free-range, pasture raised, organic, certified humane". Big portions and busy atmosphere.

**Boise: Bardenay** 610 Grove Street. Big menu, with a cornucopia of Italian, Portuguese, Thai and Mexican influences plus the American standards. Good pastas and loaded sandwiches. Selection of cocktails and fresh pressed fruit drinks.

**Victor: Headwaters Grille at Teton Springs Lodge & Spa.** Try the Rocky Mountain elk tenderloin, served with whipped Idaho potatoes, truffled broccolini and huckleberry demi-glaze. Clubby atmosphere.

**Yellowstone: Old Faithful Inn.** Deep in the national park, right by the geysers. Cavernous, jam-packed. Rather impersonal. You'll likely have to queue for a table but the food makes the wait worthwhile and the massive signature dinner buffet is great value

**Teton Village: Gamefish.** 7710 Granite Loop Road. Chefs Juan Alcantara and René Hernandez serve up such beautifully presented wonders as mint pesto rubbed rack of lamb, seafood bouillabaisse and a 12-inch buffalo rib-eye steak. Starters include taste-laden jumbo lump crab cakes.

**Jackson: Blue Lion.** 160 North Millward Street. Busy, but with a relaxed ambience and café society feel. I dined royally on seared wasabi tuna, followed by a massive rack of lamb rubbed in mustard and breadcrumbs, baked and presented sliced into cutlets with a peppercorn, rosemary cream sauce. Wow!

**Elk Mountain: Historic Elk Mountain Hotel.** 102 East Main Street. Chef de Cuisine Susan Prescott, who runs the hotel with her husband, had her own restaurant in Brussels for four years. She adds European flair to American staples like pecan crusted chicken, mesquite rubbed buffalo steak and country-fried steak. If you're feeling homesick you can even order beer battered fish and chips.

## Climate

High altitudes and an inland location mean hot, very dry summers and bitterly cold winters, with lots of snowfall. Spring, with its wildflowers, and autumn, with spectacular fall colours, are ideal times to visit.

## Currency

The American dollar. Many banks do not offer currency exchange so purchase your dollars before departure.

## Language

American-style English but close on half the population now have Spanish as their mother tongue and you will also hear various Native American languages.

## More information :

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