

Year-Round Fun at Sun Valley

"I came for the winter and stayed for the summer."

Visit any ski town from coast to coast or beyond and you'll hear the same mantra from the locals. From Telluride to Taos, Lake Placid to Lake Louise, Killington to Kitzbuhel, Squaw Valley, Deer Valley, Sun Valley, anywhere there's rampant enthusiasm for strapping on planks, pointing them downhill so gravity can do its work and experiencing the singular exhilaration that comes from sliding on snow.

In regards to that last locale, there must be something in the water or the air up in Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains, in the scenic Wood River Valley, that can explain the permanence of Sun Valley's residents, in most cases transplants from all points on the compass who plant themselves as firmly as any aspen or cottonwood into this high-desert landscape.

To paraphrase "Hotel California" and with apologies to Don Henley and The Eagles (who, unlike the Beach Boys and Doobie Brothers, didn't grace the stage at Sun Valley's stunning outdoor amphitheater this summer). the local mindset might be: "You can check out anytime you'd like, but you might never leave."



Trail Creek Golf Course No. 4

Jack Sibbach distills his 37 years at the Sun Valley Resort down to two words: Shangri-La. The native Pennsylvanian expounded on the allure of his adopted hometown as we toured the White Clouds nine, the newest of the resort's 45 scintillating golf holes and, on a typical summer evening, cloudless, temperate and clear as crystal.

"For an active person it's a paradise. Winter and summer, we are a four-season resort, and the original 'destination' ski resort in the U.S., dating from 1936."

The former schoolteacher, now the resort's director of marketing and public relations, explains that, despite the reputation of its glamorous ski lifestyle of yesteryear popularized by bold-faced names such as Ernest Hemingway, Clark Gable, Marilyn Monroe and Gary Cooper, the resort's busiest months are actually July and August. "We are very family-oriented, tons of kids' activities, our service element is of utmost importance, and we are proud of the fact that 75 percent of our guests return again at a later time. We are more than just a ski mountain and a hotel. Coming to Sun Valley is an experience."



White Clouds Lake

As is the White Clouds nine. The first and final holes are traditional-looking par-4s in the flatland adjacent to the resort. But the middle seven ascend upwards into the surrounding hillsides, each hole climbing higher than the last, affording majestic views of the entire valley, including the lively adjacent town of Ketchum and the magnificent Bald Mountain, the iconic ski hill that provided the resort its initial fame.

"They wanted something completely different than the other resort offerings," explains Sibbach, "so they built this alpine links-style nine high on the hill." Guest reactions run the gamut from love to disdain, and can be as severe as the terrain itself. Blind shots, awkward lies and titled landing areas bouncing towards impenetrable fescue limit the opportunity to use a driver. Another problem is the course isn't quite walker-friendly, owing to its extreme terrain. However, there are some fun and sporty holes, repeated plays mitigate the "puzzlement factor," and

the eighth - tumbling drastically downhill from whence the journey began - is one of the most delightful (and benign) 500-yard par-4s a golfer will ever play.

Also enjoyable from start to finish is Elkhorn, formerly a private facility, at one time sporting a six-figure initiation fee but now available to guests of the resort.



10th Hole at Trail Creek Golf Course

My tour guide was the resort's director of golf, Tyler Jones, a real newcomer to the area. But not really. "I worked as an assistant pro here for a number of years in the early-to-mid-'90s, and actually started coming here from Seattle as a grade-school kid with my grandparents." It seems even "newbies" in the Wood River Valley have decades-long affiliations.

"This job is something of a dream come true," continues Jones, who took the reins at the beginning of the 2014 golf season. "Sun Valley Resort has not only been a tradition in my lifetime but also for both my father and grandfather. I look forward to raising my children here; the area offers a great quality of life both in winter and summer."

Elkhorn offers a great quality and variety of golf holes, with capacious landing areas, beautiful views of the nearby mountains, and a number of early holes that, because they play downhill, get a golfer's pulse racing in advance of the tee shot. "We have such a diversity of golf now," continues Jones. "When I was here 20 years ago all we had was Trail Creek. But now we have these 45 holes available

to resort guests, and they love the variety. They can come for a long weekend and never play the same hole twice."



The 11th Hole at Trail Creek

Elkhorn is unique for a few other reasons. First, it is one of the final design collaborations between the father-and-son duo of Robert Trent Jones Sr. and Jr. The inward nine, nestled in a valley close to the Elkhorn Mountains, is flatter than the front and rife with fescue grasses, wetlands and streams. Finally, due to an unfortunate case of winter kill in 2013, it has different grasses on the front- and back-nine greens, the former bent grass, the latter *poa annua*.

Marcia Rankin had no problems adjusting to the disparate putting surfaces. She joined us on the sixth hole, and her pinpoint drives and safecracker's touch on the greens were just two of the indicators that she's been enjoying golf (and myriad other activities) around Sun Valley for more than 40 years.

"Hiking, biking, skiing, friendly and down-to-earth people, the reasons to live here are endless," states Rankin, who first came to the area in 1972. "The towns of Sun Valley, Ketchum and Hailey are in close proximity, so there's a wonderful feeling of community. Culturally, there are so many concerts, lectures, fairs and festivals, summer in particular. There is always something to do."



White Clouds Golf Course's Fifth Hole

Celebrity-watching is still in vogue, and Rankin, a longtime employee at the Pioneer, one of the area's iconic saloons and eateries, coolly ticks off customers she has served over the years: "Arnold (Schwarzenegger) of course. Drew Barrymore, Greg Kinnear, Clint Eastwood, Davis Love III, and many others." Ice-skating aficionados will feel their cups runneth over as well. The Sun Valley Ice Show plays to packed houses every summer weekend. Over the years practically every marquee Olympian - from Kristi Yamaguchi to Peggy Fleming, Katarina Witt to Nancy Kerrigan - has dazzled the assembled crowds.

However, it's hard to find celebs, or for that matter virtually any other souls, when you head 15 minutes out of town. "Here we have all this good shopping, dining, entertainment and a lively downtown scene," concludes Rankin, "yet drive five or 10 miles up the road and you have the trails to yourself in the wilderness; it's complete serenity."

Serenity is the watchword at Trail Creek, the original Sun Valley golf course. Despite numerous reconfigurations since its 1930s debut this is undoubtedly one of the finest tracks in the Intermountain West. The Trail Creek River offers much of the challenge at the petite parkland confection, meandering as it does from side to side and perpendicular to the line of play. Holes alternate between wide and narrow, several downhill, while sprinkled through the inward side is a pair playing directly uphill. Some are curvaceous, while others are straightforward like the par-5 opener and the par-4 ninth, the latter seemingly playing directly to the

base of Bald Mountain, the shadow of which appears to be looming over the green.



Sun Valley's Roundhouse at Sunset

A surfeit of trees, lush rough, well-bunkered greens, abundant lateral hazards and plenty of fescue grasses provides much of the defense at Trail Creek, despite the fact that bombers will have the driver holstered for much of the day. Speaking of which, my course tour guide was as local as they come: assistant professional Tate Mills, who was born in the (now defunct) Sun Valley Hospital. Not quite 30, Mills has spent half his life working at the resort. "Life here is immaculate," enthuses Mills. "Growing up we were involved in tennis, soccer, hockey, skiing, snowboarding, golf, you name it."

Another Trail Creek playing partner, developer and former city official Rich Fabiano, originally from the San Francisco Bay Area, sums up the bucolic (some might say utopian) environment in the Wood River Valley as casually as recounting last night's baseball score. "I've been here nearly 45 years and never locked my house, nor taken the keys out of my car."



Trail Creek Cabin Dining

Urban dwellers, even suburbanites, would be astonished by such an admission. Picking up stakes and relocating to the wilds of Idaho isn't in the cards for the overwhelming majority. But there are untold thousands of nature-lovers, outdoorsmen, skiers, snowboarders, golfers, fisherman, adrenaline junkies and those who simply love the peace and quiet who could easily make the time and effort to at least pay a visit.

And they should.

For more information, visit www.sunvalley.com.