



TRAVELERS' TALES,
FROM NEAR + FAR

EDITED BY
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EXPERIENCES

▶ *A cross-country skier on a trail below the Ernest Hemingway Memorial in Sun Valley, Idaho.*





The Winter of Our Content

Though it started out as a magnet for tycoons and celebrities, Sun Valley has managed to retain a comfortable, down-to-earth quality few other ski resorts can match.

By David Amsden

THE CALM WAS a shock. As we landed in Idaho, I was anticipating the nervy jolt that I've come to expect at the beginning of a ski trip: the hiccuping heart rate, the rubbery knees, and, upon first glimpsing the mountains, thoughts of carving through powder at high velocity. But no. Despite arriving in Sun Valley in utopian conditions—some 50 inches of fresh snow, cornflower-blue skies, an incandescent sun—there was something disarming about the alpine landscape. Rather than stoking adrenaline, it soothed.

I figured my girlfriend, Erin, would be able to explain it. A seasoned snowboarder, trail runner, and general high-altitude aficionado, Erin possesses a keen understanding of mountains. She sees nuances others don't and can articulate them in ways that illuminate. Yet as we rode the shuttle bus from the thimble-size airport into Ketchum, the former mining town that Sun Valley is built around, it seemed she too was slipping into a curious torpor.

Her: "It's just so...white."

Me: "And so...bright."

We had, unknowingly, hit on the reason why this remote swath of south-central Idaho has come to occupy a singular and often overlooked place in American ski culture. Opened in 1936, Sun Valley was the country's first destination ski resort and the location of the world's first chairlift. The place was dreamed up in the midst of the Depression by Averell Harriman, then the chairman of the Union Pacific Railroad, as a means of luring passengers onto his

▶ *Grumpy's, a popular gathering spot for burgers and brews in Ketchum.*



◀ *Built in the 1880s, this red barn on Sun Valley Road has become an area landmark.*

train line connecting Chicago and Portland, Oregon. The idea was to create a version of St. Moritz—but built from American gumption in the wilderness.

Harriman and his team considered a number of locations that have since become iconic: Aspen, Jackson Hole, Lake Tahoe. But it was Ketchum, then a tiny village with 233 residents, they found to be uniquely enticing—for the reasons we were only beginning to discover.

The mountains are mellow in attitude than in other parts of the Rockies, yawning

across the horizon as opposed to jaggedly elbowing for attention. Much of the terrain is treeless, and the vistas have a lunar quality in winter. And then there is the sun, beating down with metronomic dependability 120 days of the 150-day ski season, ensuring a dry, comfortable climate. In other words, this part of Idaho is abnormally white and bright—the ideal place for Harriman to rebrand skiing as an accessible and indulgent pursuit.

Sun Valley opened for business in December 1936, drumming up interest and mystique through that uniquely American marketing technique: inviting celebrities. Clark Gable, Errol Flynn, and Ingrid Bergman were early guests, as was Ernest Hemingway, who finished *For Whom the Bell Tolls* at the resort and spent the last two years of his life in Ketchum.



▲ *The après-ski scene at the Roundhouse restaurant, on Bald Mountain.*

So Erin and I pulled into the circular drive of the **Sun Valley Lodge** (sunvalley.com; doubles from \$313) expecting to be met with the radical balm of sentimentality. Having spent the prior year quarantined in our Los Angeles apartment, drifting from stir-crazy to crazy-crazy, we were yearning not just to escape but to be comforted, which the Swiss-style chalet, its timber-beamed exterior unchanged for 85 years, did at every turn. The crackling fires! The buttery lighting! The clusters of guests exuding the wholesome afterglow of a well-spent, untroubled day!

While the interior of the lodge has been renovated—with rooms expanded into suites and a day spa now flanking the outdoor pool—the spirit of the past is always present. Heading to the bar, we meandered through hallways lined with black-and-white photos taken at the resort: Bob Hope, Barbra Streisand, Bobby Kennedy, Clint Eastwood, and so on, all radiant with burnished contentment. (Today, of course, it's the tech billionaires you're most likely to pass on the slopes.)

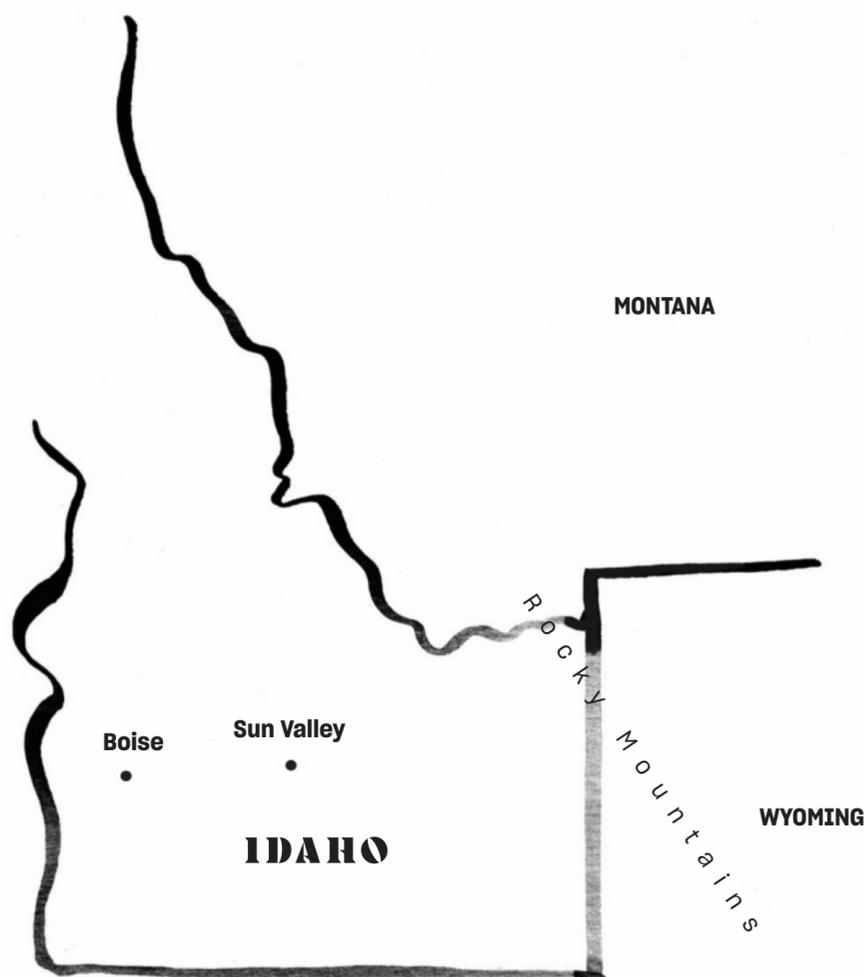
As I sipped a dry martini, a mood that would expand over the next three days took hold—a sense of what it might have felt like to arrive during the resort's early years, when a multiday train ride deposited guests into a world of infectious optimism.

THE NEXT MORNING, following a breakfast of delicate European-style pastries at **Konditorei** (sunvalley.com; entrées \$10–\$18), an Austrian

bakery that's part of the resort's ersatz European village of shops and restaurants, Erin and I made our way to the slopes via the free bus that services the area. The ride took us past Dollar Mountain, gentle and open and ideal for beginners and families, then through downtown Ketchum, before finally dropping us off at the base of Bald Mountain—or Baldy, as it's known—which opened to skiing in 1939 and has long been the resort's crown jewel. Within minutes we had our passes and our gear. Then we were being whisked up the mountain on a lift for what turned out to be a revelatory day.

The first surprise was the view. Ascending Baldy's 3,400-foot face, we found ourselves scanning a magnificent expanse of serrated peaks. And boom—the jittery buzz that had eluded us on arrival hit hard. That such splendor is invisible from the valley floor felt apt for a place that doesn't like to show off. While Baldy doesn't have the elevation of other notable ski mountains in the West, what makes it unique is its consistent pitch: no momentum-killing plateaus, just twisting groomers, grin-inducing glades, and devilishly fun bowls that encourage you to surrender to





gravity. After a few leg-rattling runs, it was easy to understand why several Olympic downhillers have cut their teeth on these pistes.

During the mid 20th century, the region evolved from a Hollywood playground into an epicenter for ski-culture pioneers. It's where filmmaker Warren Miller, whose seminal documentaries glamorized the ski-bum lifestyle, launched his career in the late 1940s. Bob Smith, inventor of the now ubiquitous fog-resistant ski goggle, headquartered his company, Smith Sport Optics, in Ketchum in 1971. And *Powder* magazine was founded here in 1973.

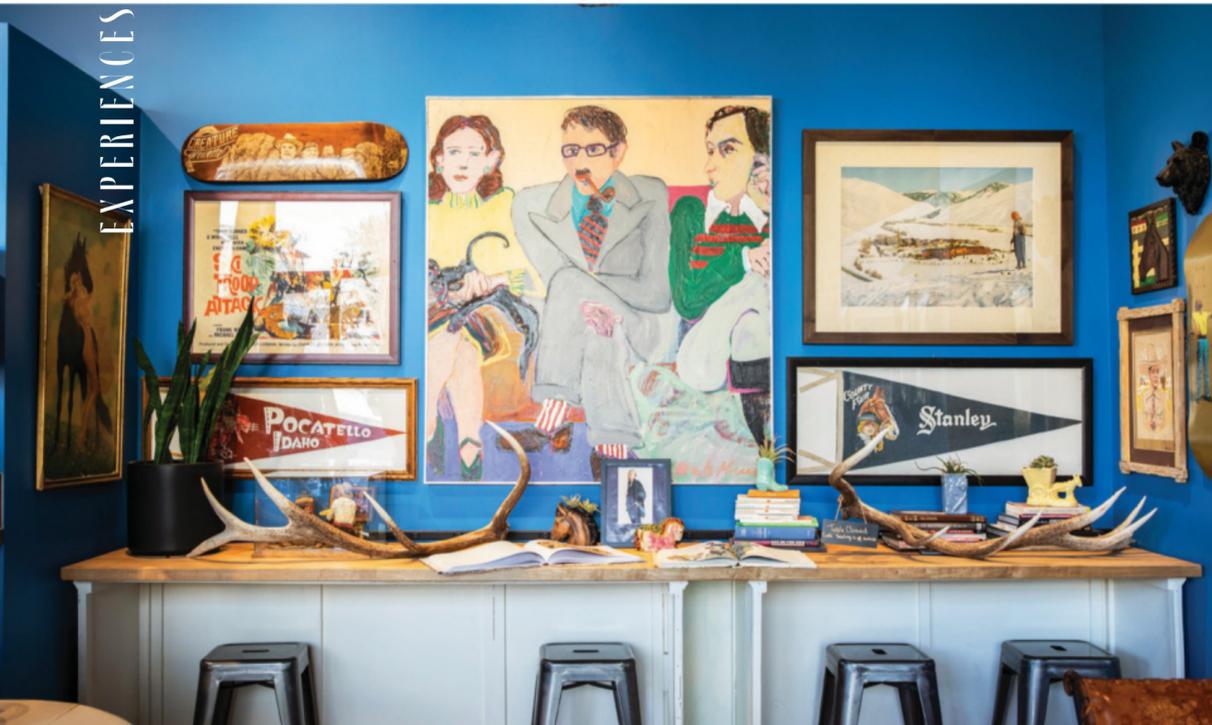
But the most striking aspect of the mountain was what we didn't experience: the crush of other people. No lift lines. No perilous slalomming through crowds. Was this a pandemic thing? No, we were told by locals, it's just a Sun Valley thing. Spending the day snaking down Baldy's northern flank, then crossing over to the south, where 380 acres of new terrain had just opened, Erin and I always had the sense of having the mountain to ourselves.

Elated and exhausted, we ended our session with a late lunch at the **Roundhouse** (sunvalley.com; *entrées \$11–\$14*), the country's first on-mountain restaurant. It is a marvel: sincerely authentic as opposed to cloyingly "authentic," with its exposed rafters, staghorn chandeliers, and stately fireplace all housed in what feels like a cabin built by Jack London. We ate fondue. We drank too many cocktails. As the sun slipped behind the mountain, we made our descent to the base. Back at the lodge, lounging in the pool, we reveled in the real virtue of Sun Valley: that the oldest ski resort in the country somehow feels like a well-guarded secret.

THAT EVENING, Erin and I ventured into Ketchum. Quaint and compact, with cabin-like buildings housing boutiques and restaurants, it somehow didn't feel like an enclave for the rich or a haven for outdoor extremists, though it is, in fact, both.

After nursing whiskies at the **Casino** (ketchumcasino.com), a congenial dive and a former Hemingway haunt, we dined at **Enoteca**

◀
Skiers and snowboarders descend Broadway, a popular run.



▲ From left: Vintage finds at Maude's Coffee & Clothes; Independent Goods, which sells art and homewares by local makers.

▼ Candles by Good & Well Supply Co. at Independent Goods.

(ketchum-enoteca.com; entrées \$18–\$22), an upscale, dimly lit Italian spot specializing in artisanal pizzas. As elsewhere in Ketchum, the tensions you expect to encounter in ski towns—between locals and tourists, between the spirit of the town and the corporate colonialism of the resort—were nonexistent. “It’s almost like there’s a pact here to treat tourists like locals,” Erin remarked after dinner, as we walked the mile and change back to the lodge under a night sky phosphorescent with stars.

“People here are connected and have this yearning to connect,” Susan Nieves told me the following afternoon, when I met up with her at **Independent Goods** (independentgoods.com), the shop she has run with her husband, Mark,



since 2016. As she showed me around the gallery-like space, where pottery, art, even handcrafted backgammon boards were on display, she explained how she and Mark had first become enamored with the area 15 years ago, when they started regularly visiting from their home in Seattle. “If you want to get in touch with someone here you still use the phone book,” she said. “And when you meet people? They don’t ask what you do; they want to know who you are, how your day went. They want to share stories and hear your story.”

Wandering across the street that evening, my legs wobbly after a second day on the slopes, I got a potent dose of what she meant while snacking on oysters at the copper bar at **Michel's Christiana** (michelschristiana.com; entrées \$21–\$45), a fine-dining mainstay where Hemingway once had a standing table. What I initially thought would be a quick drink turned into a longer affair, as I got into a conversation with a woman about the spiritual quest that led her to migrate to Ketchum. “This is a true high vortex bubble,” she noted, somehow managing to sound more authoritative than kooky.

As we spoke, we were joined by an amiable guy doing a crossword, who turned out to be related to Picabo Street, the Olympic skier who grew up in nearby Triumph. Only as I was paying the check did I learn that the man I presumed was a barback,





▲
The Covey, a cozy restaurant in Ketchum.



◀
Entrées at the Covey spotlight local ingredients and fresh pasta.

who seemed to be listening in, was actually the owner, a Frenchman named Michel Rudigoz. Turns out, he once coached the U.S. Women's Alpine Ski Team.

From there I met up with Erin at the **Covey** (thecovey.com; entrées \$24–\$65), a hip spot serving seasonal dishes, including charcuterie cured in the backyard. What started as a delicious meal—sunchokes with satsuma, bucatini in cured egg yolk—ended with our

joining the staff at the bar after closing. The owner, Jesse Sheue, a native of Ketchum who returned to raise his family after stints in kitchens in California, was conducting a weekly ritual: blind taste tests of wine to determine the following week's drink menu, which seemed more like an excuse to, well, drink a lot of wine. As we left, Sheue gave us some mysterious rehydration salts that he correctly predicted would stave off the morning's hangover if we diluted them in water before bed. "Call it the charms of Ketchum," he said. "We like to look after people."

When there's a dump of fresh powder, it can feel blasphemous to do anything but hit the mountain. But Sun Valley offers plenty of outdoor experiences that don't involve skis. After two days on the slopes, Erin and I spent our last in town doing something I'd never thought I'd do: riding fat-tire bikes, those cartoonish things that have spread like kudzu in ski towns in recent years. Aside from being a surprising amount of fun, it felt like the emblematic embrace of the lack of pretension that defines this place. We cycled through the valley, passing a meadow where a herd of elk were legit prancing, eventually ending at the resort's Nordic Center and its web of snowshoeing and cross-country trails.

After lunch in the grand dining room, Erin and I strapped into snowshoes. We chose the most challenging option, the White Clouds Trail, which turned out to be a perfect capstone to our stay. Ascending to the top of a ridgeline took us past some mansions, then into open wilderness where everything was silent save for the meditative crunch of our feet in the densely packed snow.

When I reached the top after an hour or so, I found myself thinking of Sun Valley's founding 85 years ago—and those who saw in this landscape the possibility of something that had to be built to be believed. 🌐