Sunny Ski Resort is Spectacular All Year

By the Hon. David E. Cain

A good time to visit a ski resort is before the snow flies and all the crazy skiers come to town.

Go before summer’s end. Avoid the frigid temperatures and broken bones, before anyone expects you to slide down a mountainside at 50 miles an hour on a couple skinny sticks attached to your feet. And don’t worry about finding enough to do.

We went to Sun Valley, Idaho, to visit friends with whom we traveled in Africa a couple years ago. The fact that it was the Wagon Days festival weekend added a few activities to the agenda. But there would have been plenty to do in any event. With Sun Valley being the first ski resort in the West and the site of the first chair lift in the whole world, its rich history of being a celebrity playground at the end of a railroad line gave a fascinating spin to what would otherwise still be a great place for simply looking at the beautiful natural surroundings. Mountains tower over rivers, lakes and golf courses. Large blooming flowers are everywhere – in landscaping, pots, crocks and boxes – flourishing in the mild summer temperatures.

The first day, we rode first a gondola and then a chair lift to the top of the 9200-foot Bald Mountain and enjoyed lunch at the Roundhouse Restaurant with breathtaking overlooks of ski trails winding through stands of Douglas Firs seemingly right up to the edge of the barely visible city.

Day two featured the Big Hitch Parade, the largest non-motorized parade in the Northwest a highlight of the Wagon Days Festival. The parade went up Sun Valley Rd. and down Main St. in Ketchum, the small city that sits about a mile west of the Sun Valley Resort. Many of the parade entrants were riding horses (some bareback). A couple political participants were on camels. A cowboy was riding a bull. Others were in museum quality carriages, carts, buggies and wagons being pulled by horses, ponies or mules. Young men on roller blades carried coal shovels and quickly scooped up any excrement dropped by the animals.

My favorite commercial was presented by Boot Hill Under Taking. The undertaker was riding a miniature paint horse and pulling a low-level wagon, more like a rectangular trunk about the size of a coffin, with glass sides and the corpse’s booted feet and lower legs hanging out the back. The “hearse” was followed by the grieving widow, a young woman dressed in a black dress, hat and veil and riding a pinto. Another one of the some 70 entrants was the Spirit of Ketchum Iditarod (dog) Team that will for the second year in a row be the official Ketchum entry in the Alaskan Iditarod race.

Per tradition, the grand finale was the Big Hitch itself: Six tall, skinny, wood-covered wagons that were originally used to transport lead and silver ore from the mountains surrounding the valley during the mining boom in the late 1800s. A 20-draft-mule jerkline pulled the wagons.

That night were attended “Sun Valley on Ice,” a sensational skating show starring Evan Lysacek, Olympic Gold medalist, World Champion and two-time U.S. gold medalist. In true Western style, the event began with the playing of the Star Spangled Banner while a horse trotted out onto the ice with the rider waving a large American flag.

On day three, we did some pistol shooting at a private club before driving 13 miles south to Hailey where the Hailey Rodeo Arena was hosting the two-day Intermountain Pro Rodeo Association Championship Finals. Events included bareback bronc riding, saddle bronc, bull riding, steer wrestling, barrel racing, breakaway roping, tie-down roping and team roping. Most of the participants were semi-professionals. They have day jobs, too. Children as young as 6 years old entertained between the competitive events. Some had a hard time getting up after being thrown to the ground by a bucking pony, and I wondered if Idaho has a section in its criminal code prohibiting child endangerment.

During the rest of our stay, we took a road trip about 50 miles north to Redfish Lake on the edge of the Sawtooth Wilderness. The Sawtooth Mountain Range is so named because the pointed mountaintops look like the teeth on a saw. They make great views, whether overlooking the valley along the way or reflecting off the waters of Redfish.

We also went trap shooting at the Sun Valley Gun Club where my wife, Mary Ann, hit 18 out of 25. (I have treated her really nice since then).

On our last night, we went to the highly recommended Knob Hill Restaurant on the northwest edge of Ketchum. We went early so we could visit a small cemetery nearby. Within minutes, Mary Ann spotted the grave we wanted to find. No head stone. Just a granite slab on the ground that simply stated: “Ernest Miller Hemingway. July 21, 1899 -- July 2, 1961.” Maybe it was the “Absente” wine bottle on the grave that caught her eye. Or the red onion. Or the fairly fresh long stemmed artificial roses. Or the mounds of small coins that had been tossed like into a wishing well. I didn’t understand the significance of any of this.

Hemingway had first visited Sun Valley in the summer of 1939. He came back to live after World War II with his fourth and final wife, Mary Welsh, who is buried beside him. A nearby elementary school is named after him and a Hemingway Memorial sits along Trail Creek a few miles south of town.

We went to Sun Valley with our frequent traveling companions, Dr. Jerry and Jay Gilroy of Lansing, who were longtime customers and later friends of Brenda and David Norton who own the Sheepskin Coat Shop on Sun Valley Rd. in Ketchum. The store originally featured sheepskins – David did his own tanning – but it now offers a wide variety of exotic furs. Brenda planned much of our African trip with contacts she developed at trade shows. Brenda’s sister and her husband, Kari and Jack Regan, recently moved from Connecticut to a house they built in the mountains near Hailey. Jack is a retired Marine aviator, but met Kari when they were heading computer research for the marketing operations of a large corporation, Jack on the East Coast
and Kari on the West. The four of them planned a full agenda for our visit.

The idea of a ski resort in the Western United States came to Averell Harriman, who was board chairman of the Union Pacific Railroad, while visiting ski resorts in Europe. He thought a ski resort at the end of a railroad line would turn snow from a headache to an asset. With the help of a European ski expert (an Austrian count) in 1935, he discovered the area around the small mining town of Ketchum to be perfect: Mountains the right height, open slopes, wide valley approaches, sunny blue skies, dry powder snow and mountain ranges that help break the cold winds.

Harriman quickly arrived in the area and purchased a 3400-acre ranch a mile east of Ketchum for $39,000. The railroad pitched in another $3 million for construction of a lodge, a heated outdoor pool, an ice skating rink and the world’s first chair lift (from the redesign by railroad engineers of a conveyor belt used to load bananas onto freighters).

The Sun Valley Lodge opened in December, 1936. The Challenger Inn, offering rooms at a more modest price, soon followed. By the late 1930s, the Sun Valley winter playground became the place to be and to be seen for movie stars and other celebrities such as Tyrone Power, Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, Claudette Colbert, June Allyson and John Wayne. Many of them are in the pictures that still line the hallways in the lodge. Glenn Miller’s theme song, “It Happened in Sun Valley,” added to the glamour. Sun Valley also became the setting for numerous movies (that were supposedly shot in the Alps, Africa or elsewhere).

Sun Valley Resorts, which includes about 25 restaurants and stores, has 1835 employees in the winter and 1300 in the summer, according to a woman on our shuttle bus back to the airport who said she works in human resources for the company. Most of them are foreign students with working visas, she said. Sun Valley actually sends a recruiter to South America and Europe.

Other activities in the resort area include trout fishing, hiking, rafting, kayaking and parasailing. If you are feeling adventurous, rent a bicycle and take it on a ski lift. Many of the ski trails are approved for mountain bikes.

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