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From the Los Angeles Times

PACIFIC NORTHWEST

## Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, is a relaxing lakeside retreat

**Time to power down? Coeur d'Alene and its lake, its resort and its biking trails provide refuge for the overloaded.**

By Christopher Reynolds  
Reporting from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho  
July 25, 2009

Say yes to huckleberries, yes to lazy days by the lake, yes to fast bikes on long trails.

Say no to fancy French pronunciation. Say no, also, to white supremacy. And say no, thank you, to the Rocky Mountain oysters at the Snake Pit restaurant east of town, unless you like bull testicles.

Follow this simple advice, and you'll probably do just fine here in the middle of the Idaho panhandle, where the lakeside city of Coeur d'Alene (pronounced *core-DA-lane*) draws travelers and second-homers from all over the West.

At the docks, you can catch a ride to the golf course, take a 90-minute cruise on Coeur d'Alene Lake, hop on a float plane or rent a kayak. At McEuen Field, a youth baseball diamond between the main drag and the lake, you can sit in the bleachers, munch on a \$2 hot dog from the snack shack, then stroll down to the water's edge or up to the Moose Lounge for a cold one. At the Wolf Lodge Steakhouse on the eastern end of town, you and your beloved can share a 34-ounce sirloin steak.

Now that I've spent a few days here, I have an idea why many Southern Californians (including more than a few Los Angeles cops) have retired to northern Idaho, why so many travelers arrive every summer -- and why some stay away. Whenever somebody starts talking about "the light at the end of the tunnel," I'll think of Idaho for reasons I'll explain in a minute.

The hub of action in Coeur d'Alene is the lakefront, where the 18-story Coeur d'Alene Golf & Spa Resort rises next to City Park. On a grassy expanse here, the Rotarians and the Kiwanis appear to be locked in a vicious struggle over who can provide more benches, playground structures and bandstand improvements. Wooden lifeguard towers overlook a family-friendly beach. Float planes, cruise boats and a gaggle of rental watercraft line the dock, and a sculpted moose stands sentinel at Independence Point, where local teens like to sunbathe and practice their slouches.

Every few hours, though, the sun or the scenery overcomes one of them, usually a boy. He'll slowly back up, like a gymnast preparing for a floor exercise, then rush forward, hurl himself through the air, soaring over the concrete steps and the stenciled letters saying NO DIVING, then splash down into the water. They do the same from nearby Tubbs Hill, but from boulders and cliffs.

Maybe the water exerts some sort of gravitational pull. The lake stretches south for 25 miles and fills with all sorts of pleasure craft in the summer. Hiking and biking paths are threaded around its 135 miles of shoreline.

The city of Coeur d'Alene (population about 41,000) is neatly spread around the resort. The lakefront area's main drag, Sherman Avenue, is peppered with restaurants, a few motels and numerous galleries, including several that focus on glass art and Western art.

Apparently, Coeur d'Alene's name comes from the early days of interaction between this area's Indians and the French-speaking traders who eventually showed up. As this story goes, the American Indians were tough traders, so a settler concluded, in French, that these bargainers had "the heart" (*coeur*) "of an awl" (*d'alene*).

Tastes are conservative here. The city is about 95% white, and the county, Kootenai, voted 62% for John McCain. Over the years, there have been some whose politics have fallen beyond the Democrat-Republican spectrum. One of the nation's most notorious white supremacists had his clubhouse just outside town for three decades, until nine years ago, when neighbors and lawyers shut him down. (For more on that, see sidebar: [Once home to Aryan Nations, northern Idaho makes progress.](#)) I kept an eye out on Sherman Avenue for hints of those troubles, but in four days I never saw any. Instead, I kept seeing signs that Coeur d'Alene, with its growing trade in tourism and second homes, could begin to look a little bit like Sun Valley, at least in summer. If the clocks around here once seemed stuck in 1959, they're ticking now.

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The resort, the 800-pound gorilla of tourism around the lake, opened in the 1960s, then expanded in the '80s. And then in 1991 it added a widely admired golf course with a floating 14th hole. You see lots of expensive boats in the hotel marina, including one that carries guests to the golf course. You get spectacular views from the hotel's upper floors, including from the fancy Beverly's restaurant.

Whether you stay in a \$220 resort room or a \$79 motel room (as I did, at the Resort City Inn), it's easy enough to pass a summer's day: If you're not golfing or fishing, you're on a lake cruise boat, on the beach, paddling in a kayak or dangling a few hundred feet above the lake on a parasailing ride.

To get lunch or get out of the sun, you walk up to Sherman Avenue. And if it's a Wednesday afternoon in summer, there will be a little farmers market at 5th Street.

Instead of spuds, it's huckleberries that show up everywhere, in pies, smoothies, beer, ice cream and more. Beginning late this month, they usually start appearing at the Kootenai County Farmers Market, alongside the smoked meat, organic soap, organic tofu and organic hummus.

The afternoon when I browsed, many shoppers showed up on bikes -- not surprising considering the growing network of trails around town. The North Idaho Centennial Trail carries nonmotorized traffic 24 miles west from Higgins (sometimes spelled Higgens) Point on Coeur d'Alene Lake to the Washington line (then goes on 37 more miles under the name Spokane River Centennial Trail). The Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes, another paved path for nonmotorized riders, runners and skaters, was completed in 2005. It runs 73 miles along an old rail route between the towns of Mullan and Plummer. (The federal Environmental Protection Agency, eager to seal old mining byproducts below the asphalt, was key in creating the trail.)

In winter, the area draws skiers to Silver Mountain Resort (30 minutes east in Kellogg) and Schweitzer Mountain Resort (45 minutes north in Sandpoint). For the last several years, the summer calendar has been highlighted by the Ironman triathlon and the Car d'Alene auto show, both in June, and a downtown street fair, restaurant showcase and art-on-the-green festival, which fall between Friday and Aug. 3 this year.

Besides the resort course, many golfers hit the Circling Raven and StoneRidge courses nearby. Many families leave room in their itineraries for Silverwood, the biggest theme park in the Pacific Northwest, 20 miles north of town.

One thing Coeur d'Alene doesn't offer, at least so far, is desperate recession discounting.

Dani Zibell-Wolfe, vice president for tourism at the Coeur d'Alene Chamber of Commerce, in mid-June reported that hotel occupancy was running less than 2% behind last year.

In tumultuous times, maybe old-school American atmosphere sells better. Surely that should please John and Tina Hough, owners of the Roosevelt Inn. Their four-story bed-and-breakfast began life as a red-brick school in 1905 and remained an active campus until 1971. In fact, John Hough attended grade school there. Now, most of the rooms are named after former teachers, and the halls are lined with old class photos.

The same day I checked out the Roosevelt Inn, I wound up on one of the Tubbs Hill trails, shooting the breeze with the Holt family as they lazed and clowned on a big rock.

"She's trying to catch some fish. But the fish are jacking her worms," said Dallas Holt, 5, giggling, as his stepmother, Tiesha Holt, cast and cast again.

Coeur d'Alene was looking pretty good, and I was already imagining the Fourth of July fireworks. But to appreciate this territory properly, you can't just stand and stare.

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"Think like a train," said the man in the Lookout Pass bike-rental shop, handing me a map.

I was about 60 miles east of Coeur d'Alene, in the Bitterroot Mountains on the Idaho-Montana line. My rented bike and rack in place, I drove up an unpaved mountain road to the mouth of a 1909 railway tunnel.

It looked dark in there.

For decades, this was the route of the Olympian and Olympian Hiawatha passenger trains running between Chicago and Seattle-Tacoma. The trains stopped operating about 1980. In the late 1990s, workers hauled away nearly 15 miles of tracks. Just like that, a mountain-bike trail was born.

OK. Into the tunnel. I'd been warned that spring runoff would be dripping from the walls and ceiling, and that it would be really dark, which is why my bike was outfitted with a powerful headlight. Also, they'd told me, there would be the occasional pothole. The temperature would drop to 42 degrees. And, oh, yeah, the tunnel, officially known as St. Paul Pass, would be 1.7 miles long. It starts in Montana and ends in Idaho.

It's a shame you can't bottle an experience like that.

In the long tunnel, especially on the uphill return trip, you can lose track of time and space so that you feel suspended in near-blackness, water splashing on and around you, your legs pumping away, the faint light at the end of the tunnel hovering like a distant keyhole. Then the daylight bursts upon you and you're gliding out under the big sky, a green valley unfolding around you with trickling creeks and chirping birds. Your senses are wiped clean. Even a simple cloud bank, gathering in the distance, looks like a heavenly wonder.

The long tunnel is just the beginning. From there, the route bends and descends. In the next 9.4 gentle downhill miles, I pedaled across low and high trestles, their metal supports rising from the forest floor like misplaced Erector Sets. And I passed through several more tunnels. All were shorter than that first one, but some were curved, with no end in sight, blackness all around.

And there were the straightforward stretches, where I spotted a deer, two moose by a creek, and a Wolf – Steve Wolf, a bike-riding anesthesiologist from Spokane, Wash., who had been here before.

"This is my favorite," said Wolf, staring down from the trestles over Clear Creek. I had to agree. The creek lay 220 feet below.

Then, grateful that the railroad engineers designed the grade at less than 2%, I turned and pedaled back the way I'd come in. (In summer, a daily shuttle bus carries weary riders back to the top.)

A few hours later, I was back in Coeur d'Alene, intending to watch the sunset from Independence Point. But instead, taking a seat at the steps near the lounging local youths, I got something a little different.

That cloud bank from my ride was a full-blown thunderhead, obliterating the low sun, throwing lightning sheets at the lake. Even the teenagers were impressed.

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