

Summer Fun in Sun Valley

Story & photos by Emily Fagan



Just the name “Sawtooth Mountains” evokes fantastic images of snow-capped, chiseled peaks that pierce the sky and loom over the valleys with a cold, imposing air. At the opposite extreme, the name “Sun Valley” sounds bucolic, tranquil and inviting, a place where you can relax in glowing warmth. The small town of Ketchum, Idaho embraces both: perched in a valley surrounded by the soaring Sawtooth mountains, it is home to the glorious Sun Valley Ski Resort. Although Sun Valley was created as a wintertime playground and is known for outstanding winter sports activities, my husband Mark and I discovered that summer is a wonderful time to visit.

Sipping coffee one morning at one of the many charming outdoor bistros in the middle of town, we breathed in the cool mountain air and gazed at the jagged mountain peaks that rose above the quaint rooftops. The rugged beauty of the lofty summits gives no hint of the town's quirky history. Originally named for David Ketchum, a fur trapper and miner who built the first shelter (a tent) on the future town site in 1879, Ketchum evolved into a silver/lead mining Mecca in the 1880s and then changed gears and topped the nation's sheep shipments in 1920. Just over 50 years after that first tent went up, the town suddenly became host to the glitz and glamour of Sun Valley Ski Resort and

emerged from the depths of the Great Depression in high style.

During the 1930s, railroad executive Averell Harriman wanted to lure tourists onto the Union Pacific Railroad line, and he sent Austrian Count Felix Schaffsgotch out to find the ideal spot for a world class ski resort. Taking the trains to the end of each line, Count Schaffsgotch could not find a suitable location until he stepped off the train in Ketchum. Suddenly he felt like he was back in the Austrian Alps, and he was convinced a ski resort would thrive here. Within a year Sun Valley was born, featuring not only a luxurious lodge but also the world's first chair lifts. Their design was developed from equipment used

to load bananas in the tropics. Bringing Hollywood's elite to the heart of America's Alps, Sun Valley forever changed the landscape and history of this classic western mining town.

A solo guitar player serenaded us from his chosen spot on the street corner opposite us while a gourmet meat and cheese-tasting event was in full swing under umbrellas along the sidewalk nearby. The sun glinted off classy convertibles driving past our spot in front of the coffee shop, and a grey haired fellow with a ponytail swerved through traffic on his roller blades. Funky sculptures lined the storefronts around us, from a cowboy booted flamingo to a cowboy booted oversized chair. A huge stuffed animal sat on a park bench surveying the scene. As we whiled away the morning we watched kids hop onto the park bench next to the big fuzzy bear and give it a hug while their moms took snapshots. Ketchum manages to be hip, trendy, laid back and historic all at once.

We had ridden our road bikes with the local bike club out over the mountain passes that morning, and we were planning an afternoon visit to the outdoor skating rink to watch the figure skaters training with their coaches. In the evening we were going to pack a picnic to listen to the outdoor symphony concert. Ketchum is so full of activities like these that the Visitor's Center offers a pamphlet of "50 Fun Free Things to Do in Ketchum / Sun Valley." Ticking down their list, we found the town so engaging we stayed a month.

Long before Sun Valley became home to the rich and famous, Ketchum was a grubby, down-and-dirty mining camp. The fascinating Ore Wagon Museum houses several of the original ox-driven carts that were used to haul the ore to the smelters. "Galena," a lead/silver ore, is what these mountains held, but it was so difficult to process that 20 years passed before mining took off. The 1884 arrival of the Oregon Short Line railroad spur in Ketchum helped

the mines get rolling. The railroad hauled supplies and bullion between Ketchum and bigger cities down the line while teams of ox and horse driven carts traveled a 160-mile loop to the outlying mines in the mountains to haul supplies and ore back and forth to the smelters in the Big Wood Valley around Ketchum.

Camping alongside the ice cold, gurgling Big Wood River, we could see our breath in the crisp, crystal clear summer morning air. Every evening deer wandered through our campsite, placidly nibbling the grass. From this vantage point it was impossible to imagine that the artsy town of Ketchum was once loaded with stinking, smoking smelters. The dramatic, craggy mountain peaks that surround the town seem pristine, untouched by humanity and impervious to the machinations of mankind. Yet the region lived and died by the galena mines, and by 1900 not only had almost all the ore been removed from the mines but silver prices had crashed and the smelters had shut down.

Ketchum is as resilient as the mountains that embrace it, however, and in 1920 it rose again, this time becoming home to Basque sheepherders. The railroad hummed once more, carrying lambs instead of bullion, and Ketchum soon became the largest sheep shipping station in the country and the second largest in the world behind Sydney, Australia.



We pondered this colorful history as we rode the 30 miles of paved bike paths around town. Steep climbs rewarded us with pretty views, and the sweeping descents were exhilarating. Ernest Hemingway's humble memorial lies at one end of town along the bike path, and another paved path takes you to the town of Hailey where Bruce Willis and Demi Moore once made their home. These celebrity names are just three on the enormous roster of A-list celebrities who have visited the area, thanks to Averell Harriman's brilliant schemes to woo Hollywood to his new ski resort.

Sun Valley opened in 1936, the year that the charismatic, blonde Norwegian figure skating star Sonya Henie won her third Olympic title. Together, Sonya Henie and the resort itself share the starring roles in the clever 1941 promotional movie *Sun Valley Serenade*. Playing for free in the Sun Valley Opera House every weekend, we found ourselves swept away by the movie's charm. It opens (in black and white) with happy ski vacationers arriving at the train depot to be



whisked away to the resort in horse drawn sleighs, blankets covering their laps. Henie's dimpled smile, her flirtatious romancing of co-star John Payne, the funny 1930s era ski clothing and hairstyles, and the exhilarating 9,000 foot snow-covered summit of Bald Mountain all flicker enchantingly on the silver screen. The music of Glenn Miller provides a delightful backdrop as he leads his orchestra on trumpet while performing many of his famous tunes, including *In the Mood* and *Chatanooga Choo Choo*. The movie captures the bewitching spirit of Sun Valley, even while being rooted in its time in history.

After the movie, we took a leisurely stroll through the elegant Sun Valley Lodge. An inviting fireplace in the lobby beckons visitors to relax in big comfy chairs. However, we were drawn to the walls of the corridors that are hung with hundreds of photos of famous celebrities, elite athletes, and legendary icons of industry line the walls. They pose on their skis, ski poles in hand, their grinning faces framed by sunglasses that were stylish in their time. The Lodge still plays host to wealthy guests who can choose to eat in their beautiful dining room or take in a meal rink-side



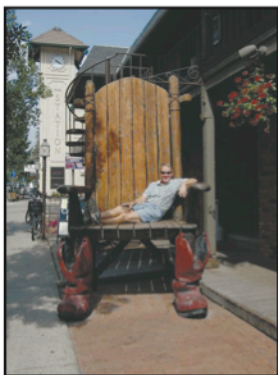
during one of the summer's many outdoor ice-skating shows.

Camping further out of town beneath the Sawtooth pinnacles along another branch of the Big Wood River, we rode our mountain bikes along part of the 18-mile Harriman trail that parallels the southern part of the Sawtooth Scenic Byway on Highway 75. Winding along the river's edge and out into wide meadows, we stopped at Easley Hot Springs where visitors can soothe their tired legs in the natural hot springs. A little further on we found the Galena Lodge, a terrific spot for an afternoon hamburger out on the porch.

What a surprise to wake up one morning and discover the sheriff had shut down a section of Route 75 to stage the first annual Sun Valley Road Rally. We watched in amazement as local millionaires lined up their racecars at the top of a hill and then drove them time-trial style down the hill at top speed past the Sheriff's "speed trap." Each driver's speed was clocked on radar and posted for an appreciative audience across the street. A local family took top honors as each member got behind the wheel of the family Porsche: the 23-year-old son was first at 188 mph, Dad was next at 186

mph, the 22-year-old daughter followed at 183 mph and finally Mom came in at 181 mph. Besides this illustrious family, a whole host of other recreational drivers took advantage of the Sheriff's offer to break all speed limits in the name of charity. Each trip down the racecourse cost the entrant \$1,500.

Back in town we had several picnic dinner dates on the lawn beside the Pavilion listening to the Sun Valley Symphony Orchestra. Playing a different program almost every evening in August, this world-class orchestra brings classical music to anyone in town that has a twilight hour to spare. Visitors are encouraged to spread a blanket on the lawn where the music is broadcast over loudspeakers or to take a seat inside the concert hall. Every seat at every performance is free.



For those curious about the origins of the evening's music, there is a free afternoon pre-concert lecture in which the history and essence of the pieces and their composers are explained in layman's terms. From Brahms to Beethoven, from Irving Berlin to Peter and the Wolf, there is something for all ages and interests. Listening to a soprano singing "The hills are alive with the sound of music" while watching the sunset behind the Sawtooth Mountains is an unforgettable experience.

Ketchum / Sun Valley is a unique gem tucked between the peaks of one of our country's most spectacular mountain ranges, and it offers summer fun for everyone.

General Information

www.visitsunvalley.com

Ketchum / Sun Valley Chamber of Commerce website

About the Author

www.roadslsstraveled.us ✨

