

For Points North, July 2004

Unspoiled Idaho: Be the first on your block to discover Coeur d' Alene
By Suzanne Wright

Maybe you, like me, have a hard time placing Idaho on a map, thinking it's one of those square western states best known for potatoes. But since I'm collecting states and I haven't been there, last summer I ventured to the northwest panhandle.

From the moment you pull into the driveway at the Coeur d'Alene Resort, located on a pristine glacial lake with its 20,000 bright red geraniums and doormen wearing knickers and argyle socks, you know this place is not going to take itself too seriously.

Idaho is known as the Gem State, and Coeur d'Alene is perhaps the jewel of the state. The vibe of this inland burg, a 40-minute drive from the Spokane, Washington, airport (the hotel has a shuttle service), is low-key and perfect for vacationing families. Go in summer and you'll enjoy sweet-smelling air that averages daytime highs of 80 F and nighttime lows in the 50s—with no humidity.

CDA as it is known, opened in 1986 and has since received many travel accolades, listed in *Golf Magazine's* "America's Top 20 Courses." I don't golf, but judging from the stellar landscaping—including more geraniums, the water taxis that whisk you there, the charming caddies, the famous "Floating Green" on the 14th hole and the well-sated looks of those who've completed 18 holes, I trust the moniker is apt.

Coeur d'Alene was given its name by the early French settlers who were impressed with the Schee-Chu-Umsh Indians trading practices. The natives were said to have hearts, or *coeurs*, like an awl, *d'alene*, a sharp tool used to pierce and sew leather. There's an Atlanta connection, too: Sherman Avenue, the main downtown street and Fort Sherman are both named after you-know-who. Abandoned in 1901, following the Spanish American War, the fort is now home to the North Idaho College campus.

The rambling resort property is low-lit throughout with lots of quiet nooks and crannies. The rooms, done up in monochromatic shades of beige and marine blue are well appointed and inviting. My premier suite boasted a sitting room overlooking the marina with its many bobbing boats.

The town has just 35,000 residents and although you might happily hang out in the resort there are numerous other things to see and do just steps away. A 20-minute, \$40 floatplane ride is exhilarating, giving a bird's-eye view of the ritzy homes located along the 125-mile shoreline. The sunset dinner cruise offered by the hotel is another opportunity to explore the water (although the food is nothing special). Watching the twinkling lights along the shoreline while a full orange moon rose in the black velvet sky, illuminating the dark lake, was a highlight of the trip.

There's also parasailing, boat rentals, carriage rides, fishing charters, garnet hunting, gold panning, horseback riding, ice skating, mining tours, helicopter flights, casino outings, moped and mountain biking, tennis and ballooning during the warm months. Be sure to walk the world's longest (3,300 feet) floating boardwalk made with 1,600 float logs, 28,000 pounds of spikes, 16,000 lag screws and 8,000 pounds of bolts, anchored to 150 tons of concrete. For a more rigorous workout, Tubb's Hill is a scenic, two-mile, self-guided footpath next door to the CDA.

Want to shop? Check out the wonderful Journeys, run by Bruce and Sue Bothker, who moved here from Los Angeles 25 years ago to sell unique jewelry and home décor; I bought a silver Native American ring that nets me constant compliments. Cisco's is singular antique store, with everything from bear rugs to mooseheads, fine oil painting to chaps, leather furniture to Navaho rugs. Perhaps you'll find a souvenir for your Georgia lake or log home.

Need to refresh? The spa offers a number of signature treatments including a hot stone massage and the Idaho pine salt glow. I enjoy my hour and a half wildflower facial which included an herbal foot bath, cup of huckleberry tea (which I asked for iced—hey, I'm from the South!), a mini hand and foot massage, an aromatherapy facial and an energizing neck, shoulder and scalp massage. You even take home a wildflower sachet. Afterwards I relax in the meditation room with its fireplace and water views. On my way back to my room, I treat myself to a huckleberry shake at Dockside.

Getting hungry? For casual fare, the resort's Dockside restaurant serves terrific food including an alder-smoke salmon omelet and halibut fish and chips. In huckleberry season you'll also find smoothies, BBQ ribs, chicken salads and pancakes made with these tart berries. "We do a lot more with huckleberries than potatoes," says the summering college student/waiter.

For something a bit more indulgent, try Brix, on Sherman Avenue. Located in a former JCPenney store, it's a great-looking restaurant with its warm earth tones, exposed brick walls, plank floors, stamped lead ceiling and marble-topped bar. By 6 p.m. on a Saturday night the place was abuzz. The menu features seasonally changing, regionally inspired cuisine, including a decadent seared foie gras with red wine-soaked Bing cherries and butter poached Alaskan halibut with fennel-blackberry mojo. There's also a more casual space downstairs with a cigar room and dance floor. A few doors down, The Wine Cellar, popular with locals, offers nightly entertainment.

While I was there, I heard John Travolta had bought a home for his sister. Will this be the next Santa Fe? Santa Barbara? I don't know, but now I not only have a much better grasp on northwestern geography, I have an appreciation beyond potatoes for Idaho.

For information or reservations, contact The Coeur d' Alene Resort, 1-800-688-5253 or log onto www.cdaresort.com.

