

Travel

AND RECREATION

Sky-high on Schweitzer

Big slopes and small-town charm at northern Idaho's up-and-coming resort

By Kimberly Seely Brown
Photographs by Glenn Oakley

My family and I stood at the top of Schweitzer Mountain and stared. It was the first morning of a long-planned ski week at up-and-coming **Schweitzer Mountain Resort** in northern Idaho, and so far it was looking impossibly good. The sky was true blue, the air crisp and still. From where we were perched with our skis poised, ready to drop into Schweitzer Bowl, we could see all the way into Canada. And almost no one else was in sight.

In the valley beneath us, 43-mile-long Lake Pend Oreille gleamed like a wintry mirage. "It looks like we're skiing over the San Juans!" said my 13-year-old son, pointing a ski pole toward the lake's fir-clad islets below. He was right—except that here the sun was shining in a most un-Cascadian way.

My husband and I have skied all over the West; on most winter weekends, we schlep our boys to one of the resorts near our home in Bellevue, Washington. For this holiday, we wanted a mountain big enough to keep



Uncrowded, gently sloped glades filled with snow-flocked trees and feather-light snow are ideal places to practice your slalom turns.

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The resort's Outback Inn Dining Hut is a convenient gathering place, especially during a snowstorm.

everyone interested, but within driving distance on our side of the Canadian border. We wanted to play hard during the day, but didn't want to rough it at night. And since it was our vacation, I was angling for cozy but stylish accommodations, preferably with a small kitchen and a prime ski-in/ski-out location—plus access to a cozy village. We had heard that Seattle-based Harbor Properties had bought Schweitzer Mountain Resort (near Sandpoint, Idaho, on Lake Pend Oreille, a six-hour drive from Seattle) in 1998, renovating its mountainside **Selkirk Lodge** and opening the new **White Pine Lodge**. Decision made.

"We're never going to be the biggest—we don't want to be," explains Stephen Fina, vice president of real estate development for Harbor Resorts (formed by Harbor Properties in 1998), showing me around Schweitzer Village on our first day there. Indeed, although the resort encompasses a full 7,000 acres (roughly 2,500 of which are skiable), the village feels like a step back in time. For one thing, it's isolated high on the mountain, at the end of 9-mile-long Schweitzer Mountain Road, which twists and turns up from the valley floor, so at the end of the day it feels as if you're driving back up to your own little mountain hideout.

There, your choices are refreshingly simple: two lodges (which face one another across a snowpacked plaza), a handful of shops, three restaurants, and two coffeeshouses.

Each day, we got a kick out of being practically the first in the lift line, even after lolling around watching the clouds or sun or snow sailing over the lake from our brand-new kitchen at the **White Pine Lodge**. And later in the day, my husband and I loved that we didn't have to worry about leaving our kids on the mountain if we chose to trade in our skis for a latte at the **Mojo Coyote Cafe**; the resort is small enough that we were bound to run into them later. If this resort were located in Colorado, it would be mobbed. But for now, both Schweitzer and nearby Sandpoint seem to be just too far up the Panhandle for most people to bother.

A genuine community

One morning we met Reidar Wahl, a former member of the Norwegian National Ski Team and two-time World Pro Ski Championship winner. Five years ago, Wahl relocated to northern Idaho from Telluride, Colorado, because the town of Sandpoint has a real community, he explained. "Plus," he said, "the skiing feels like Aspen 30

years ago." Another day I hooked up with the head of Schweitzer's nordic ski trails, Jacqui O'Neill, and explored some of the resort's groomed cross-country trails. We made fresh tracks as we schussed through silent stands of western hemlock, birch, and larch, and I vowed that one morning of cross-country skiing would be mandatory on any future ski trip.

The other thing that's mandatory when staying high on Schweitzer Mountain is a drive down to explore the town of Sandpoint. It's the kind of place that lands on lots of "Ten Best Places to Live" lists, with its old brick storefronts, a Masonic Temple, and the **Panida Theater**, a restored 1927 Spanish Mission-style theater.

My cousin moved to Sandpoint from Southern California 12 years ago and has carved out an idyllic life here with her husband and three daughters. I made my way down the mountain one day to meet her for a tour of the town. We walked down First Avenue toward the two-story complex that houses **Coldwater Creek**, whose founders, Dennis and Anne Pence, started the multimillion-dollar retail company after moving here from Manhattan nearly 20 years ago. We swung through the building's handsome **Café Express**, where two editors

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Warm up with a latte or hot cocoa in the Mojo Coyote Cafe.

from the local paper, the *Bonner County Daily Bee*, were conducting their usual lunch meeting. And we checked out the new tasting room for the **Pend d'Oreille Winery**, where winemaker Stephen Meyer is turning out a full line of surprisingly sophisticated wines. "We wanted a place where we could concentrate on living, instead of just getting by," Meyer replied when asked why he and his wife had settled in Sandpoint.

After a latte at **Monarch Mountain Coffee**, Sandpoint's local coffeehouse, we made our way to **Cabin Fever**, a home decor store. "We're all transplants from somewhere," a sales associate told another customer. I was busy leafing through a book on cabin style, thinking about what it would be like to have my own Schweitzer getaway full of lodgepole pine, wood-framed mirrors, and antler chandeliers. While I could imagine tiring of the rustic look, I doubt I would ever tire of the Sandpoint lifestyle.

Finally, I drove back out on U.S. 95, which runs straight through town and past **Misty Mountain Furniture**, then turned up toward Schweitzer. Snowdrifts piled up alongside the road as my wipers made a steady *shhh, shhh* sound across the windshield. The car climbed steadily higher, then finally rounded the last bend. The lights of the resort were just coming on. "We'll be snowed in again tonight," I thought, smiling. ♦

The skinny on Schweitzer

Schweitzer Mountain Resort is 11 miles north of the town of Sandpoint, Idaho, on the Idaho Panhandle. By car, it's a 1½-hour drive from Spokane and 6 hours from Seattle via I-90 and U.S. 95. The nearest airport is Spokane International Airport.

Ski season typically runs from Thanksgiving (weather permitting) through April 11. The four-day **Sandpoint Winter Carnival** (Jan 15-18; 208/263-0887) kicks off with a food and wine festival and a snow-sculpture competition, then continues with a winemakers dinner and a parade of lights.

The **Greater Sandpoint Chamber of Commerce** (900 N. Fifth Ave.; www.sandpointchamber.com, 800/800-2106, or 208/263-0887) provides maps as well as information on lodging and activities. For details on mountainside accommodations, lift tickets, lessons, and vacation packages, contact **Schweitzer Mountain Resort** (www.schweitzer.com or 800/831-8810).

Alpine and nordic skiing

Most of Schweitzer Mountain Resort's alpine ski runs are intermediate and advanced; 20 percent are for beginners.

There are also 15½ miles of groomed cross-country trails. Lift tickets: \$44, \$30 ages 7-12; \$5 ages 6 and under.

Shopping and entertainment

Cabin Fever. Great gifts, books, outdoor wear, and cabin-style decor. 113 Cedar St.; (208) 263-7179.

Coldwater Creek. Clothing, jewelry, and accessories are sold at the national chain's hometown showplace on the Cedar Street Bridge. 334 N. First Ave.; www.coldwatercreek.com or (208) 263-2265.

Misty Mountain Furniture. One-stop shopping for mountain-rustic housewares. 502 Cedar; www.misty-mountain.net or (208) 265-4190.

The Panida Theater. Hosts performing arts and film. 300 N. First; www.panida.org or (208) 263-9191.

Pend d'Oreille Winery. An inviting tasting room serves award-winning wines made from Washington grapes. Free tasting 10-6 Mon-Thu, 10-7 Fri-Sat, 11-5 Sun. 220 Cedar; www.powine.com or (208) 265-8545.

On-mountain dining

All of these are on the Schweitzer Mountain Resort property (10000 Schweitzer Mountain Rd.).

Chimney Rock Grill. Inside the Selkirk Lodge, Chimney Rock reopened last year with a wonderfully inventive, albeit somewhat pricey, menu. (208) 255-3071.

Mojo Coyote Cafe. Guests of the Selkirk Lodge pad down in their slippers for muffins, scones, and lattes. (208) 255-3037.

The Outback Inn Dining Hut. On the Outback Bowl near the Stella chairlift, this resort cafeteria serves basic fare for lunch. (800) 831-8810.

Thor's Pizza. This casual pub

and pizza hangout will deliver, which comes in handy during a blizzard. (208) 255-5645.

In-town dining

Café Express. Coldwater Creek's upstairs wine and coffee bar is known for Friday-night happy hour (5:30-7:30), with complimentary appetizers and performances by local musicians. 334 N. First; (208) 263-2265.

Eichardt's. Gourmet burgers, pizza, and salads, plus beers on tap. 212 Cedar; (208) 263-4005.

Monarch Mountain Coffee. Loitering is encouraged at this relaxed, cozy coffeehouse serving fresh baked goods and terrific breakfast burritos. Closed Sun. 208 N. Fourth Ave.; (208) 265-9382.

Spud's Rotisserie and Grill. A local favorite for lunch, with delicious fresh soups and tables overlooking Sand Creek. 102 N. First; (208) 265-4311.

Swan's Landing. Swan's rustic, elegant dining room has a sensational view of Lake Pend Oreille. Ask for a table in front of the fireplace. 41 Lake Shore Dr., Sagle; (208) 265-2000.

On-mountain lodging

Selkirk Lodge. Schweitzer's original slopeside lodge, the Selkirk underwent a massive renovation four years ago, converting its 80 rooms into more spacious accommodations with pine and leather furniture. It's lovely and a good value. From \$133. Schweitzer Mountain Resort; (800) 831-8810 or (208) 263-9555 for information and reservations.

White Pine Lodge. The new White Pine Lodge (opened June 2002) is a sleek ski-in/ski-out property with stunning views of Lake Pend Oreille. 50 condo-style units range from one to three bedrooms, with full kitchens and gas fireplaces. One-bedrooms from \$229. Schweitzer Mountain Resort (see above).