

BOISE WEEKLY

Sun Valley Two Ways: One of Idaho's Swankiest Regions on a \$50 Budget, or Without One



The nonprofit **LeRoy's Ice Cream** stall in Ketchum is known for its locally sourced dairy—but the lemonade is fresh-squeezed to order, and not to be missed. Behind the counter on June 30, a young boy scooped flavors like elk tracks and wild huckleberry into cones while a teenage girl with dark hair and a deep summer tan worked a gleaming silver lemonade press, mixing the juice with sugar and pouring it over ice. The final result was mouth-puckeringly tart and instantly refreshing, a fitting complement to the nearly 80-degree weather—and a bargain in the high-priced world of Sun Valley at \$4 for a 16-ounce glass.

The lemonade from LeRoy's, like a surprising number of things available in the upscale Idaho resort towns of Ketchum and Sun Valley, is an equal-opportunity luxury. While the two towns (often lumped together under one name) have reputations as getaways for the rich and famous—well-deserved, as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Oprah Winfrey, Clint Eastwood, Bruce Willis and Bill Gates have all owned property there, among others—that doesn't mean they don't also have budget-friendly options and destinations for the average Boisean. To prove that very point, *Boise Weekly* sent me east with the challenge to do Sun Valley two ways: first as a day trip on a \$50 budget, and then as an overnight getaway in high style.



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The \$50 Day

By the time my road trip partner and I hit Ketchum it was 2 p.m. and just over 70 degrees. I had \$50 in my pocket, and the postcard-perfect ski town was enclosed under an unbroken dome of eggshell-blue sky. The first order of business was to find lunch; the second, to search out a bike rental shop and explore the miles of bike paths that wind through and around the community.

With a mind to take advantage of the weather, we decided to find a lunch spot with tables al fresco. **Grumpy's**—a highly recommended local dive described to us as a "pioneer saloon"—fit the bill. Grumpy's has been a Ketchum institution since 1978, and it looks it. Inside, the walls are covered with an assortment of beer cans, license plates, road signs and old photographs in cheap wooden frames. Our food was affordable (\$8.25 for a chicken sandwich, \$8.75 for a 1/2-pound hamburger) and unpretentious, chosen from a pared-down menu of meaty entrees perfected over years at the same grill. Supplemented with creamy coleslaw redolent of anise and caraway, or fries hot from the fryer, it was a lunch filling enough to make dinner seem all too near.



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Luckily, biking was next on the agenda. Given a big enough car and a bike of your own, hitting Ketchum's trails doesn't need to dent your budget, but in the spirit of the challenge, we left our bikes at home and stopped by **Sturtevants** to rent rides. Here's a tip: if you plan do a half-day rental (\$20 per person, discounted 20 percent if you stay at the **Knob Hill Inn**, **Hotel Ketchum** or **Limelight Hotel**) go for the afternoon, not the morning—that way, you technically have the bikes all night, since the shop only asks to have them back on its outdoor rack by the next day's opening.

Once in the saddle, the low-budget options are practically endless, and we pedaled through downtown Ketchum, stopping by the **Ore Wagon Museum** to read the historical

plaques, window shop through Giacobbi Square and hit Atkinsons' Market to stock up for a picnic dinner. We left a lot of possibilities unexplored, from the public Penny Lake Hot Springs that are only accessible in the warmer part of the year down an unpaved road; to **Sawtooth Brewery**, which hosts live music every other Wednesday; to the world-class fly fishing (free with a permit). There are also plenty of art galleries that offer free admission.



Toward the end of the day we rolled down the manicured bike path connecting Ketchum to Sun Valley, home of the famed resort and opera house, in pursuit of handmade truffles recommended by a random local who'd overheard us discussing chocolates on a public staircase. Not only did **The Chocolate Foundry** have truffles (bits of heaven sold individually to fit the budget), it also had a replica of the Sun Valley Resort logo hanging on the wall made entirely from Jelly Beans. For a truly luxurious finish to a price-conscious day, take your truffles and picnic fixings out to the resort lawn (no one will protest, we promise), spread your blanket pondside and watch the sun go down to the burbling soundtrack of the creek.

The Budget-free Night

There is, of course, more than one way to do Sun Valley, and nearly all of the low-budget recommendations above came not from a guidebook or Google search, but from Sun Valley native Timothy Mott, the gregarious and knowledgeable manager of **Ketchum's Knob Hill Inn**. Knob Hill, a boutique hotel on the outskirts of town, offered itself up as home base for the flipside of our mission: living up Sun Valley in luxury. And having stayed in its rooms (roughly \$350 per night for a king, though rates vary), eaten its complimentary breakfast and dined in its indoor-outdoor restaurant, I can say definitively that whether you're celebrating a special occasion in high style or just looking for a relaxing weekend close to home, Knob Hill is the place to set your GPS for.





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After a brief property tour, including a walk through the elegant Grill at Knob Hill, festooned with chandeliers made from light-wrapped bundles of branches on the inside, and tables topped with sherbert-colored umbrellas on the grass, we took the elevator up to our fourth-floor bedroom. While the room itself was well-appointed, I was immediately drawn to the balcony, which overlooked the restaurant and offered a million-dollar view of Bald Mountain, fronted by the cemetery where Ernest Hemingway is buried and trimmed by a window box of pink, white and violet pansies. If it weren't for our impending dinner reservations, I could have happily stayed there all night drinking in the view.

As it was, the **Grill at Knob Hill** was waiting. The meal started at 7 p.m. with cocktails and airy popovers slathered in house-made honey butter that was one of the highlights of the meal, as thick as frosting and nearly as sweet.

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(Restaurant Owner-Operator Bob Dunn was kind enough to share the recipe, but it's a secret you'll have to learn for yourself.)

That was followed by a bowl of mulligatawny soup thick with basmati rice, shredded chicken, carrots and corn. For my entree, I took the waiter's recommendation and chose the pretzel-crusted Canadian walleye fillet served in a pool of stone-ground mustard sauce with a side of sautéed spinach, and paired it with a glass of 2015 Lagaria Pino Grigio. The mellow depth of the mustard balanced the buttery hit from the fillet's crust, with the garlicky spinach serving as a counterpoint. By the time we reached dessert—peach crisp topped with a generous scoop of vanilla ice cream, the transcendent end to an impeccable meal—the sun hung low and heavy in the sky and a soft breeze was blowing, eddying the voices of the other diners out across the lawn.

Sitting there, I was reminded of something Mott had said earlier as he wrapped up our tour of the property: "Our philosophy here is that we don't really ever say no."

If you get the opportunity to spend the night at Knob Hill—or to visit Ketchum, regardless of the thickness of your wallet—we suggest taking a leaf out of his book.



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