

# Call of the wild

Travelling the byways of Idaho and Montana



Salmon Challis National Forest, Idaho



River rafting on the Payette River, Idaho

Adrenaline junkie **Shane Boocock** wets his appetite for wild adventure in big-sky Montana and big-river Idaho.

**A**s the raft hit the first big rapid, a wall of water showered everyone on board... With the temperatures in the 80s (fahrenheit) it was one sure way to stay cool. Forty minutes earlier I'd been in Boise and surprisingly, that's all it takes to find some good whitewater rafting in this part of Idaho. I had set aside three hours with Cascade Rafts to experience the Payette River — more than a simple float trip yet less than a serious

whitewater assault on a grade-four river system. I wasn't to be disappointed. It was a mild to wild adventure and the perfect introduction to the rivers of Idaho.

Boise residents and visitors it seems have everything right at their fingertips. In the winter the folk who live here can sometimes experience 15°C temperatures downtown, yet only 30km away, their local 2188m high local ski resort, Bogus Basin, is all powder action.

The truth is, over 4800km of Idaho whitewater rivers supply canoeists, kayakers, rafters, fishermen, jetboaters and jetskiers with an endless supply of H2O, more than any other state in the lower 48. Add another 78 rivers in Montana, including the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers and it's enough to wet anyone's adventurous appetite.

The perception that Idaho and Montana are too much like New Zealand can be quashed easily. This is real

Sun Valley Boundary Campground





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Killgore jetboat on the Snake River, Idaho

outdoors America where the Rockies offer a different wilderness experience: majestic saw-tooth mountains, abundant lakes and rivers, resort-style log-built lodges, great campgrounds and RV resorts, yet it's the wildlife component that adds another dimension to its stunning scenery.

On my 10-day road trip I was out to discover what makes this region so special, to find out why this unique piece of North American landscape demands more than a cursory glance at a road map. My quest was to enjoy some outdoor activities in two states famous for their great Rocky Mountain environment.

I spent my first night in the town of Riggins, located on the banks of the Salmon River. It's a spot with a casual small-town atmosphere including numerous river outfitters, just one main

street, a few cafes, a liquor store doubling as a fishing tackle shop and just two bars where tough loggers with long beards smoked cigarettes and told tales in gravelly voices. "I've been married three times," Dave, a logger, declares, "and each time it was to the same woman."

"Do you know what I do?" he then asks. "I'm a hooker and a stripper... Yep, I hook logs and strip them."

The next day I arrived on the banks of the Snake River to begin my six-hour jetboat ride through a place known as Hells Canyon, a 50km journey upstream with a few class-three and two class-four rapids to negotiate. Killgore Adventure's jetboat had a roofed-in canopy open over the front row of seats and with three 315hp diesel engines, it sliced its way

through the rapids like a torpedo. It made for a spectacular ride and a very wet one also as we hit the impressive Bernard Rapid... Not once but three times!

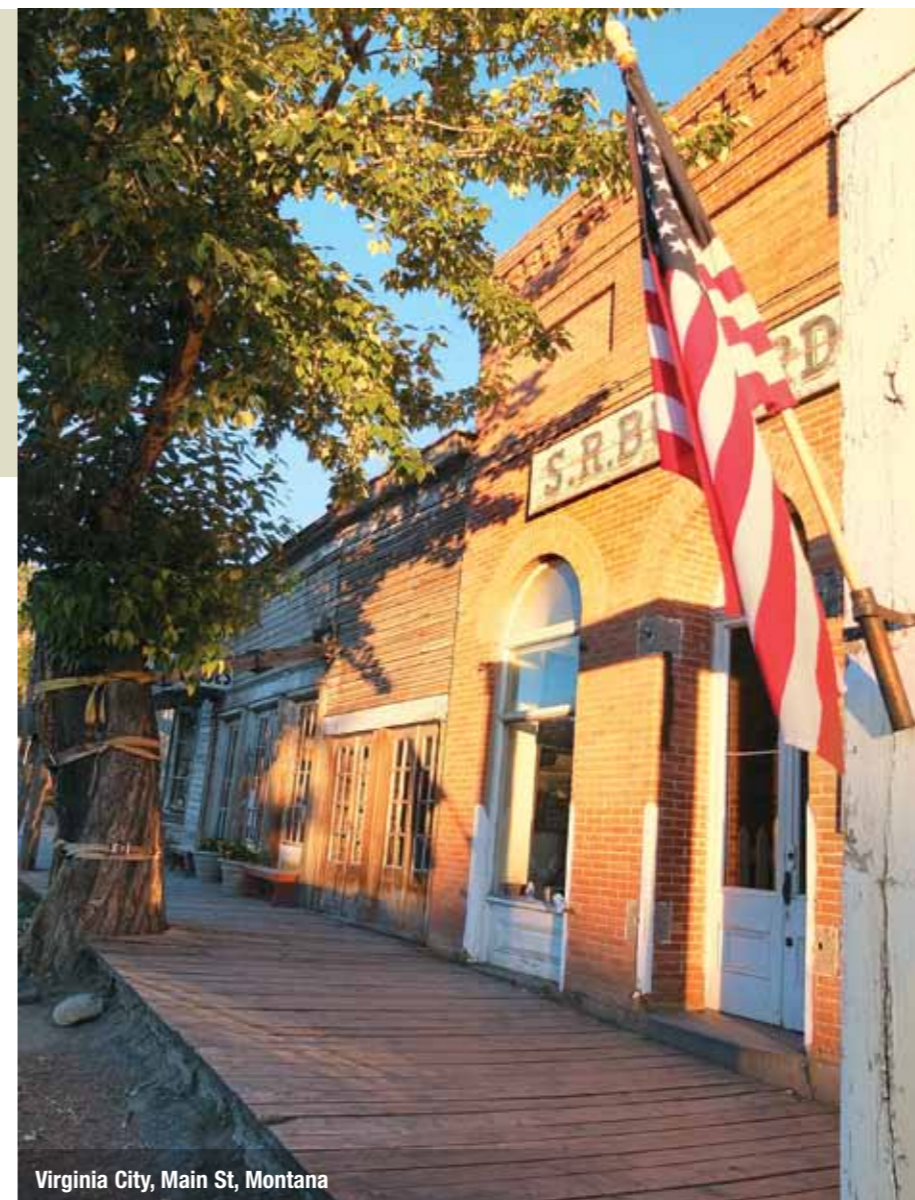
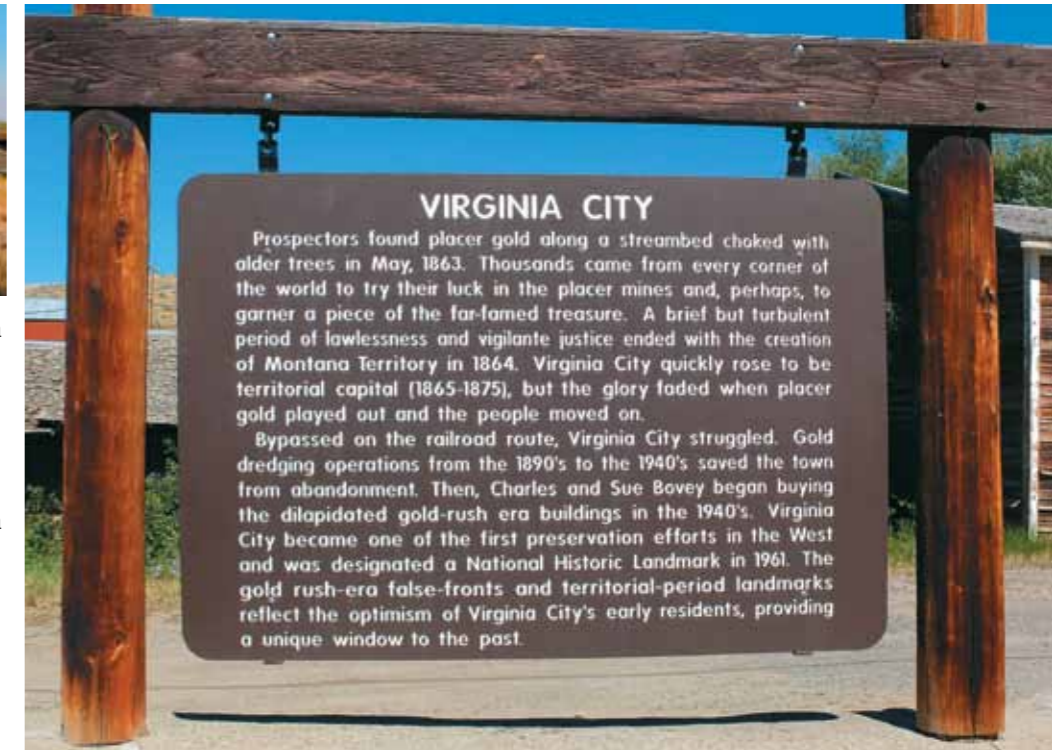
I again drove north for about 140km to spend the night alongside the Middle Fork of the Clearwater River. I was now on Highway 12, part of the 202-mile Northwest Passage Scenic Byway that follows Meriweather Lewis's and William Clark's course through the Nez Perce Indian lands in search of a route to the Pacific over 200 years ago.

At 9am the next day my expert fly fishing guide, Shane Reynolds pushed off from the bank in his custom-made 5.7m Dory-style drift boat high on the Upper Selway River, which eventually joins the Clearwater River. Within 10 minutes I'd hooked and netted my first cutthroat



trout — a nice 14-inch specimen. From a nearby forest fire the smell of burnt wood lingered in the air above the 1.2-million-acre Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, thick with cedar and ponderosa pine.

Within an hour we had spotted a bald eagle perched on the upturned roots of a fallen tree on the riverbank, overhead an osprey circled endlessly looking for a fish snack. We drifted down these rivers for over eight hours, during which time Shane reckoned I netted upwards of 20 catch and release trout — now that's the way I like to end my day.



Virginia City, Main St, Montana

**FACTS:**

With daily Air New Zealand connections from Auckland to San Francisco, and then just a one hour connection from San Francisco to Boise with United Airlines, this is a serious contender for the best outdoor USA region to explore and experience.

Idaho is an RV owner's paradise with over 650 privately-owned RV Parks and public campgrounds and on top of that Montana boasts at least another 450 places to park your rolling RV.

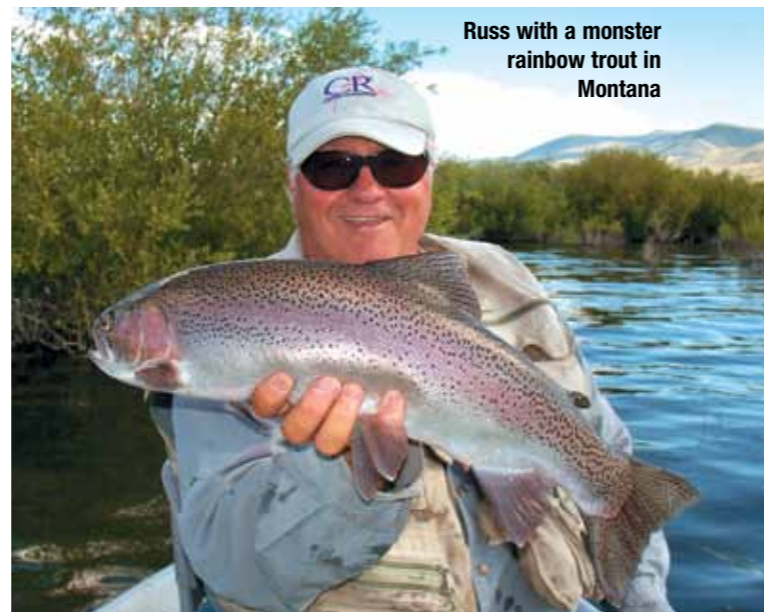
The evening was turning to dusk when I arrived at Lolo Hot Springs in Montana, having driven about 120km tracing the wildly curving Lochsa River before crossing into Montana via the 1590m Lolo Pass.

The next morning I hooked up with Dan Shepherd, owner of the Grizzly Hackle fishing tackle shop in Missoula, Montana. Dan had arranged for me to drift float down the Clark Fork River for three hours with Darren, one of his river guides. It was another chance to boat one of the big rainbow trout the river is famous for. After losing a bunch of decent fish my day's reward was a beautiful 17-inch (43cm) specimen.

At 4pm I headed east into 'Big Sky Country,' where the air was still hazy from the forest fires that lingered above ranch lands extending into the wide valleys and lowland hills.



Shane, my fly fishing guide in Idaho



Russ with a monster rainbow trout in Montana

From the town of Ennis I drove over a 2250m pass and parked up in the main street of Virginia City, a former gold rush town founded almost overnight in 1863. If ever there was a city retaining a slice of the Old West then Virginia City, Montana has to be it.

The town nestles along the gold-laden gulches of Alder Creek. By the mid-1860s the surrounding areas were quickly populated with thousands of feverish fortune hunters. This was once the territorial capital and today remains a true historical treasure. Glimpsing into the past, I wandered leisurely around the 1880s buildings before taking a short four-kilometre loop of the city in an historical fire engine. My final thrill of the day was riding shotgun on an authentic stagecoach, John Wayne style.

Following a great home-cooked breakfast and a short two-hour drive across sagebrush-covered prairie, I pulled up at the front door of the Montana High Country Lodge that looks out over the Pioneer Mountains. It lies in the Grasshopper Valley of Western Montana, with almost 500,000 acres of pristine backcountry wilderness on its doorstep. If you like fly or tackle fishing, river float trips, trophy archery, game hunting or snowmobiling in the winter months, this is a region worth exploring.

With seven trout ponds on his property, Russ, then owner of the lodge, drove me between each pond to fly fish for large rainbow trout that obligingly snatched his nymph twice as many times as mine — mind you he is an expert fly fishing guide!

Crossing back into Idaho over the Chief Joseph Pass on the road to Salmon, a forest fire was encroaching and log homes were in serious danger of being destroyed. A signpost in Challis advised the road to Stanley and onto Ketchum was closed due to another major forest fire.

I eventually took an unsealed road through the Salmon Challis National Forest to Sun Valley. It was a spectacular journey through sagebrush lowlands and over a steep pass that on one side dropped over a thousand metres into a valley — Sun Valley, Idaho. Most people have heard about it. Why? Because it was the first ski resort in America to offer a chairlift up a mountain — the year was 1936! Today Sun Valley covers nearly 3900sqm and is considered one of America's best biking, hiking, fishing and skiing destinations. Add three sensational golf courses and an 18-hole putting course and it equals one amazing, adventurous, outdoor paradise.

I finally arrived back in Boise after my memorable trip. On my 10-day, 1900km trip I'd seen two beaver, a bald eagle, a golden eagle, osprey, elk, deer, big-horned sheep, herds of antelope and my fair share of sizable trout. So, if you're hearing the call of the wild, it's being carried on the Big Sky winds. ■



Montana in summer

### WHAT, WHERE, HOW

- The Idaho RV Campgrounds Association official source for information: [vidaho.org](http://vidaho.org)
- The Campground Owners Association of Montana official source for information: [campingmontana.com](http://campingmontana.com)
- Rafting on the Payette River, Idaho: [cascaderaft.com](http://cascaderaft.com)
- Jetboating and RV Park on the Snake River, Idaho: [killgoreadventures.com](http://killgoreadventures.com)
- Accommodation on the Middle Fork of the Clearwater River, Idaho: [riverdancelodge.com](http://riverdancelodge.com)
- Guided rafting and fishing trips in Idaho and worldwide: [rowadventures.com](http://rowadventures.com)
- Guided rafting on the Clark, Bitterroot and Blackfoot Rivers, Montana: [grizzlyhackle.com](http://grizzlyhackle.com)
- Virginia City, Montana: [virginiacitymt.com](http://virginiacitymt.com)
- Bed and Breakfast accommodation in Virginia City, Montana: [justanexperience.com](http://justanexperience.com)
- Montana High Country Lodge for guided fishing, hunting, snowmobiling and family vacations: [mhct.com](http://mhct.com)
- Sun Valley, Idaho accommodation, golfing, fishing, skiing, mountain biking: [sunvalley.com](http://sunvalley.com)
- Boise Tourism, Idaho for all you need to know before you go: [boise.org](http://boise.org)
- Shane Boocock travelled to the Rocky Mountains courtesy of Idaho Tourism: [visitidaho.com](http://visitidaho.com); and Montana Office of Tourism: [visitmt.com](http://visitmt.com)

