

Idaho's vibrant capital of culture

Best known to travellers for its Rocky Mountain location, Boise is aiming to become the most liveable city in the US by focusing on art, sustainability and local food.

By Kristin Conard
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Upon his first visit in 1906, Clarence Darrow -- one of the 20th Century's most famous American lawyers -- proclaimed Boise to be the "Athens of the sagebrush" due to the desert town's vibrant culture. But for travellers, the Idaho capital's main draw has long been its location in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, perfect for hiking and mountain biking.

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However in the early 2000s, city leaders launched an initiative to make the often culturally underrated Boise the “**most liveable city in the country**”, revitalizing many of the city’s neighbourhoods and putting a new focus on art, local food and environmental sustainability. And to top it all off, in 2013 Boise will commemorate its sesquicentennial with a whole year of celebrations, fittingly called **Boise 150**.

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Cultural draws

As the most geographically isolated urban area of the Lower 48 (Reno, Nevada is 334 miles away, Portland, Oregon is 348 miles away and Salt Lake City, Utah is 350 miles away), Boise has always had to provide its own art and culture. Over the last decade, the city government has made a concentrated effort to increase artistic funding, resulting in city-wide public murals, mosaics and sculptures, including the River Sculpture in front of the **Grove Hotel**, which depicts the central Boise River. The Boise 150 program will take this artistic focus one step further with legacy projects like new public art installations.

Boise’s unique location also means that art often blends with nature, and the summer audiences seated in the **Idaho Shakespeare Festival**’s 770-seat natural outdoor amphitheatre may see herons, geese or deer during a performance of Romeo and Juliet or

The Winter's Tale. Since 1976, the repertory theatre has put on five or six shows between May and September each year, and watching a show under the stars has become a much-loved local tradition.

Opera Idaho, the state's only professional opera company, will be celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2013. In collaboration with Boise-based **Ballet Idaho**, the opera is performing Pagliacci with Stravinsky's Pulcinella Suite in March, along with its Boise 150 performance of Carlisle Floyd's Susannah in May. All the main stage performances are held in the elaborately gilded and decorated **Egyptian Theatre**, which was built in 1927 during an increase in Egyptian Revival-style buildings across the country following the discovery of King Tut's Tomb in Egypt. The theatre will also host the Boise 150 Kick off Night on 9 February 2013.

An exciting newcomer to the Boise arts scene is the **Trey McIntyre Project**. Award-winning dancer and choreographer Trey McIntyre formed his touring contemporary ballet company in 2008, and despite being able to set up shop anywhere in US, he chose Boise. Co-founder John Michael Schert explained the surprising decision as "an opportunity to create a sense of ownership amongst the citizenry in which a dance company could be upheld as a paragon of what it means to be a Boisean – creative, entrepreneurial and

proud.”

For Boise 150, the Trey McIntyre Project will continue their **Boise Bright Spot Project**, where dancers unexpectedly descend on an urban space, like a restaurant or on the street, and perform.

A river runs through it

The capital of Idaho boomed during the 1860s Gold Rush as a stop for pioneers moving west along the **Oregon Trail**. Explorers and trappers who approached the area from the east saw the tree-lined Boise River as a lush beacon in the middle of desert and mountains. But until the 1960s, the river was neglected and its banks were a dumping ground. Now, the banks have been reclaimed as the **Boise River Greenbelt**, a beloved 25-mile tree-lined walking and cycling path that connects 850 acres of park space and provides an alternate commuter route.

There are easily navigable class II rapids on the six-mile stretch between **Barber Park** and **Ann Morrison Park**, and floating the river is a favourite summer pastime. But for a greater challenge, local companies like **River Roots** teach white-water kayaking in hard shell play boats.

Advanced paddlers can play on the waves at the **Boise River Recreation Park**; opened in June 2012, the park was 14 years in the

making and started as a dream of local river runners. McLaughlin Whitewater Design Group, who designed the 1996 Olympic white-water course in Atlanta, Georgia, developed the quarter mile stretch of river between Main Street and **Veterans Memorial Park** where surfers and kayakers can “park and play” on the two waves controlled by nine underwater gates that regulate water flow. This is phase one of an ongoing project; the next is developing the nearby **Esther Simplot Community Park** to include pathways, picnic shelters and a stream, expanding the white-water features downstream, and building a “lazy river” – a slow flow channel connecting three ponds for tubing and rafting.

Living history

Community is a major theme of the Boise 150 celebration, and the Basque community from north-central Spain and southwestern France plays an integral part in local history. Basque immigrants congregated in the area in two waves, first in the 1890s and then in the 1930s and 1940s, and today almost 10% of Boise’s approximately 211,000 residents have Basque heritage.

Basque festivals are held throughout the year, and in downtown’s **Basque Block** (on Grove Street between 6th Street and Capitol Boulevard) the pavement is coloured red and green to match the Basque flag. **The Basque Market** sells specialty food and gifts, like

Vindaro Añejo vinegar and handmade ceramics, and a **Basque Museum and Cultural Center** has exhibitions on Basque history and holds language classes. For Boise 150, the museum will renovate its most-prized artefact: **the Cyrus Jackobs/Uberauaga House**, which noted Boise pioneer Cyrus Jacobs built in 1864.

Boise and Basque history combine at **Bar Gernika** on the Basque Block, where the menu places classic American dishes like burgers and fries next to traditional foods like lamb kabobs and *croquetas* (deep fried balls of chicken and onion). Along with local beers, the bar also serves red tempranillo wines from the Basque region and *kalimotxo*, the Basque cocktail of red wine and Coca Cola served over ice.

Sustainable city

Ask just about anyone to name an Idaho food, and the answer is likely potatoes. And for good reason -- the soil and climate make it perfect for growing this tuber, and the Idaho potato is world famous, led by the Boise-based JR Simplot Company who patented the frozen french-fry and provides McDonald's with more than 50% of its potatoes.

The award-winning restaurant **Boise Fry Company** puts the spud centre stage and serves its burgers (vegan or free-range local beef or bison) on the side. There are

thousands of options to choose from, with six potato options (russet, purple, okinawa, sweet, Yukon old and yam), five preparation styles (from homestyle fries to fried balls of mashed potato), a selection of flavoured salts (vanilla, jalapeno, cinnamon or ginger) and several dipping sauces (blueberry ketchup or sour thai). The most decadent is the “bourgeois” fries, fried in duck fat and sprinkled with truffle salt.

But local food is more than just the potato. Cameron Lumsden, owner of the restaurant **Fork**, which opened in early 2011, has pledged to create a seasonally changing menu sourced from suppliers from across the northwestern United States, serving dishes such as sea scallops with acorn squash and smoke mushroom risotto. Many drinks are locally sourced too, such as the American Lavender cocktail made of **American Harvest organic vodka** from the Snake River Valley, local lavender and mint and house-infused lavender honey syrup.

The local food movement is supported by downtown side-by-side sister restaurants **Bittercreek Alehouse and Red Feather Lounge**. The former sources food from 30 nearby ranches and farmers and has a rotating selection of 39 craft beers on tap. The latter, a cocktail lounge with 61 different cocktails, uses metal straws (no plastic to toss) and reduces their carbon footprint by

dimming the lights for two hours each day.

And it is not just restaurants that are eco-friendly. Hundreds of buildings in the Warm Springs district and more than 65 businesses downtown, including the **Capitol Building**, are heated by geothermal energy thanks to Boise's location on natural geothermal reservoirs.

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