

Hot Springs Hopping

Soak up the health and history of Idaho's thermal waters

BY KIT BERNARDI

Burgdorf Hot Springs

Idaho's mineral-rich hot springs have always been wellness destinations. Native Americans have been gathering at the steamy pools for thousands of years.

Today, visitors soak up not only health benefits, but cultural and geological history. There are more than 100 hot springs in the Gem State, more than in any other state in the country.

There is plenty to choose from — natural pools in remote wilderness creeks and rustic, historic homestead pools to modern resort spring-fed or recreational swimming pools. Summer is the busiest season, but it's less crowded on weekdays. Seasonal weather periodically hinders access to remote hot springs locations, so check websites for updates.

MIRACLE HOT SPRINGS, BUHL

"From the freeway, the Snake River Plains look pretty barren, but exit and go into the hills and canyons to find lots of waterfalls, hot springs, trails to hike and rivers to kayak," says Kalem Olsen, whose family has owned the 8-acre Miracle Hot Springs since 1959.

Four outdoor geothermal public pools are encircled by an adobe-style building housing 21 open-to-the-sky, private hot pool spaces; two also have cold-water plunge pools. Each space accommodates four to six guests who can adjust their pool's temperature. Reservations are required for all soaking services.

Massage treatment rooms, free of Wi-Fi and cell service, enhance relaxation.

Glamping-style geodesic domes or

campsites are available for guests staying overnight.

BURGDORF HOT SPRINGS, MCCALL

Frederick Burgdorf learned about the local hot springs from Chinese miners during the 1860s gold rush. He purchased the land in 1870 and built a hotel with pools filled naturally by hot water bubbling up from the ground. Since 1923, the Harris family has owned Burgdorf Hot Springs, a 160-acre historic homestead listed on the National Register of Historic Places and surrounded by the Payette National Forest. "Just like Burgdorf's visitors long ago, our guests soak in the same three, pine-log-sided pools surrounded by some original buildings and pristine mountain views," co-owner Scott Harris says. >

Gorgeous wooded mountain slopes frame a sprawling meadow flanked by Lake Creek, a protected Chinook salmon and bull trout spawning ground. These are the sacred lands of the Nez Perce tribe, whose headquarters are in Lapwai. The area is also a gathering place for sandhill cranes and where elk, moose and deer wander.

Daytime guests must make reservations online to soak. A maximum of 30 overnight guests staying in 15 rustic cabins enjoy unlimited pool access. Be advised: There's no electricity or running water (including bathrooms, though there are outhouses), and you must bring your own food, camp stove, cooking utensils and bedding.

GOLDBUG HOT SPRINGS, SALMON

Visitors to remote Goldbug Hot Springs in the Salmon-Challis National Forest wilderness earn their relaxing soak by hiking two miles on a steep trail to Warm Springs Creek in the Lemhi Mountain Range. Gaining almost 1,000 vertical feet, the narrow trail switchbacks up the rocky north slope to the hot springs tucked into a slim canyon at 5,320 feet.



"There are as many as six pools along the gravel-bottom creek, each with varying temperatures, depending upon the season and the amount of snowmelt and runoff from the Lemhi Mountain Range," says Travis Seaberg, the outdoor recreation planner for the Bureau of Land Management's Salmon Field Office.

Prepare for wilderness conditions; wear sturdy hiking shoes and weather-appropriate gear. Bring food, water, a towel, trekking poles, if you have them, and a head lamp. The only public bathrooms available are vault toilets at the trailhead where parking is limited, often requiring visitors to park along the gravel road.

CHALLIS HOT SPRINGS, CHALLIS

Thirty-five miles south of Goldbug Hot Springs and situated in the geographic center of the state, visitors find the only soaking experience located in an Idaho state park.

Open to the public since 1883, Challis Hot Springs is a spring-fed swimming pool in the campground of Land of the Yankee Fork State Park.

Formerly Tukidika Shosone land, the park's attractions include restored 1800s homestead buildings, marked ATV trails, bighorn sheep, preserved mining ghost towns and the Challis Bison Kill site listed on the National Register of Historic Places. ■



DID YOU KNOW?

A region's type of rock and that rock's interaction with water determine a hot spring's mineral content, alkalinity and temperature — all natural features credited with healing and restoring health.

Alkalinity helps heal dry, irritated skin. Minerals such as magnesium, calcium, zinc, sodium and potassium nourish the body, and dipping in the water is better than taking supplements.

Water temperatures in Idaho's hot springs can range from 90 to 115 degrees. The heat increases blood circulation and soothes aching muscles.