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Visiting Idaho

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Introduction

Known as the "Gem State," Idaho offers tourists an unparalleled combination of scenic beauty and outdoor activities, making it a must-visit destination. From the soaring peaks of the Rocky Mountains and the deep gorges carved by majestic rivers to tranquil forests and uniquely formed volcanic landscapes, Idaho's terrain is as varied as it is captivating. This book serves as a detailed guide for prospective tourists interested in discovering Idaho, focusing on specificities unique to this enchanting state.

Idaho is much more than just its incredible landscapes; it is a place rich in culture and history, with experiences that cater to both adventure seekers and those looking for respite in serene surroundings. Whether you're interested in hiking through verdant trails, skiing down world-class slopes, or exploring vibrant cities with distinctive identities, Idaho promises a diverse range of activities to enhance your travel.

The state is divided into several distinct regions, each with its own allure and character. North Idaho is a nature lover's paradise, abundant with dense forests and shimmering lakes. The Southwest offers an enticing blend of urban sophistication in Boise and the natural magnificence of Snake River landscapes. Eastward, picturesque paths lead you toward Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, adding unique dimensions to any journey.

Visitors will find that Idaho's climate is as diverse as its topography. Summers are perfect for outdoor pursuits, while winters transform the state into a snowy playground ideal for winter sports enthusiasts. Spring and autumn offer mild temperatures alongside breathtaking natural displays of blooming wildflowers or vibrant foliage.

This guide aims to equip travelers with all the necessary practical details, including the best ways to get into and around the state, accommodation options that range from camping under starry skies to luxury mountain resorts, and a culinary scene that showcases Idaho's agricultural bounty combined with cultural influences.

As you embark on this exploration of Idaho, we encourage you to embrace the spirit of adventure, respect nature, and savor the unique offerings of the Gem State. With careful planning and a sense of curiosity, your visit to Idaho is bound to be an unforgettable experience filled with wonder and discovery.

CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Climate of Idaho

Idaho's geography is as distinctive and memorable as its nickname, the "Gem State." Glance at a map, and you'll notice its unique shape, often likened to a logger's boot or perhaps an upright saucepan with a long panhandle reaching northwards. This unusual outline hints at the immense variety contained within its borders. Stretching nearly 500 miles from the Canadian border in the north to the high deserts bordering Nevada and Utah in the south, Idaho encompasses a staggering range of landscapes, elevations, and consequently, climates. It's a landlocked state, yet water defines much of its character, from massive rivers carving colossal canyons to thousands of pristine lakes reflecting rugged mountain peaks.

The defining feature of Idaho's topography is the Rocky Mountains. Unlike the relatively linear front range seen in Colorado, Idaho's Rockies are a vast, complex, and deeply dissected maze of mountain ranges covering most of the state's central and northern territory. These aren't gentle, rolling hills; they are formidable, often remote ranges like the Bitterroots forming the rugged border with Montana, the jagged Sawtooths offering some of the most iconic alpine scenery in the American West, and the Lost River Range, home to Borah Peak, which at 12,662 feet is the state's highest point. These mountains dictate travel routes, create distinct ecological zones, and store the winter snowpack vital for the state's water supply.

Traveling through central Idaho means navigating this mountainous heart. Roads often follow river valleys, winding through steep terrain. High passes can be closed for much of the year due to snow. The sheer scale of this wilderness is immense; Idaho contains some of the largest roadless areas in the contiguous United States, particularly within the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. For the tourist, this translates to both breathtaking beauty and the need for careful planning, as destinations that appear close on a map might be a long, winding drive apart, or seasonally inaccessible. The alpine environment provides stunning summer hiking and challenging winter sports, but demands respect for its potential hazards.

Water has sculpted this landscape dramatically, primarily through the actions of its major river systems. The Snake River is Idaho's lifeblood, originating in Wyoming near Yellowstone, arcing across the entire southern breadth of the state before turning north to form part of the Idaho-Oregon border, and eventually joining the Columbia River. Its journey creates diverse landscapes, from the broad, irrigated plains crucial for agriculture to deep, imposing canyons. None is more impressive than Hells Canyon, carved by the Snake along the border with Oregon and Washington. Plunging over 8,000 feet from He Devil mountain peak to the river below, it surpasses even the Grand Canyon in depth, offering a raw, wild beauty accessible mainly by boat or

challenging trails.

Just as significant, though perhaps even wilder in character, is the Salmon River. Aptly nicknamed the "River of No Return" by early explorers and boatmen daunted by its powerful current and rapids flowing through deep canyons, the Salmon River system drains a vast area of central Idaho's mountains. It remains one of the longest undammed rivers in the continental US within a single state, offering world-renowned whitewater rafting and critical habitat for salmon and steelhead trout. The Clearwater River, another major tributary of the Snake, also drains a large part of north-central Idaho's mountainous terrain, known for its forested canyons and historical significance to the Nez Perce tribe.

Contrasting dramatically with the mountainous terrain is the Snake River Plain, a vast, crescent-shaped lowland sweeping across southern Idaho. This region is fundamentally volcanic in origin, formed by the passage of the North American tectonic plate over a stationary geological hotspot (the same one currently fueling Yellowstone's geothermal activity). While often described as a plain, it's far from monotonous, featuring rolling hills, isolated buttes (remnants of ancient volcanoes), and fascinating volcanic features like shield volcanoes, cinder cones, and extensive basalt lava flows. This unique geology is most starkly visible at Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve, but evidence of volcanism underlies much of southern Idaho.

The Snake River Plain's relative flatness, combined with the water diverted from the Snake River for irrigation, has made it Idaho's agricultural heartland. Vast tracts of potatoes, sugar beets, barley, and hay flourish here, creating a landscape distinct from the forests and mountains elsewhere. Volcanic soils contribute to the region's fertility. Tourists driving across southern Idaho on Interstate 84 will spend much of their time traversing this unique physiographic province, witnessing both the agricultural productivity and the underlying volcanic character breaking through the surface in places.

Evidence of Idaho's volcanic past isn't confined solely to the Snake River Plain. Extensive lava flows, some relatively recent in geological terms, cover large areas. Visitors can explore accessible lava tubes—caves formed by cooling lava—at places like Craters of the Moon or near Shoshone. The landscape around the Island Park area in Eastern Idaho sits within the vast caldera of an ancient supervolcano, one of the largest such structures on Earth. While not as immediately obvious as the cones and flows further south, this volcanic legacy shapes the landforms and geothermal activity (like hot springs) found throughout the state.

Moving north, the geography shifts again in the Idaho Panhandle. This narrow strip of land, squeezed between Washington, Montana, and Canada, is characterized by lower, though still significant, mountains compared to central Idaho. It's part of the Northern

Rockies ecosystem, featuring dense forests dominated by conifers like ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, and western red cedar. The Panhandle is renowned for its large, stunning natural lakes, remnants of glacial activity during the last Ice Age. Lake Pend Oreille, one of the deepest lakes in the United States, Coeur d'Alene Lake with its intricate shoreline, and the relatively remote Priest Lake are major draws for recreation and define the character of North Idaho.

Some areas in the far south and southeast of Idaho exhibit characteristics of the Basin and Range province, more typical of Nevada and Utah. This geological region is defined by roughly parallel, north-south trending mountain ranges separated by wide, flat valleys or basins. While not as dominant as the Rockies or the Snake River Plain, this topography adds another layer to Idaho's diverse physical makeup, particularly noticeable in areas around the City of Rocks National Reserve. This constant interplay of mountains, rivers, plains, forests, and deserts across different geological provinces makes Idaho a remarkably varied state to explore.

This dramatic geographical diversity inevitably leads to a highly variable climate across Idaho. Elevation, latitude, and the formidable barrier of the Rocky Mountains combine to create distinct weather patterns from north to south and east to west. Generally, Idaho experiences a four-season climate, but the character and length of those seasons can differ significantly depending on where you are. Forget any notion of Idaho having a single, uniform climate; prepare for variety.

Summers in Idaho (roughly June through August) are typically characterized by warmth and abundant sunshine, especially across the southern parts of the state and in lower elevations. The Snake River Plain can experience hot temperatures, often exceeding 90°F (32°C), accompanied by low humidity, which makes the heat feel less oppressive than in more humid climates. Daylight hours are long, perfect for extended exploration. However, escape from the heat is always nearby in the mountains, where daytime temperatures are much cooler, and nights can become distinctly chilly, even in mid-summer. Thunderstorms, sometimes intense but often localized and brief, can develop in the afternoons, particularly over the mountains.

Autumn (September and October) is often considered a delightful season to visit Idaho. The intense heat of summer subsides, replaced by pleasantly cool, crisp days and colder nights. The risk of thunderstorms diminishes, leading to many days of clear blue skies. This is a season of transition, with the first snows often dusting the highest peaks by late September or October. Fall foliage provides spectacular color, especially the golden aspens contrasting with dark conifers in the mountains, and the changing colors of deciduous trees along river valleys and in the Panhandle. Days grow noticeably shorter, signaling the approach of winter.

Winter (November through March) transforms much of Idaho into a snow-covered landscape. Winters are generally cold, with significant snowfall, particularly in the

mountains and the eastern highlands. This snowfall is the foundation for Idaho's excellent skiing and snowboarding scene. Temperatures frequently drop below freezing, especially at night and at higher elevations. Valleys, like the Treasure Valley around Boise, can experience temperature inversions, where cold, foggy air gets trapped below a layer of warmer air, leading to periods of gray, chilly conditions while higher elevations enjoy sunshine. Travel can be challenging, with mountain passes potentially closing temporarily or requiring snow tires or chains.

Spring (April and May) is a period of dramatic awakening and often unpredictable weather. As temperatures rise, the substantial mountain snowpack begins to melt, swelling rivers and streams, sometimes leading to high water or localized flooding. Lower elevations green up quickly, and wildflowers begin to bloom across the foothills and plains. However, spring weather can be volatile, swinging between warm, sunny days and sudden cold snaps bringing rain or even late-season snow, especially in the mountains. Higher elevation trails and roads often remain snowbound well into June or even early July, a crucial factor for planning hiking or backpacking trips.

Beyond these general seasonal patterns, significant regional climate variations exist. The Northern Panhandle, being further north and more exposed to moist air masses moving inland from the Pacific Ocean, generally receives more precipitation than the southern parts of the state. Its climate is somewhat moderated by this maritime influence, resulting in slightly cooler summers and milder (though still snowy) winters compared to areas at similar elevations further east or south. The forests thrive in this moister environment.

Central Idaho's mountains experience the most extreme climate variations, driven primarily by elevation. High peaks remain snow-capped for much of the year. Mountain valleys like Stanley, although at significant elevation themselves, can experience very cold winter temperatures but surprisingly pleasant, cool summer days. The growing season is short, and weather can change rapidly at any time of year. Visitors venturing into these areas must be prepared for a wide range of conditions.

The Snake River Plain, lying in the rain shadow of mountains to the west, is characterized by a semi-arid, continental climate. This means greater temperature extremes between summer and winter, and day and night, compared to the Panhandle. Precipitation is significantly lower, summers are hotter and drier, and winters are cold with less overall snowfall than the mountains but often accompanied by wind. Agriculture here relies heavily on irrigation drawn from the Snake River system.

Eastern Idaho, encompassing high-elevation plains and mountains near the Wyoming border and the Yellowstone plateau, experiences long, cold, and snowy winters. Its higher average elevation contributes to cooler temperatures year-round compared to

the Snake River Plain. Summers are typically pleasant and relatively short, making it a popular season for visiting nearby national parks. The climate here shares similarities with the high-elevation regions of neighboring Wyoming and Montana.

Precipitation patterns across Idaho reflect the interplay of mountains and prevailing weather systems. Generally, the wettest areas are the Northern Panhandle and the higher mountain ranges, which intercept moisture moving from the west. Areas east of major mountain barriers, like the Snake River Plain, exist in pronounced rain shadows and receive much less precipitation. Much of the annual precipitation, especially in the mountains, falls as snow during the winter months. This mountain snowpack acts as a natural reservoir, its gradual melt feeding the state's rivers throughout the drier summer months, making it critically important for agriculture, ecosystems, and recreation.

Despite the potential for winter gloom or summer thunderstorms, Idaho generally boasts a good amount of sunshine. Southern Idaho, in particular, enjoys many sunny days throughout the year, contributing to its agricultural productivity and appeal for sun-seeking visitors. The clear, dry air, especially at higher elevations and away from city lights, often results in exceptionally dark night skies, making Idaho a prime location for stargazing. Parks like Craters of the Moon and Bruneau Dunes State Park (with its public observatory) specifically highlight this astronomical advantage, a direct benefit of the regional climate.

Wind is another climatic factor worth noting, especially for travelers planning outdoor activities. The wide-open spaces of the Snake River Plain are particularly prone to windy conditions, which can be a chilling factor in winter and can whip up dust in drier periods. Mountain ridges and passes are also frequently windy. While sometimes a nuisance for campers or hikers, this wind resource is also being harnessed for renewable energy generation in several parts of the state.

A unique practical consideration for travelers navigating Idaho is its division into two time zones. This split follows a rather jagged line generally associated with the Salmon River in the central part of the state. The Northern Panhandle, north of the Salmon River (including cities like Coeur d'Alene and Sandpoint), operates on Pacific Time (PT). The rest of the state, comprising southern and eastern Idaho (including Boise, Twin Falls, Idaho Falls, and Sun Valley), operates on Mountain Time (MT). This division reflects historical economic ties, with North Idaho often looking towards Spokane, Washington (in the Pacific Time Zone). For tourists traveling north-south, particularly through the central part of the state, it's crucial to be aware of this boundary to avoid confusion with schedules, appointments, or opening hours. Always double-check the local time when crossing this zone.

Beyond the broad regional patterns, Idaho's complex topography creates numerous microclimates. A specific river valley might be warmer and drier than the surrounding

hills. The aspect of a slope—whether it faces north (cooler, moister) or south (warmer, drier)—can significantly influence vegetation and local conditions. Large lakes like Pend Oreille can have a moderating effect on the temperatures of immediately adjacent areas. These local variations add another layer of complexity and interest to Idaho's climate, reminding visitors that conditions can change over relatively short distances.

Understanding Idaho's geography and climate is fundamental to planning a successful trip. The timing of your visit will be heavily influenced by the prevailing seasonal conditions and the activities you wish to pursue. Summer offers the widest range of accessibility for hiking, camping, and water sports but also brings the largest crowds and highest temperatures in the south. Winter is prime for skiing and snowmobiling but requires preparation for cold and potentially difficult travel. The shoulder seasons of spring and fall offer fewer crowds and unique beauty—wildflowers in spring, foliage in fall—but come with greater weather unpredictability and potentially limited access to high-elevation areas. Being prepared for variable weather, understanding the vast distances and challenging terrain, and respecting the power of nature are key to enjoying the diverse landscapes of the Gem State.

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