

Sun Valley, Idaho

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Galena Lodge welcomes cross-country skiers and snowshoers. (Photo courtesy Ketchum-Sun Valley Chamber of Commerce)

A Place Called Galena Lodge

By Claire Walter

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The cross-country system near Ketchum/Sun Valley, Idaho, ranks among the grandest in the United States. The most reliable portions are the more than 50 kilometers of immaculately maintained trails that lace through the upper Wood River Valley from the historic Galena Lodge – a commercial enterprise, to be sure, but a place so intertwined with late 19th - and early 20th-century Idaho and perhaps destined to take its place as a footnote to presidential history in the early 21st century that it is in a class by itself.

The Galena Lodge trails are part – many people would say the best part – of the North Valley Trailssystem, a network of over 180 kilometers of trails between Bellevue to Galena Summit, a distance of nearly 50 road miles. Most people, including me, prefer to hop on the free shuttle bus that links the Galena Lodge with Sun Valley/Ketchum, but hardcore distance skiers tackle the Boulder Mountain Trail's 30-kilometer run from Galena Lodge to the northern fringes of Ketchum.

The present Galena Lodge is virtually all that remains of the short-lived mining town (1879-1890) of the same name. The last business, the Galena Store, limped along, supplying the few shepherders, fisherman and travelers who made their way over Galena Summit. Even after the establishment of the Sawtooth National Forest in 1905, a primitive old pack and stage road remained. It was improved over time, but not until the 1950s was an asphalt ribbon laid past the store and over the pass into the Stanley Basin. Fast-forward to the 1970s, the first-wave cross-country skiing boom in North America, and the “discovery” of the valley’s deep and consistent snows. With winter accessibility, the paving literally and figuratively paved the way for a splendid cross-country ski trail system, and the old store morphed into the Galena Lodge. Asphalt in the ‘50s might seem recent as such things go – until you learn that the lodge was just wired into the electrical grid last summer. Until 2004, a generator powered the lights.

Between the ghost town days and the current plugged-in era, operators came and went, but the names of Pearl and Charles Barber are inextricably linked with Galena. Excellent trout fishing lured the couple to the Wood River Valley from Boise. They purchased the Galena Store in 1924, and later, inspired by the success of skiing in the new resort at Sun Valley, they installed a rope tow on a hill south of the store. Before snowmaking, Sun Valley guests were bused to Galena during light snow years when there wasn’t enough downvalley cover for skiing.

Charles suffered a stroke and eventually died in 1944, but Pearl ran the business for a total of 35 years. The Gelsky family purchased it from her in 1960 and expanded it into the nucleus of the current Galena Lodge. They cobbled the day together from building materials gleaned from the Galena townsite. Over time, trails were laid out along old mining roads. Operators came up with ambition to develop a full Nordic resort, accommodations and all, but they never came to fruition. In the meantime, the challenges of conducting a viable seasonal business in ancient buildings and a harsh climate proved insurmountable, and the lodge was closed for nearly two years. Eventually, the United States Forest Service said, “Fix it up or tear it down.”

Locals from Ketchum and Sun Valley, 24 miles to the south, rallied. They formed a committee to save the lodge and, by extension, use of the marvelous Nordic ski facilities that had developed around it. The community’s fundraising efforts attracted the attention of Teresa Heinz, widow of Senator H. John Heinz. One of the Heinz family’s several homes was in Ketchum, and she and her children had deep emotional ties to the area. The then Mrs. Heinz pledged a US\$325,000 donation in memory of her late husband to rescue the old lodge, with the proviso that the community raise an additional \$200,000 to create an endowment that would provide ongoing support for it.

Within three months, one thousand of the small town’s residents and regular visitors came through, raising the required US\$200,000. The Blaine County Recreation District, a not-for-profit organization, purchased the Galena Lodge in 1994 and continues to maintain it and its winter trail system. The annual Friends of Galena fundraiser in late November continues to be one of greater Ketchum’s favorite social and charitable functions. Depending on the outcome of the 2004 U.S. Presidential election, that could change. Mrs. Heinz, of course, is now Teresa Heinz Kerry, and if she and her husband are getting set to move into the White House, the Ketchum/Sun Valley area will be a presidential retreat in the Sawtooth Mountain – and who knows which heads of state might be entertained there.

Until the election campaign, the Heinz-Kerry clan managed to remain pretty low-key during their Idaho sojourns. Senator Kerry lunched at the lodge during mountain biking season, but Carlin Thompson, who with her husband, Charles Savage, currently operates the Galena Lodge, believes Mrs. Kerry to be the cross-country skier in the family. She adds, “We see her kids the most. Andre was on the floor one day, playing with our dogs. We didn’t even know who he was.” It isn’t surprising that the Heinz sons are happy to escape the pressure cooker of prominence in a place like the Galena Lodge, which bears a patina without being stuffy or pretentious. It is more a put-your-feet-up than a keep-your-hands-off establishment.

It comes by that patina honorably. “The original purposes of parts of the lodge are shrouded in mystery,” says Thompson. “All the timbers were salvaged from the original town, but the lodge has gone through many remodels.” Along with the ancient timbers came some spirits. Thompson, Savage and their staff live on property, and ghostly tales have been told. “Some employees have had encounters,” Thompson says guardedly. “One gal was asleep in the lodge. She woke up because she heard all sorts of noises, but the rest of us had all gone to town. She went to the back door to look for us, but no one was around. When we got back, she had all the lights on. There have been other incidents, like opening doors and flying dishes, but they’ve all been in summer.”

Perhaps Galena Lodge’s ghosts hibernate, or perhaps they migrate elsewhere to escape the snow that falls in prodigious quantities. While the area boasts of sunshine and great scenery, you won’t hear about them from me. I’ve been to the Galena Lodge in snowfall so thick that it resembled Ivory Snow being poured from a box or down feathers escaping from a ripped comforter. On my first visit, I skied along Senate Creek, but I could barely see the tracks in front of my ski tips, let alone the creekbed. Call me a wimp if you like, but to me, it was a one-and-done day, with the warmth and refreshment offered at the lodge infinitely more appealing than a no-visibility slog through a storm.

Another visit provided better visibility – but “better” doesn’t equal “great.” The snow was fabulous, but hung low over the Big Wood River Trail. This gentle meander parallels and eventually crosses Idaho Highway 75 (that’s the one that was paved back in the ‘50s). I assume there must be scenic beauty, because the Galena trails lie between the Smoky Mountains and the Boulder Mountains, which look pretty neat in photographs, but again, clouds obscured them.

Dogs are permitted on all the trails on the west side of the highway, and in fact, Galena Lodge has a rep as a particularly most canine-friendly (and also snowshoe-friendly) maintained Nordic network. In addition to classic and skating lessons, the lodge offers equipment rental and instruction. There are coed skating clinics, clinics for masters racers and women-only clinics for moms, snowshoe tours, wildlife and family, kids’ events and races too. Galena Lodge has long been known for its bracing morning espresso and delicious lunches, but special evening stargazing dinners, full-moon dinners and family dinners are fantastic too. And then there are the yurts – three of them perched on a ridge. Without such modern conveniences as lights, the yurts are nevertheless warm and comfortable. Guests can pack in their food and cook there, or have a meal catered by Galena Lodge chefs. That sounds good to me, especially if I snare a reservation in the Honeymoon Yurt next time I visit Galena. I bet the food will be knock-out, except that I remain slightly puzzled by the concept of a honeymoon accommodation that sleeps four.

I know I'll return to the upper Wood River Valley, explore some more trails and hopefully spend a night in a yurt, and if my weather fortunes change, I might actually see some of that fabled scenery when I next visit the Galena Lodge.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Galena Lodge: HC 64, P.O. Box 8326, Ketchum, Idaho 83340, 208-726-4010,
www.galenalodge.com

Blaine County Recreation District: 208-788-2117

North Valley Trails System: 208-726-6662 (grooming hotline), www.xcskisv.com

Sun Valley/Ketchum Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 2420, Sun Valley, Idaho 83353,
1-800-634-3347 or 208-726-2423, www.visitsunvalley.com

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