

Good Karma in Sun Valley ©
By Amber Borowski

Men. You'd think after surviving a lifetime of torment as the only sister in a family of brothers I'd have a clue. I don't.

This was confirmed during a recent trip to Sun Valley with my friend John as he gunned my Jeep up a precarious road. It was evident that my warning, "Hey don't forget about the bikes on top" was completely lost on him when he replied "Great point, Amber. We can ride them back out when we get stuck." We somehow made it out alive but that was just the first of many perplexing glimpses into the male psyche during the trip.

The Valley of Sun

What took nature millions of years to create has in the last several decades become the outdoor playground for the rich and famous. Sun Valley and neighboring Ketchum are gold-plated European-style resort towns with a gentrified Western feel.

While celebrities, gilded shop signs, a clock tower, opera house and fine dining all characterize Sun Valley, there is a lot more to this celebrity enclave than meets the eye. Venture a few miles out of town and you will encounter the largest roadless area in the lower 48, much of it encompassing the 756,000-acre Sawtooth National Recreation Area.

Not to be missed is the 8,701-foot Galena Summit Overlook, which marks the separation of two watersheds: the Big Wood to the South and the Salmon to the North. Galena has expansive views of many of the 40 gray needlelike spires that march more than 10,000 feet across the 35-mile Sawtooth range. With 300 lakes, four mountain ranges, and headwaters that feed four of the region's major rivers, the Sawtooths provide what money can never buy.

Conversion in Sun Valley

John and I wanted a unique backcountry experience, so we turned to Sun Valley Trekking, featured in *Outside* magazine for their hut-to-hut backcountry skiing. Co-owner Carrie Douglas informed us that only one of their five yurts—Coyote—remains open during the summer because of Forest Service permit restrictions.

Nestled at 8,700 feet in a stand of spruce and fir, Coyote has a vast network of hiking and mountain biking trails for all abilities: from rolling Jeep roads for beginners, to hardcore singletrack leading to Baker Lake, to fat-tire classic Adams Gulch. Throw in some spectacular views of Boulder and Pioneer Mountains and you've got a yurt made for a Mongolian King in a Sun-kissed Valley.

Sound too good to be true? Yep. It was May and the yurt was still surrounded by snow. Carrie suggested we take advantage of one of their lower-elevation yurts—Fishhook—before they took it down for the summer. A 2.2-mile hike from Redfish Lake leads to

this yurt where the Sawtooth's highest peak—10,766-foot Thompson Peak—stands sentry.

It was not her description of the environs that piqued John's curiosity, but rather the fact there was a hot tub at the yurt. That is, if you consider an old trough heated by a wood-burning stove a hot tub. John was not rattled when she told him it would take 70 buckets of water from the nearby creek to fill it.

He deflected my disparaging look. "I'll fill that tub myself," he announced. His machismo then proved spiritual: "It will be good Zen." Good Zen? Last I heard, he was not a convert to Buddhism.

We set out on our Zen-ith experience to Redfish Lake, about 60 miles north of Sun Valley on Highway 75. We stopped atop Galena Pass. The sweeping views of the Salmon River's headwaters reflexively caused a deep, whistling intake of breath. The descent into the postcard-perfect Sawtooth Valley was effortless, the mountains growing larger until we were swallowed by their shadows.

We arrived at Redfish Lake, snuggled under 10,229-foot Mount Heyburn. Named for the sockeye salmon that once spawned there by the thousands, Redfish is the Sawtooth's largest and most popular lake.

Once at the Redfish Lake trailhead, we loaded food, clothes and sleeping bags in our backpacks. Carrie recommended we pack lightly because the yurt provided most essentials such as matches, dishes, lanterns, a stove and sleeping pads. We set out on the easy trail and wound along Fishhook Creek through a forested valley.

After a 2.2-mile jaunt, we came to an open meadow and a view of Williams and Thompson Peaks. The area is a compendium of striking vistas and a labyrinth of streams that mirror serrated peaks chiseled by a goliath's saw.

A Yurt, a Trough and Zen

We bushwhacked back through the forest about a quarter-mile until we found the yurt--rustic, remote and fortified by a wall of firewood. Bunk beds lined one side of the concave walls, a rectilinear table divided sleeping and cooking quarters, and mice had left their droppings as welcome.

John immediately started hauling buckets of water to the hot tub. Ten trips into it, the shirt came off. Thirty-eight buckets later, he was weary but finished.

We then explored the area. The yurt's guidebook contained a topographical map with a gallimaufry of hiking routes. Our options for the next day were to summit snow-covered Thompson or Williams Peaks (we had no mountaineering gear), bushwhack a few miles using a map and compass to Yurt Lake (we had no compass) or to hike the well-marked 10-mile roundtrip trail to Marshall Lake. We chose the latter.

Upon return from our explorations, John gathered kindling and chopped firewood. It finally came time for the pinnacle Zen cleansing: to light the fire. I reverently stood by. And I kept standing by for quite some time. John had made the inauspicious discovery there were no matches. Anywhere.

I am sure that even Buddha would have had a good chuckle over this one. After an hour of ransacking the yurt, we halfheartedly settled down to eat (note: no matches plus a gas stove equals a cold dinner).

During our meal, John thought to read the yurt guidebook, which disclosed the location of the matches. Now, this would mean good Karma for most, but not for John. While I leisurely watched a double sunset: one igniting the peaks, the other shimmering across the water, John spent four hours chopping wood and stoking the fire. He finally took a brief plunge around 11 p.m.

And his payback? He was so sore and tired that he couldn't get out of bed the next morning. So much for our hike to Marshall Lake. Ahhh, men. Or would that be Zen?

Mountain Biking with Karma

We eventually backpacked out and then drove to Hulen Meadows, just outside of Ketchum. I left John to ponder his Zen experience while I went in-line skating. A paved 21-mile bike path winds from Ketchum to Bellevue through the Wood River Valley. I took a 14-mile chunk out of the beautiful trail that winds along the Big Wood River, through residential lands and past Sun Valley Resort.

Carrie had recommended a few areas outside of Ketchum for mountain biking that included the fat-tire classic Adams Gulch, the Norton Lakes Loop off Baker Creek Road, and the Fox Creek Trail, often referred to as the best all-around trail in the region. Again, we chose the latter.

In keeping with bad Karma, the Fox Creek Trail was closed due to high water damage from the river. We resorted to the Adams Gulch Trails network, within a short distance of downtown Ketchum. Unfortunately, we were not the only ones who chose the area—the parking lot was full when we arrived in the popular valley.

We had a couple of options. We could do the 5.5-mile loop, often called the ultimate loop in the Sawtooths, with numerous side trails and a complimentary grind during a steep 1,270-foot ascent. Or we could opt to do the Adam's Gulch Trail, a 14-mile out-and-back with a 2,450-foot elevation gain. My sources at the trailhead used such descriptors as technical, serious and abusive. We chose the former.

It should have been the wise decision but we did not have time to fully study the map before two busloads of children arrived. Panicked by the threat of a kiddy obstacle course, we set out in the counter-clockwise direction. The only thing I could remember

about the Adams Gulch Loop was that the trail started on a Jeep road. (We started on singletrack.) And that there were several stream crossings on the ascent. (The trail was dry.)

With 6-year-olds hot on our wheels, we eased through aspen groves and tight lodgepole forests. It was a climb of attrition, as biking turned into hike-a-biking in some of the steeper areas. The ascent made me forget why I like mountain biking.

But it was during our wet-footed, mud-dotted descent that I remembered. A white-knuckled downhill led us over epic singletrack and several stream crossings. Footbridges are in place so getting splattered is optional, but all of the traverses are rideable. Well, mostly rideable. Fortunately, my inadvertent dunk was nothing short of refreshing.

We finally hit a Jeep road that felt like a freeway after the constricted trail. It took me a few moments before I clued in that this was the road we should have tackled at the beginning. We had indeed done the loop in the wrong direction. Bad Karma? Perhaps. But hanging out in Sun Valley can only be good Zen.

For comments containing good Karma, Amber can be reached at Crazycanuck131@yahoo.com