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# your own private idaho

The military, European industrialists, conspiracy theorists, and weekend vacationers—everyone around Lake Pend Oreille wants a piece of the Gem State. | by Jim Gullo

**O**n a warm summer afternoon on Lake Pend Oreille, a young guy named Justin from the Seasons condominium development in Sandpoint fired up a leather-appointed Chris Craft, offered my wife and me cold beers and sodas, and bombed us straight down the dragon-shaped lake for a solid hour, from the civilized northern end to the wild and treacherous south side.

Forty-three miles long, with 111 miles of coastline, Lake Pend Oreille (*pond-uh-RAY*) in Idaho's panhandle is a geological wonder, a huge gash scooped out when the ice dams of prehistoric Lake Missoula broke and flooded from here to the ocean. The northern end of the lake is populated by towns, lakefront mansions, and resorts; the south is harsh and barren. The water is 1,172 feet deep, making it the fifth-deepest lake in the United States. And there are fascinating, odd people and outrageous pieces of history at every bend in the shoreline.

Flying down the lake in the Chris Craft we passed a remote lakeside compound, its roofs studded with satellite dishes. Justin explained

that it's the home of Dr. Forrest Byrd, who invented the respirator, has a private airstrip for his planes and helicopters, and does side work for the Defense Department from here.

A few miles farther down the lake we approached the town of Bayview, home in the 1920s to the unfortunately named Swastika Hotel, affiliated with the Swastika Mining Company up-lake. Business got bad in

## IT'S THE FIFTH-DEEPEST LAKE IN THE U.S. AND THERE ARE FASCINATING, ODD PEOPLE AND OUTRAGEOUS PIECES OF HISTORY AT EVERY BEND IN THE SHORELINE.

the '30s when the Third Reich adopted the swastika as its logo. The hotel went out of business and then burned to the ground.

Justin slowed down at a platform offshore: The only U.S. Navy submarine research center located in a lake. Below our boat was a field of instruments Navy engineers use to test the acoustic properties of propellers. Were we to fall off the Chris Craft and plummet into the 39-degree depths, we would encounter, 600 feet below the surface, a football-field-sized

ring of acoustic panels. The area is unrestricted and open to the public, and it is not uncommon for fishermen hunting for trophy-sized kamloops trout or mackinaw to spot the *Cutthroat*, the Navy's 111-foot-long replica of a Virginia-class submarine and the largest unmanned watercraft in the world.

But I'll take civilization over deepwater military toys. And Sandpoint, population

6,835, on the northwest corner of the lake and accessible only via a two-mile bridge over the Pend Oreille River, is civilized—the kind of place that's always vying for "Greatest Town in America" consideration, with its Fourth of July parade (which includes—of course—a precision-tractor-driving contest), a downtown core of weathered brick and clapboard storefronts, and restaurants like the Pie Hut, which serves over a dozen kinds of homemade pie (the huckleberry



**Main Street, U.S.A**  
Sandpoint always seems to be vying for "Greatest Town in America."

will change your life). Justin's outfit, the Seasons at Sandpoint Resort, deals in prime real estate, selling and renting condos with exquisite views of the cerulean lake. City Beach is a public park on the lake with broad green playfields, sandy beaches, lifeguards, and a replica of the Statue of Liberty at the end of a public dock. And at the Hoot Owl Café, locals and visitors mingle over big breakfast plates served by a big-haired waitress named Wanda who bellows things like, "I've only got two hands, Sweetie!"

I like that in a town. I also like that the lake was clean and warm enough for my family to jump into every morning from the dock outside our rental cabin—at Sleep's Cabins in the little hamlet of Sagle—and that it has produced world-record fish, which we hunted one morning with Diamond Ed Dixon, who leads charter tours on a 32-foot Carver boat.

We didn't catch anything (we were there in July and the best fishing is in October), but Diamond Ed showed us lots of cool places and kept up a nonstop patter of stories. Like the one about Berlin industrialist Klaus Groenke, who has a sprawling estate on the corner of the Hope Peninsula, across the lake from Sandpoint. Groenke bought 150 acres here in

1984 and built a proper compound. A slab of the Berlin Wall marks the entrance to his property and is a popular attraction for visitors.

From the boat, we could see Groenke's collection of outdoor sculptures by Ed Kienholz, another larger-than-life figure. During the 1980s and early '90s, the 300-plus-pound Kienholz split his time between Berlin and the peninsula, creating sculptures and collages that have made their way into modern art museums around the world. Legend has it that when he died suddenly of a heart attack in 1994 after lunch at the Hope Floating Restaurant, his wife Nancy wedged him into the front seat of a 1940 Packard coupe with a bottle of 1931 chianti beside him, a dollar and a deck of cards in his pocket, and rolled the whole thing into a tomb in nearby Clark Fork.

In its heyday the Groenke estate received visits from the likes of President Gerald Ford and First Lady Betty, Groenke's pal Henry Kissinger, and a string of foreign dignitaries. These guests, along with the Kienholz sculptures, have made the estate a favorite target for conspiracy theorists, including one Dr. Leonard Horowitz, a local author whose books include *Death in the Air: Globalism, Terrorism & Toxic Warfare* and the ever-

popular *Emerging Viruses: AIDS & Ebola—Nature, Accident or Intentional?* In one treatise on energy prices and the New World Order, Dr. Horowitz suggested that the Kienholz sculptures on the Groenke property were perfectly triangulated with the submarine base in Bayview and other structures, and have been



**Empire of the spud** The Lake Pend Oreille region includes 111 miles of shoreline, a handful of small towns, and infinite opportunities for discovery.

## WHEN YOU GO

### SLEEP

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208-265-4035; [www.coithouse.com](http://www.coithouse.com)

#### Condo rentals at Seasons at Sandpoint Resort

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#### Sleep's Cabins

231 Lakeshore Dr, Sagle  
208-255-2122; [www.sleepscabins.com](http://www.sleepscabins.com)

### DO

#### Fishing with Diamond Ed

100 S First Ave, Sandpoint  
208-265-2565; [www.diamondcharters.com](http://www.diamondcharters.com)

#### Lake Pend Oreille Tours

208-255-5253; [www.lakependoreillecruises.com](http://www.lakependoreillecruises.com)

### EAT

#### Hoot Owl Café

30784 Highway 200, Ponderay  
208-265-9348

#### Old Ice House Pizzeria & Bakery

140 W Main St, Hope  
208-264-5555

#### Pie Hut

502 Church St, Sandpoint  
208-265-2208

"curiously associated with bizarre lightning events and stupefied animal behavior."

But the only stupefied animals I saw in Sandpoint were my wife and me after several pitchers of beer at the wonderful pizzeria in Hope that was converted from an old icehouse by a group of former hippies led by a character from New Jersey who goes by the name Little Bear. The pizza was fresh and crispy and delicious, the beer was cold, and live folk music was played on an upstairs porch that had the best lake views in town.

It was enough to make me think I should erect my own private compound on the shores of Pend Oreille. I'd spend the rest of my summers flying down the lake in a Chris Craft and discovering more quirks of the lake. And then there's huckleberry pie, lots of huckleberry pie to eat, yet so little time. I've only got two hands, Sweetie. ✨