Exploring Baker City: Even an outdoor person spends some time indoors

by Scott_Staats

Although I prefer being outdoors, I donâ€™t mind being spoiled indoors once in a while. When I head over to the eastern and northeastern parts of the state for some exploring, I usually stop off in Baker City. As Iâ€™ve found out over the years, the town itself can be the destination.

Geiser Grand Hotel, All Photos by Scott Staats Two places worth a stop are the Geiser Grand Hotel and the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center. I once heard it said that if you travel fast enough around the planet heading east that you can actually go back in time. Although I never hit warp speed, by the time I pulled into Baker City it did feel like the late 1800s. For anyone who loves history, this town will swallow you up.

The Cupola Suite of the Geiser Grand Hotel in Baker City, Oregon Iâ€™ve stayed at the Geiser Grand Hotel twice, the last time in their Cupola Suite that overlooks the historic downtown and the Elkhorn Mountains. I also enjoyed one of the best meals of my life on my last visit -â€“ coconut shrimp.

Built in 1889 during Eastern Oregonâ€™s gold mining boom, the Geiser once had the reputation as being the finest hotel between Salt Lake City and Seattle and served as the Baker City stagestop.

â€œIts relationship to the community is what makes the Geiser Grand so unique,â€• said owner Barbara Sidway. â€œThe hotel reflects the history of the community, its pride, exuberance, confidence, its decline and subsequent rebirth.â€•

The hotel was saved from demolition by the Sidways in 1993 and reopened in 1998 after about seven million dollars in restoration costs. â€œThe fact that it is a living, breathing hotel just like it was a hundred years ago makes it far more special than if it would have become a museum or turned into condominiums,â€• said Sidway.

While dining under the hotelâ€™s famous stained glass ceiling (the largest in the Pacific Northwest), it didnâ€™t take much imagination for me to conjure up visions of white-gloved waiters a century ago serving such delicacies as their renowned Maine lobster or green turtle soup. However, I was very satisfied with the shrimp.

The hotelâ€™s signature cupola clock tower rises 110 feet over Main Street. Ten-foot tall windows in each of the 30 rooms offer breathtaking views of the snowcapped mountains and picturesque historic district. The Geiser once boasted the third elevator west of the Mississippi River and was one of the first hotels in Oregon to offer electricity. Today, more than 100 crystal chandeliers help provide lighting.

Baker City has about 110 buildings that are on the National Register of Historic Places, more than any other city in Oregon per capita. The oldest building dates back to the 1860â€™s. The city was even considered for the state capitol at one time and once had the tallest building west of the Mississippi. Baker Cityâ€™s population has averaged about 10,000 people for the last 100 years. There are 24 ranches in the county that have been operating for over a century.

For a unique experience, there are also horse-drawn carriage tours available, which run around $25 for each half-hour. The hotel can set you up with a tour.

Being in a valley encircled by mountains, there are plenty of recreational opportunities in the area, including downhill and cross-country skiing in the winter. The Geiser offers special ski packages for customers to the nearby ski area at Anthony Lakes.

As my wife and I walked down the east side of the street near the hotel, I realized that we would not be considered â€œrespectable folksâ€• a century ago. The saloons and brothels were located on this side of the street and the respectable townspeople always walked on the west side of the street. Even the older residents today avoid the east side of the street. I guess some habits are hard to break.

Oregon Trail Interpretive Center One of the more famous outdoor experiences that occurred in the country was that of the few hundred thousand people who traveled the Oregon Trail. After our stay at the Geiser, we headed five miles east to the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, located at Flagstaff Hill just off of Highway 86.

Opened in May of 1992, the facility has extensive exhibits, displays of artifacts, video presentations and historic photos. Some exhibits even mimic the creaking of leather, the turning of wagon wheels and the voices of pioneers. I closed my eyes and tried to envision the challenging journey these early travelers faced. Over four miles of interpretive trails lead visitors to the actual ruts carved deep into the ground by the passing

wagons.

Wagon ruts of the Oregon Trail. You canâ€™t think of the Oregon Trail without visualizing the old mountain men. When the fur trade went flat by 1840, the mountain men were hanging around St. Louis waiting for something to do. Just then, the wagon movement started and people began heading for Oregon. Since the mountain men were familiar with the western lands and the Indians, many were hired on as guides.

Joel Walker is credited as the first settler to make the complete trip with a family, in 1840. Large scale migration started in 1843, when a wagon train of over 800 people with 120 wagons and 5,000 cattle made the five month, 2,000-mile journey from Missouri to the Willamette Valley. Of course any journey of this length is not without its perils. Of the estimated 300,000 to 500,000 people who traveled over the Oregon Trail, about ten percent died along the way.

After our visit, I pointed my vehicle westward and headed back home -â€“ back to the future. As I drove, I thought back again to those pioneers along the Oregon Trail. They saw some of the same mountains, canyons and rivers from atop their bumpy wagons that I was seeing through my windshield. What I covered in a day would have taken them a few challenging weeks.

National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center

Â§ Open daily except Christmas Day, Thanksgiving, and New Yearâ€™s Day.

Â§ 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. -- November 1 through March 31

Â§ 541.523.1843

Geiser Grand Hotel, 888.434.7374, www.geisergrand.com

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