

A Place Called Galena Lodge



By Claire Walter

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The Nordic system near Ketchum/Sun Valley, Idaho, ranks among the grandest in the United States. The North Valley Trails system totals some 100 miles of winter trails for snowshoers and cross-country skiers along the 50 road miles between Bellevue to Galena Summit, respectively south and west of Sun Valley/Ketchum. This includes more than 20 miles of designated snowshoe trails. Some would say the best part lie in the upper Wood River Valley around the historic Galena Lodge – a commercial enterprise, to be sure, but a place intertwined with late 19th and early 20th-century Idaho history.

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 sheepherders, fisherman and travelers who made their way over

Galena Summit. Long after the establishment of the Sawtooth National Forest in 1905, it remained a primitive old pack and stage road. 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 Nordic 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 in the summer of 2004. Until then, 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, resort 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 facility. They cobbled a day lodge together from building materials gleaned from the Galena townsite, and 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 to save the lodge and, by extension, use of the marvelous trails that had developed around it. The community's fundraising

efforts attracted the attention of Teresa Heinz, widow of Senator H. John Heinz and now the wife of Senator John Kerry. 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 in 1994, more than 800 of the small county's residents, plus a couple of hundred sympathetic visitors, raised the required funds enabling the Blaine County Recreation District. This not-for-profit organization purchased the lodge and to maintain it and the trail system. The annual Friends of Galena fundraiser in late November continues to be one of greater Ketchum's favorite social and charitable functions. Elite supporters and guests notwithstanding, the Galena Lodge wears 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 followed along Senate Creek, but I could barely see my feet under me, let alone the creek bed. 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. I paralleled the river on a

gentle meander paralleling 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.

The snowshoe trails are marked, signed and packed. A particular favorite is the Cowboy Cabin Trail, an easy meander along the Bigwood River. For the best views, if you luck out with clearer weather than I experienced, the east side trails offers scenic vistas and wide open meadows. Check out the Pioneer Cemetery Loop or the steeper Tilt a Whirl Trail. Dogs are permitted on all the trails on the west side of the highway, and in fact, Galena Lodge has a rep as having a particularly canine-friendly trail network.

Wednesdays through Saturdays, a free shuttle travels between Sun Valley/Ketchum and the Galena Lodge, center of Upper Wood River Valley winter recreation. A local naturalist leads free weekly



winter wildlife and ecology snowshoe walks from January through March. The walks are on moderate terrain and open to all ages. They begin on Wednesdays at 11:00 a.m. at Galena Lodge. The lodge's guides also lead informative group and private tours, with or without lunch, along the extensive trail system.

Sawtooth National Recreation Area Forest Service Rangers additionally lead free 1½ to 2-hour snowshoe tours focusing on the fascinating cultural and natural history of

the Galena area and the greater Wood River Valley, leaving from the Galena Lodge deck at 11:00. Participants receive a complimentary snowshoe pass for the day from Galena. Snowshoe rentals are available at the Lodge. It has long been known for its bracing morning espresso and delicious lunches, but special evening five-course full-moon dinners are wonderful too. When the moon is full, there are optional snowshoeing before or after dinner on moonlit trails. When the moon is new, Dr. Steven Pauley, a local astronomer, further spices the feast with a fabulous slide show during dessert and then sets up his telescope pointed at the stars in the dark night sky.

And then there are the yurts – three of them perched on a ridge above the lodge. 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 knockout, 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.

IF YOU GO:

Galena Lodge, HC 64, P.O. Box 8326, Ketchum, ID 83340; 208-726-4010,

<http://www.galenalodge.com>. Snowshoe trail fee, \$5 for all ages. Snowshoe rentals,



snowshoe tours, snacks and lunch (11:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. daily) and warm hospitality available. Full-moon and stargazing dinners, \$35 per person.

Sawtooth National Recreation Area: Contact: 208-727-5013,
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/sawtooth/>.

Blaine County Recreation District, 1050 Fox Acres Road, Hailey, Idaho 83333; 208-788-2117, <http://www.bcrd.org>. North Valley Trails System: 208-726-6662 (grooming hotline), <http://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, <http://www.visitsunvalley.com>.

