

## **A Canyon, a Lake and a Shake**

**Bear Lake Valley provides a cool mountain paradise in the middle of northern Utah.**

*By Susan Zimmerman*

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When the temperature in Salt Lake City hits triple digits, locals from Utah's northern Cache Valley head for Logan Canyon, Bear Lake and a raspberry shake to escape the baking sun.

After a short time in Salt Lake's warm embrace, my family and I are ready to follow the well-worn trail to these hot spots for rest, relaxation and recreation. Logan Canyon National Scenic Byway is a real neck-craner, with mile-high limestone cliffs that overlook the curvaceous Logan River. Bear Lake's popular moniker as the Caribbean of the Rockies is well-deserved because of its 20 miles of turquoise-blue water.

### **Heading North**

"You're going to love Bear Lake and that drive," said Pam Tolman, who works as a guide at the American West Heritage Center, where we stop to stretch our legs at the foothills of the Wellsville Mountains. The drive from Salt Lake City to Logan is a fast 90 miles by interstate—we're just six miles from the Wasatch-Cache National Forest and relief from the heat. After that, it's mosey mode up Logan Canyon's 40-mile, action-packed scenic road of hikes and sites, which then spills into Bear Lake's watery paradise.

"It's a beautiful drive, but it's curvy, so you better wake up," said Tolman, who suggested we stop and let our daughter put her feet in the "crick" while my husband and I rest. "Use your imagination when you drive through the canyon. You can see them pulling those mule trains." Though I expected to pass few beasts of burden, her words steered us in the right direction; the road is steeped in history.

During the early 1800s, the canyon was the stomping grounds of Shoshone Indians and mountain men. Then, in the 1860s, came Brigham Young's Mormon settlers. When the route through Logan Canyon to Bear Lake was completed in 1871, it was the cool place for the pioneer in-crowd. During the 1920s, families packed up their Model-T Fords and headed for the mountains to picnic and camp. In the summer of 1927, some 79,000 cars passed through the canyon.

### **Cruising Logan Canyon**

"It takes an hour if you drive without stopping," said L.J. Western, a park ranger who staffs the visitor center, which serves as the first site into the canyon. There are some 30 more points along the way, marking everything from campgrounds to caves. Hoping she can narrow the field to three must-see stops for us, Western circled her top picks— Tony Grove, Limber Pine Trail and Overlook—in the Logan County Canyon Guide. Thumbing through the guide, I got the feeling we'd be braking a lot more than thrice.

The canyon's towering outcrops and steep walls brim with natural attractions and activities. Near the beginning of the trail, we stopped at an unlisted boulder covered with castings of 400-million-year-old marine worms. Surprises appeared at every bend in the road. We watched cliff swallows at Ricks Spring, caught a beaver working

on a dam at Beaver Creek and spotted a granddad teaching his grandkids to rappel. The canyon's a popular hangout for everyone from cruisers to climbers.

Western's picturesque description of Tony Grove convinced us to take the seven-mile drive on a paved side road up an almost 2,000-foot climb to Tony Grove's glacial lake. The ride was a breeze, but it wasn't always that easy in Logan Canyon. A writer in 1892 described a tense journey past "huge boulders ... deep mud holes and dangerous washouts." Back then only intrepid, wealthy Victorian socialites (termed "tony" at the time) could afford to brave such a journey. But camping's not just for "tonies" anymore.

"It's pristine, it's therapy," said local Paula Okey about Tony Grove's glacial cirque often referred to as the crown jewel of the Bear River Range. Okey, whose camping days in the canyon spans the last 20 years, recalled how her daughter lost her first tooth at Tony Grove. On this day, she was looking after her young granddaughter while her son put his canoe in the lake for fishing. The parking lot was empty, but come the July Fourth weekend, she assured me it will be full.

Following the self-guided mile-long nature trail around the lake encircled by a forest of spruce and fir, I stopped to watch three kids still in their clothes splash about in the icy water as their mom told me they couldn't wait to put on their swimsuits. It's hard to imagine with the hummingbirds and glacier lilies out, that just three weeks ago there was a foot of snow.

The canyon's peak altitude is 7,800 feet and is fittingly marked along the Limber Pine Trail's one-mile loop, which makes for a refreshing summit stretch to see the trail's namesake tree (actually five pines that have grown together). Dozens of colorful wildflowers line the path, including Indian paintbrush and bluebells, my favorites.

The rest of the drive on Logan Canyon National Scenic Byway was downhill. Our last stop at the overlook meant the end of the ride was near, but knowing we would get another chance to catch some new sites on the return trip made it easy to turn our backs on the canyon and dive into Bear Lake, nestled almost 6,000 feet high in the Rocky Mountains. The Caribbean of the Rockies was calling.

### **Cruising Bear Lake**

"They come from Provo to Pocatello," said Ray Elliot as we stood at his Blue Water Resort beach hotel that was our home for three days. Of the area's many lodgings, his resort (which doubles as a campground), is one of the few right on the lake.

"The sand is just perfect, it's like going to the ocean," he said, adding we were seeing the lake at his favorite time of day—in the morning. Except for a few seagulls, half a dozen people and a tractor boat launcher, the beach was quiet and the white sand still cool to the touch.

"The solitude depends on what time you get here," said Elliot, who explained the season runs from about June 20 until after Labor Day. Come summer, this sleeping community of 8,000 swells to anywhere from 80,000 to 100,000. By July 4, it will be towel-to-towel people. It was the calm before the crowd during our visit the last week of June, which convinced me now was the time to at least dip my toes in the 60-degree water. I heartily agreed with a resort employee who told me, "it's gorgeous, but it's cold."

Even with the week's temporary lull in visitors, by mid-morning this Rocky Mountain High lake took on a sort of Wild West ambiance with the sound of revving engines as Jet

Ski cowboys rode on the water. When it comes to action, this is the place to race to your heart's content; at one rental spot, I counted at least 14 ways to stay afloat.

As far as local Bryce Nielson is concerned, those who visit only the southern part of the state are missing the boat when it comes to what he thinks is one of the most unique bodies of water. The blue hue of Utah's second largest natural fresh-water lake comes from light-absorbing, color-reflecting limestone particles suspended in water.

"It's been here for so long, it's steeped in historical facts," said Nielson about this lake that's thought to be around 150,000 years old. Its legacy is rich with tales of the Shoshone Indians and mountain men who held their trading bash rendezvous in the early 1800s for which the lake's Rendezvous Beach is named—long before family reunions were held there. Brigham Young's Mormon pioneers also held a few settlement "parties" of their own in the late 1800s.

Nielson, Bear Lake's retired fisheries biologist, came to manage the lake for five years and ended up staying 30 because he fell in love, scientifically speaking. He's still close to the object of his affection even in retirement. These days, he runs Cisco's Landing, a marina concessions shop, and shares his years of knowledge by giving lake tours. He reels off facts and fiction about endemic fish to the "Bear Lake Monster." Nielson saw "something" 20 years ago that looked monster-like but ended up being a herd of elk crossing the lake.

Near the end of our boat ride, Neilson took us to his special spot in the middle of the lake where there was nothing but Western Grebes in sight. It was just us and the birds when we witnessed a rarely seen moment as a chick got a ride from its mother. Seeing the lake through Nielson's eyes offered many one-of-a-kind insights into the lake—some more hands-on than others.

"Sure you can feed the dolphins in the Caribbean, but can you sit on the edge of a dock and put bread between your toes and let (carp) eat," laughed Nielson back at the marina as two of his employees demonstrate this unusual feat (pun intended). I couldn't resist having these huge carp gently mouth my toes for the bread. It was truly a touching, not to mention ticklish, encounter.

### **Full Circle**

There are many ways to get to know this lake that straddles the Utah-Idaho border—get in it, take a ride on it or take a spin around it. While navigational skills are needed to negotiate the road through Utah's lively southern half, Idaho's northern desolate stretch (with few homes and services) is made for cruise control. We veered off the lake's paved circle only once for a pit stop at Minnetonka's nine-room cave. Otherwise, we sailed past the eastern side's arid mountains.

Coming full circle into Garden City, one of the lake's few mountain settlements, I was struck by the town's eclectic charm that appeared on the verge of trendiness.

"It's like a gold rush here," said Steve Klein about the area's recent building boom as

he made me an espresso at the Holey Cow. This little cafe, which he owns with his wife, is one of the trendier places on the scene, complete with Internet access and world-famous Aggie ice cream his wife “imports” in a sleeping bag from Utah State University in Logan.

Though the lake’s popularity is slowly changing the face of Garden City, it still retains its small-town flavor, especially during the Raspberry Festival, held the first week of August. LeBeau’s, known in town for its ice cream shakes, is the only local hangout for late-night eats—meaning you have to dine by 9 o’clock for a sit-down meal or you’ll end up standing outside at LeBeau’s.

Faced with French fries and a shake “straight up,” we opted to coast down the canyon into Logan for a bite and a scoop of homemade Aggie ice cream direct from the university’s on-campus shop.

During our return trip up the canyon, we had only the light of a full moon for company until we reached the overlook, where we meet two locals in the dark. While the mule deer hightailed it back to the forest, the lone camper, who was staying at the Sunrise Campground, joined us at the overlook.

In just a few short days, a certain at-home feeling began to take a hold. When Blue Water Resort employee Sue Lutz told me how her son would only date a girl if she liked Bear Lake, I nodded in agreement like a local. (He’s now married with three children.)

The canyon and the lake grow on you. You could say they were made for each other—nature made, that is. I’ll drink to that. Please make mine a shake.