

Idaho

It's not every day an armed chef cooks your dinner. But this was the US, 8,000 feet up in Idaho's White Cloud wilderness on a riding and fishing trip, with a bear on the prowl. In our absence it had invaded camp, littering the mess tent with debris in its efforts to find food. Not even a bag of barbecue coal had escaped its attentions. Sooty paw prints stencilled the canvas floor.

I recalled that someone very like me, in a parallel universe, had once considered America's firearms laws to be wanton. Now, faced with the possibility of an unwelcome ursine encounter, the powerful Magnum 45 pistol hugging the cook's hip was overwhelmingly reassuring.

Darkness brought a heightened sense of paranoia. The sign at the trailhead carpark, telling of recent black bear attacks on humans, now seemed more like a prediction than a mandatory safety warning. In the shadowy light of the tilly lamp, we maintained a wary silence. Then came the growl. The cook, gun in hand, leapt out of the tent with Rob and myself in pursuit like kids following the Pied Piper. A thorough inspection revealed no sign of our furry friend. Nevertheless, we opted for the safety in numbers approach that night, and piled into the same tent.

This mountain expedition formed part of a tailor made 'His n' Hers' holiday put together for us by a specialist tour company. Such an arrangement caters for couples with disparate recreational needs and for whom compromise is an alien concept. It gave Rob the chance to mainline his particular passion, fly fishing, while I was able to ride horses. Separate daytime pursuits were mitigated by evenings spent at comfortable ranches and lodges, where good food and wine created the right ambience for reassembling a relationship.

And why Idaho? Only one of our friends grew animated at the mention of this North Western US state, citing its prolific potato production as a point in its favour. She exhorted me to smuggle out a spud for seed crop purposes, but, uncertain of the merits of founding a potato cartel, I passed up on the opportunity.

Tubers aside, Idaho offers awesome mountain ranges, teeming rivers, waterfalls, alpine lakes, canyons, immense forests and an abundance of wildlife: bears, moose (they actually kill more people than bears), elk, antelope, cougar, big-horn sheep and bald eagles. Only Alaska can top Idaho's 18 million untamed acres. If some people carry guns, it's due to the unpredictable nature of wild beasts, not because of a human threat. There are still places in Idaho where people don't bother locking their doors.

Way back in 1896 Idaho became the fourth state in the nation to give women the right to vote. That spirit of social justice still prevails. 114 human rights organisations operate in Idaho. Recently one of them raised \$25,000 to purchase classroom materials for teaching about diversity and human rights.

Parts of the state are slick with money. Around Ketchum, Ernest Hemingway's last staging post, it's no big deal to see private jets flying in. Pockets of casual sophistication slot in alongside cranky frontier towns, some no more than a collection of dilapidated shacks huddled alongside a dirt road. The kind of place where you might see a dusty station waggon bearing the sticker, I LOVE CATS - they taste like chicken. Or hear Idaho's classic rock station blasting out the kind of ear-contorting music I enjoyed as a wilful seventeen-year-old. Three chords from a screeching lead guitar was all it took to conjure up my old bedroom, posters of leering rock stars plastered on the walls and my fretting parents, tormenting themselves with the thought that I might be developing a taste for disreputable men.

The His n' Hers trip took us to the 4,000 acre Teton Ridge Ranch, a paean to immaculate taste built of honey-coloured wood with a mesmerising view of the mountains. It was owned by Bill Gates' former partner, Paul Allen, (he'd been there once). A staff of 12 attended to four guests. We ate halibut and mussels flown in freshly from the coast and slept in a bed the size of a football field.

From the luxury of the ranch Rob was able to go out with a guide on the Teton River, where he caught the largest wild rainbow trout of his angling career. I rode with Kevin the head wrangler on Paint, a little skewbald mare. The Teton Range, actually over the border in Wyoming, made an arresting back-cloth as we followed deserted trails through stands of slender lodgepole pines and delicate aspen. Red-tail hawks patrolled overhead and a coyote slipped out from the cover of the trees, low and watchful. Soon after the horses spooked, nostrils flared in alarm. "Bear," said Kevin, "A black bear, see it?" But no, like the other bear this one was an elusive, if less threatening, presence.

The His n' Hers vacation closed with a mutually acceptable activity, the hire of a 1350cc Harley Davidson, the Heritage Softail Classic. Astride this powerful machine we swallowed up 1500 miles. By the end of a journey that took us to the utopian hills and pasturelands of Garden Valley and into the wilds of the mighty Sawtooth wilderness, our ears had become as accustomed to the meaty roar of the Harley engine as a mariner does to the swish of the sea.

The final day provided a surreal excursion. The Craters of the Moon National Monument was formed when the earth ruptured 15,000 years ago, discharging torrents of lava that now form a fissured volcanic ocean, its strangeness amplified by clusters of gaunt cinder cones. Astonishingly, this derelict landscape is home to more than 300 species of plants, that bloom riotously in springtime. Birds such as prairie falcon and great horned owls thrive here too, as do marmots and bobcats.

We had lunch in nearby Arco, the first city in the world to be lit by atomic power. Local traders milk the nuclear connection for all it's worth. Like Pickle's Diner, neon radiance advertising its house speciality - the Atomic Burger. Beyond Arco, where dust blows apocalyptically across the plains and stern signs inform you that access is strictly prohibited, lies the cagily named Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory.

As the afternoon drew to a close the highway converged with a railway line, where a huge freight train rattled along the tracks. The driver was clearly visible in the cab, so

we waved. He responded by blowing his horn, releasing a doleful rhapsody that vibrated around the lonely expanses of outback Idaho like a lament.