

# Tourism grows into key factor in state's economy

By Ken Levy  
SPECIAL TO THE IBR

As a key component of Idaho's economy, tourism wasn't always taken as seriously as it is now.

According to Carl Wilgus, former state tourism director, tourism was "the Rodney Dangerfield of economic development" because it didn't get any respect.

"That probably is not the case any more," he said. Communities such as Sandpoint, Coeur d'Alene, Cascade, McCall and others, once dependent on extractive resources such as mining and forestry, have turned to economies "driven more by the attractive resource base of tourism," said Wilgus.

Idaho tourism is now a \$3.4 billion industry, contributing about 6 percent of the state's GDP, according to Karen Ballard, administrator of tourism for the state of Idaho. That's up from about \$2.03 billion in 1999, and the industry employs 24,100, up from 22,600 in the same period, according to the U.S. Travel Association.

Getting people here means getting the message out about the vast tourism opportunities in the Gem State. Methods of getting that message out have changed dramatically over the years.

"It's incredible to think that in the last 25 years, marketing has really flipped for us," Ballard said.

"The growth of the Web and the technology around it has dramatically changed the way we do our job and how we reach out to our customers," said Wilgus.

Idaho received a real jump on using technology when it installed informational kiosks in nine locations around the state in 1993.

"The kiosks operated with all the information delivery concepts we now just take for granted on the Internet with hyperlinks, video, maps, printable text and the ability to make reservations at a hotel from a computer," said Mark Ellsworth, who was contracted to assemble and author the content of the kiosks.

"We were able to get a good jump on a lot of other states for a state travel site," he said, "as we had compiled all the information into a database that we were easily able to port over to the Internet in 1996."

Ballard said the Internet has been huge in leveling the playing field for tourism draw. "We can't compete with California's \$75 million to market themselves," she said, "but I'd put our Web site up against California's any day."

The Idaho Division of Tourism Web site, [www.visitidaho.org](http://www.visitidaho.org), "is more consumer-driven," said Kellie Kluksdal,

agency spokesman. "They're demanding video and different methods and more and more robust information. Social media is becoming a big thing with us now."

The state also markets its tourism opportunities to the European market, along with Montana, Wyoming and South Dakota.

"We've been doing that for about 20 years," Ballard said, "and that cooperation has always been successful for us. It really did well for us last year when things were turning down."

Studies indicate the state had a one-tenth of one percent growth in national market share in 2008.

"That's huge, and we're gaining," said Ballard, "and when this economy turns around again, I think we have some momentum that is pretty profound. You're going to see us recover and go into double digits (of growth)."

Scenic byways are sure to be part of that growth in statewide tourism. The International Selkirk Loop, for example, runs from Sandpoint to Bonners Ferry, and up into British Columbia, before returning through Washington to Priest River. Popular with drivers, motorcyclists and campers, the loop is part of a new initiative called Top Ten Scenic Drives of the Northern Rockies.

There are 30 listed scenic drives in the state, "and that's one of the things that's progressed since the *Idaho Business Review* started. We didn't have any scenic byways other than we knew they were scenic."

Those drives lead to some of Idaho's most popular travel destinations.

"The northern Idaho lakes are profoundly popular, particularly in the summer," said Ballard. "It's the strongest tourism region in the state."

Numerous camping and recreational opportunities in the region's parks are a big reason for the area's tourist draw. Northern Idaho's Farragut State Park, on the shores of Lake Pend Oreille, and Priest Lake State Park are among the top camping destinations for recreational travelers.

Overall, Idaho's parks are a huge draw to the Gem State, according to Rick Just, comprehensive planning manager for the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation. Those on a limited budget and who may be seeking a green vacation experience will find that camping may be their best bet, he said.

"According to the Outdoor Industry Foundation, Idaho ranks number one in car camping, with 41 percent of the population participating at least occasionally," Just said.

Just recommends the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes for green-minded tourists. Completed in 2004, the 73-mile-long trail "is starting to draw a lot of people. It's one of the longest-paved trails in the country," said Just. "Riding bikes on that beautiful stretch can make memories for life."

Idaho is becoming even more of a dream destination for kayakers and rafters with the advent of new recreational river parks. Boise, Ketchum, Cascade, Riggins and Garden Valley are in various stages of fundraising, planning or development of

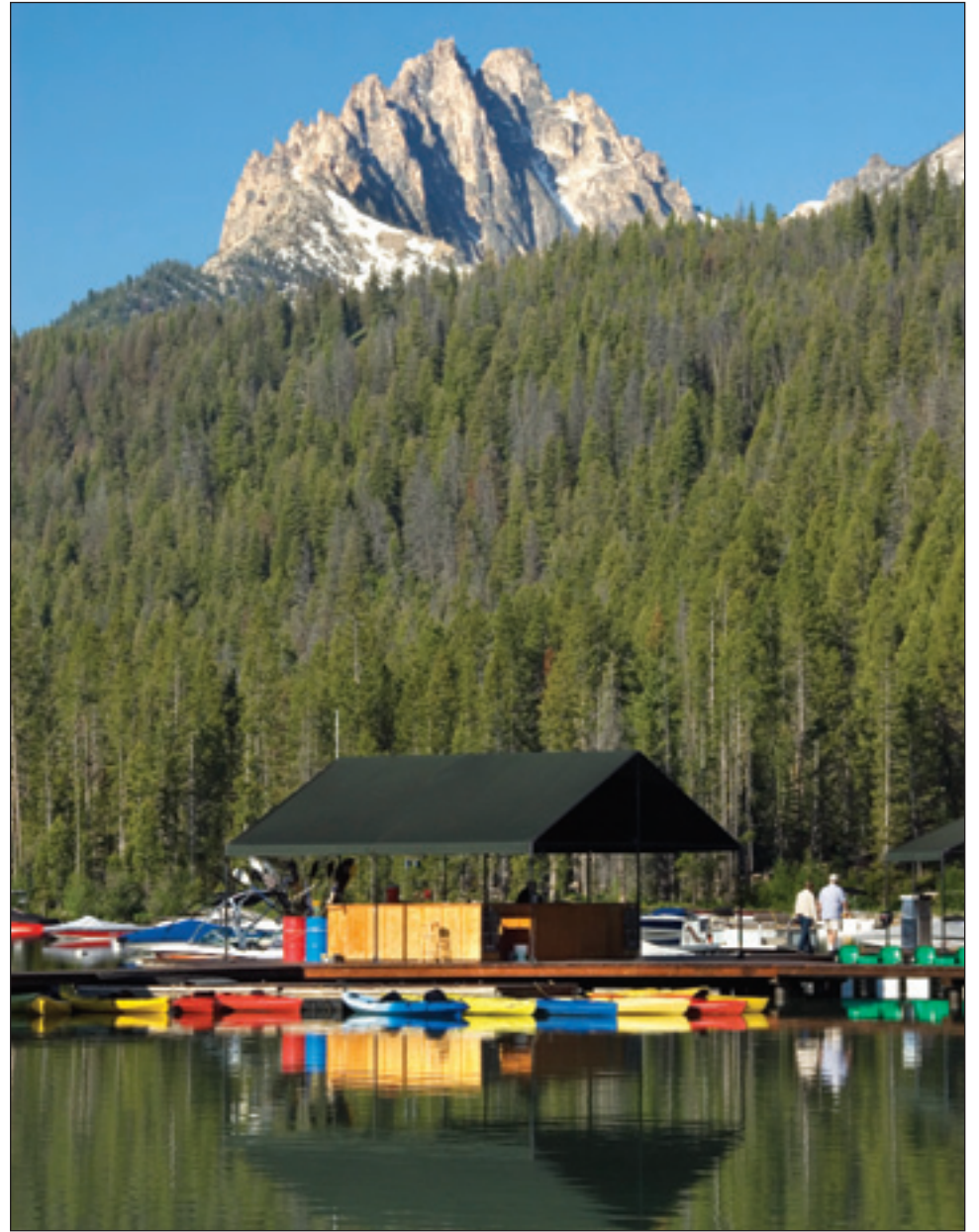


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**Above:** Mt. Heyburn rises above Redfish Lake in the Sawtooth National Recreational Area of central Idaho on an early June morning. Visitors to Redfish Lake can boat, swim or fish, and stay in a rustic lodge or camp in the surrounding campgrounds. **Below:** Canoers paddle the pristine waters of Thousand Springs in the Hagerman Valley of south central Idaho. Neighboring Twin Falls is becoming more well known for its "fabulous recreation," said Karen Ballard, administrator of tourism for the state of Idaho.



PHOTO BY KEN LEVY

whitewater river parks.

As with virtually every state, Idaho's main draw is people coming here to visit family and friends.

"Beautiful as the state is, most travelers are coming here first and foremost because they want to visit someone who lives

here," said Just. "That's why it's so important to Idaho's economy that residents encourage their friends from other states to come for a visit."

*Ken Levy is a Treasure Valley-based journalist and photographer.*