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Idaho's vibrant capital of culture

By Kristin Conard



Boise, the capital of Idaho, is located in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. (Randy Wells/Getty)

Upon his first visit in 1906, Clarence Darrow -- one of the 20th Century's most famous American lawyers -- proclaimed Boise to be the "Athens of the sagebrush" due to the desert town's vibrant culture. But for travellers, the Idaho capital's main draw has long been its location in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, perfect for hiking and mountain biking.

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However in the early 2000s, city leaders launched an initiative to make the often culturally underrated Boise the "[most liveable city in the country](#)", revitalizing many of the city's neighbourhoods and putting a new focus on art, local food and environmental sustainability. And to top it all off, in 2013 Boise will commemorate its sesquicentennial with a whole year of celebrations, fittingly called [Boise 150](#).

Cultural draws

As the most geographically isolated urban area of the Lower 48 (Reno, Nevada is 334 miles away, Portland, Oregon is 348 miles away and Salt Lake City, Utah is 350 miles away), Boise has always had to provide its own art and culture. Over the last decade, the city government has made a concentrated effort to increase artistic funding, resulting in city-wide public murals, mosaics and sculptures, including the River Sculpture in front of the [Grove Hotel](#), which depicts the central Boise River. The Boise 150 program will take this artistic focus one step further with legacy projects like new public art installations.

Boise's unique location also means that art often blends with nature, and the summer audiences seated in the [Idaho Shakespeare Festival](#)'s 770-seat natural outdoor amphitheatre may see herons, geese or deer during a performance of Romeo and Juliet or The Winter's Tale. Since 1976, the repertory theatre has put on five or six shows between May and September each year, and watching a show under the stars has become a much-loved local tradition.

[Opera Idaho](#), the state's only professional opera company, will be celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2013. In collaboration with Boise-based [Ballet Idaho](#), the opera is performing Pagliacci with Stravinsky's Pulcinella Suite in March, along with its Boise 150 performance of Carlisle Floyd's Susannah in May. All the main stage performances are held in the elaborately gilded and decorated [Egyptian Theatre](#), which was built in 1927 during an increase in Egyptian Revival-style buildings across the country following the discovery of King Tut's Tomb in Egypt. The theatre will also host the Boise 150 Kick off Night on 9 February 2013.

An exciting newcomer to the Boise arts scene is the [Trey McIntyre Project](#). Award-winning dancer and choreographer Trey McIntyre formed his touring contemporary ballet company in 2008, and despite being able to set up shop anywhere in US, he chose Boise. Co-founder John Michael Schert explained the surprising decision as "an opportunity to create a sense of ownership amongst the citizenry in which a dance company could be upheld as a paragon of what it means to be a Boisean – creative, entrepreneurial and proud."

For Boise 150, the Trey McIntyre Project will continue their [Boise Bright Spot Project](#), where dancers unexpectedly descend on an urban space, like a restaurant or on the street, and perform.

A river runs through it

The capital of Idaho boomed during the 1860s Gold Rush as a stop for pioneers moving west along the [Oregon Trail](#). Explorers and trappers who approached the area from the east saw the tree-lined Boise River as a lush beacon in the middle of desert and

mountains. But until the 1960s, the river was neglected and its banks were a dumping ground. Now, the banks have been reclaimed as the [Boise River Greenbelt](#), a beloved 25-mile tree-lined walking and cycling path that connects 850 acres of park space and provides an alternate commuter route.

There are easily navigable class II rapids on the six-mile stretch between [Barber Park](#) and [Ann Morrison Park](#), and floating the river is a favourite summer pastime. But for a greater challenge, local companies like [River Roots](#) teach white-water kayaking in hard shell play boats.

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