

Shoshone Field Office

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Driving Tour of South Central Idaho Shoshone Field Office

Introduction

South Central Idaho is full of amazing historical, scenic, and cultural marvels. This driving tour is designed to take visitors to a region of Idaho known for its scenic abundance and to gain a little knowledge about Idaho's history. This journey is a loop that begins and ends in Shoshone.

What should I bring on this journey?

- This guide;
- Your sense of adventure;
- A full tank of gas; and
- Water and food (you can stop along the way to enjoy a picnic lunch and the area's scenery)

Where can I stop along the way?

There are plenty of places to stop for picnics, both improved and unimproved. There is also dispersed camping available along BLM land. Pull out a tent and set up camp near these beautiful areas. Just remember to leave the area as you find it to ensure that others who visit the spot can enjoy the same beauty.

How much time does it take?

Total drive time can vary, depending on your interests and available time. The entire route is approximately 100 miles roundtrip, plus added miles each time you deviate from the main highway. Without stops, the main route would take about 2 hours to drive. However, many travelers will choose to linger and explore various locations along the way, so it's reasonable to plan for a 4 to 6 hour trip. Before embarking on this new adventure, make sure to leave with a full tank of gas and a spirit for excitement and knowledge. Shoshone provides an interesting place to begin a journey of adventure.

Shoshone - The Beginning of Your Journey

The rural town of Shoshone, Idaho is the county seat for Lincoln County along the beautiful Little Wood River. It is found at the junction of Highways 93 and 26, and State Highway 75. The Shoshone community hosts a population of 1,500 people and is supported by a strong economic base of agriculture. Surrounding areas rely on livestock production and manufacture cheese and milk for neighboring communities. Shoshone has been called "the oldest town in the Magic Valley" and was originally formed when the Union Pacific Oregon shortline set up there in 1883. To this day, four sets of railroad tracks intersect Shoshone's downtown area.

The town holds an interesting historical background. During the construction of Twin Falls, Shoshone was a supply center. The county courthouse in Shoshone was built in 1907 and was recently placed on the National Register of Historic Places. You should notice how local buildings such as the Community Methodist Church are constructed from lava rock. Visitors will also notice old mansions once owned by sheep barons and officials of the railroad, as well as more sensible houses of people in the Basque community including shepherders, businessmen, and farmers. The city also boasts a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds including people of Basque, Hispanic, Oriental, Portuguese, European, and Scandinavian descent. Every July, this community hosts the Old-Time Fiddler's Jamboree. For such a small place, Shoshone has an interesting history and is in close proximity to many interesting areas of scenic and historic value.

Gooding



As you leave Shoshone, you will travel due west along Highway 26 for approximately 19 miles. When you reach the Highway 46 intersection, turn north and follow the signs to Gooding, which is just past the intersection along the Little Wood River.

Gooding was originally called Toponis and was founded at the site of the Union Pacific Railroad in 1883. It was later renamed Gooding after Frank R. Gooding, who donated money in order to make it a town. From 1905-1908, Mr. Gooding served as the state governor and then in 1921, he was a US Senator. In 1910, Gooding was also the site for the State School for the Deaf and Blind. Finally, Gooding became the Gooding county seat in 1913.

Big Wood River

Just outside of Gooding, notice Big Wood River as you pass over it. The Big Wood River is around 120 miles long and begins in the mountains north of the Ketchum/Sun Valley area. It then flows through the towns of Ketchum, Hailey, and Bellevue and continues toward the Magic Reservoir. It is a popular place for fishermen and is a good site to find trout. Many anglers enjoy the many access areas for the sport of catch-and-release fly-fishing. Make sure to check with local Fish and Game offices for information on fishing regulations. Surrounding areas are also nice places for hiking, biking, and picnicking.



The Bennett Hills and the Little City of Rocks



From Gooding, continue north along Highway 46 for about 10 miles. At this point, you will see an unpaved road leading west off the main highway and an asphalt turnout. A sign that states "Little City of Rocks" will confirm your traveling destination. You will also find a kiosk with information on the Bennett Hills near this intersection. About a mile down this unpaved access road is the first stop on your tour, Little City of Rocks. The access road should pose no problem for passenger cars on dry days. Exercise caution on wet days.

Once off the main highway, you will soon reach a small parking area near the Little City of Rocks. The spectacular scenery at this location provides a great setting for recreation. There are abundant opportunities for hiking at all levels of experience in the summer and cross country skiing in the winter. Although there are no official, established trails in this area, you can easily hike up the main access road, which is closed to motorized vehicles.

The area also has many small side drainages that invite exploration. Keep your eyes peeled for wildlife such as deer, elk and antelope, as well as for petroglyphs that cover several rock faces. It is important to remember to leave the area as you find it and pack out what you pack in. Help maintain the gentle beauty of this fragile environment.

At this point, you will be entering the Bennett Hills area. The Bennett Hills were formed from massive eruptions of molten rock (volcanic tuff) that occurred 12-15 million years ago.

Gooding City of Rocks

Once you're back on the main highway, continue north for about three miles, where you'll see a turnoff leading west and a sign pointing to Gooding City of Rocks. Follow this well-maintained gravel road for about eight miles to reach the Gooding City of Rocks. This side trip to Gooding City of Rocks will take about 20 minutes of travel time, each way.

Gooding City of Rocks has similar formations as Little City of Rocks, but covers a much larger area. Beautiful views of the Snake River Valley can also be seen from Gooding City of Rocks, especially in the morning and late afternoon. Both Little City of Rocks and Gooding City of Rocks are known for their impressive, towering hoodoo formations. (Hoodoo formations are vertical, separated columns which are formed and shaped through wind and water erosion.)



Thorn Creek Reservoir

Once you get back on Highway 46 and are heading north again, you will travel a little over a mile and find an unpaved road leading to the east. Traveling this road for about 5 miles will take you to Thorn Creek Reservoir. Thorn Creek Reservoir is bordered by sagebrush and grasslands and provides a good opportunity for fishing, hunting, picnicking, boating, and wildlife viewing. While at the reservoir, keep a lookout for various waterfowl that visit this area during the spring and fall months.

Johnson Hill

As you continue on your journey back on the main highway, notice the many scenic vistas on the way. The road travels across rugged mesas that are studded with pockets of aspen. Take time to stop your car along the way and enjoy the area's beauty. In about 6 miles, the highway crests over Johnson Hill. There is a turnout along this ridge with an information sign and spectacular views of the Camas Prairie below. Continue along the highway for approximately 7 miles, across the Camas Prairie to the intersection for U.S. Highway 20.

Camas Prairie



Camas Prairie is situated on a basalt plateau between the Bennett Hills and the Central Idaho Mountains. This area has been utilized by the Shoshone-Paiute, Bannock and other tribes for at least 10,000 years. Historical records show that Indians in southern Idaho spent winters around the Snake River Plain and during the spring traveled to the Camas Prairie in search of food and resources. They often spent time in the Camas Prairie and Bennett Hills before migrating to higher mountain areas.

The Camas Prairie is named for the tribes' staple food, camas root. Before this area was farmed, camas root carpeted this broad plateau and this resource was highly coveted by the Native Americans. Camas root was one of the most important trading goods among American Indian tribes.

Camas root has the shape of an onion, is the size of a hickory nut, and has a blue flower that looks like a hyacinth. It was an important source of nutrients such as protein, calcium and iron. Not only humans, but animals such as elk and mule deer also relied on this vital plant for food. The most important part of this root in Indian life was the bulb. It had a sweet, pleasant taste when eaten raw. It was also eaten cooked; the Indians boiled it over an open pit. When cooked, camas root has a similar taste to potato. This root is also mentioned in the journals of Lewis and Clark. The Nez Perce generously shared their fish and camas root with the starving duo after they returned from their journey through the Bitterroot Mountains.

The bulbs were harvested, after flowering, between mid-July and September. Indians needed to be knowledgeable about plants in their environment because one misidentification could lead to sickness or death. For example, the white-flowered camas appears similar in shape to the commonly used camas root, yet is inedible and toxic.

In the present day, there are good opportunities for wildlife viewing in this area. Pronghorn antelope are often seen on the Camas Prairie and sandhill cranes stop here during their spring and fall migrations.

At the intersection of Highways 20 and 46, you can choose to deviate from the main route to stop for food, lodging, restrooms or gas. If you choose to stop, you should turn west at the intersection and travel three miles to the small town of Fairfield.

Fairfield

The first settlement in this area was called Soldier and was established in 1884. In 1911, a town two miles to the south of Soldier named New Soldier was set up along the tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad. The town became a popular stopover on the route from Boise to the Wood River Mines at Bellevue and Hailey. Its name was later changed to Fairfield.

This area was also the site of the Bannock war, which began when the Indians found the white settlers depleting the fields of camas root and farming the land that had been used by them for centuries. Once the leaders of the Bannock were killed in battle, the defeated Indians were forced to flee to the reservations.

The Fairfield area is just south of the Sawtooth National Forest and provides access to recreation areas popular for hiking, mountain biking, and camping. Fairfield also hosts the annual Camas County Fair each August and has been the county seat for Camas County since 1917. If you want to know more historical information, the Camas County Historical Society Museum is located in South Fairfield. To get there, travel two blocks along Soldier Road and you will find it in the old Railway depot near Camas Avenue.

Head east on Highway 20 to continue on your journey. As you travel along this route, notice that you are paralleling Goodale's Cutoff, the alternative route for many Oregon Trail travelers.

Goodale's Cutoff

Goodale's Cutoff followed a migration corridor of the Shoshone Tribe, but the use of the route by white settlers was pioneered by John Jeffrey. Jeffrey was a ferry boat operator who created the bypass in hopes of creating more traffic for his ferry business at the mouth of the Blackfoot River. The cutoff was used sporadically from 1852-1854, but the majority of its usage occurred in 1862. Many travelers on the Oregon Trail sought a more direct route to the Salmon River gold fields and this route was their answer. Tim Goodale was the first one asked to lead a group of 1,095 people, 338 wagons, and 2,900 head of stock from Fort Hall to Boise. This turned out to be a monumental trip because this group represented the largest assembly of people to pass through a section of the Oregon Trail.



After traveling along Highway 20 for about 22 miles, you will reach the intersection with State Highway 75. Turning south, you are headed toward the original point of your adventure, Shoshone.

You're now traveling on the Sawtooth Scenic Route, and there's many more interesting and scenic sites to explore in this area. In about 10 miles, you'll see the turnoff for Magic Reservoir, which offers excellent opportunities for boating, fishing, canoeing, camping, windsurfing, and wildlife viewing. There are also established picnic areas, campgrounds, and docks for easy boat access.

Black Butte Crater WSA



Just a few more miles down the road, you will find Black Butte Crater Wilderness Study Area. A rugged but fairly short hike leads to the rim of this extinct volcano and outstanding views of the surrounding countryside. However, there is not a major road leading to this destination, so your best bet would be to call the Shoshone BLM office and ask for specific directions for accessing the Crater and hiking trail. Still further south down the road, will be a turnoff for Shoshone Ice Cave to the west.

Shoshone Ice Cave

Shoshone Ice Cave is a popular tourist attraction for not only Idahoans, but for out-of-state travelers as well. Geologists across the country have called this formation one of the natural wonders of the earth and it is also the largest known lava ice cave in the world. Although it was discovered in 1880, it wasn't put to use until 1900 when the residents of Shoshone used it as a local source for ice. Prehistoric animal fossils were found in the cave and today visitors can see them on display near the cave entrance. Its tunnels, located 90 feet below the surface, were created when lava flowed through them thousands of years ago. The largest cavern in the cave is three blocks long, 30 feet wide, and 40 feet in height. The cave remains at a year-round constant temperature of 18-33 degrees Fahrenheit. Since it remains at such a cool temperature, it is an especially nice place to visit during the scorching Idaho summers. If you plan on visiting the cave, make sure to pack a warm coat and sturdy walking shoes. For the rockhounds, there is also a museum near the cave housing gems, rocks, and other minerals.

If you are interested in more opportunities for spelunking, Mammoth Cave is located 1.5 miles west of the highway and only 10 miles south of the Shoshone Ice Cave. It was discovered in 1902 and its one-quarter-mile-long lava tube offers a great opportunity for daring cave explorers.

Once you leave the Shoshone Ice Caves, Shoshone is about 17 miles away.

Back in Shoshone - End of Journey

Once you roll back into Shoshone, you are finished with the tour. This completes your journey of the fascinating cultural, historical, and scenic values of beautiful south central Idaho. Hopefully this adventure has increased your awareness of Idaho's history and allowed you to view some of the most beautiful vistas Idaho has to offer.

Thanks to historical information from:
Idaho for the Curious, by: Cort Conley
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