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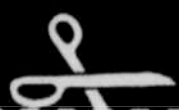
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The Roads Less Traveled

Discovering the *other* Pacific Northwest

BY ANDREW COLLINS

Spokane and Sandpoint: These aren't your typical Portland road-trip destinations. But early last October, I set off on a six-month on-and-off-again cross-country road trip, and visited both places. Spokane—a rugged, no-nonsense metropolis that made its fortunes on mining, lumber and agribusiness—feels about as different from swank-and-shiny Seattle as a city in the same state could. In Sandpoint, I discovered a surprisingly progressive and urbane sensibility that belies this small, lakeside town's location in the heart of Northern Idaho's conservative panhandle. If your weekend travels rarely tempt you east of the Cascades, you might consider a trip to this increasingly gay-friendly part of the interior Northwest.

I hadn't been to Spokane (visitspokane.com) in 10 years. The drive from Portland took six hours, much of it through the spectacular scenery of the Columbia Gorge—it's worth road-tripping if you have the time, ideally if you can spare an extra night along the way, perhaps in the superb yet still underrated wine-making center of Walla Walla, which requires just a 90-minute detour. A far simpler option is flying—Southwest and Horizon offer multiple direct flights each day, and you can usually snag a round-trip fare for under \$150.

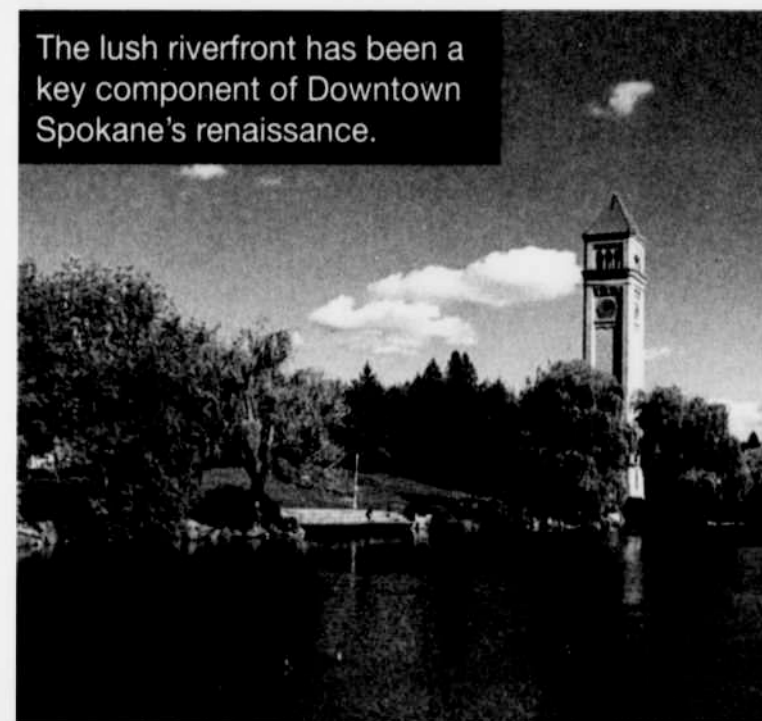
I pulled into Spokane just as the sun began to drop over the surrounding Selkirk Mountains, which shimmered in autumnal hues of orange, crimson, russet and gold. Spokane has a handful of distinctive, design-minded hotels and inns—I spent the night at my favorite of the bunch, the Montvale (montvalehotel.com), an atmospheric hotel in an 1899 building, its 36 rooms replete with high ceilings, fluffy beds and spacious tile bathrooms. I also ate dinner here, in a cozy basement space called—appropriately—Catacombs Pub, where brick-oven pizzas and local microbrews stand out on a menu of hearty comfort foods. Just off the Montvale's lobby, elegant Scratch Restaurant & Lounge is another of the city's top restaurants. Other hotels in Spokane worth a look include the intimate and historic Hotel Lusso (hotellusso.com) and the reasonably priced, conveniently located Red Lion Hotel at the Park (redlion.rdl.com).

In this part of the country, the farther east you go, the redder the politics. But Spokane has a more visible and pronounced gay scene

than you might imagine, and although McCain edged Obama 49 percent to 48 percent in Spokane County in 2008, the city itself grows steadily more liberal with each passing year. Spokane hosts a good-sized Gay Pride celebration in mid-June (June 11 this year), and although gay nightlife is limited for a city of 210,000, there are a pair of cool hangouts within walking distance of downtown hotels: Dempsey's Brass Rail—the larger and more established of the two—and Irv's Bar, which is more mixed gay/straight. I met plenty of chatty locals, including a few students from Gonzaga University, which has an active on-campus LGBT resource center.

The following morning—one of those crisp, sunny autumn days tailor-made for strolling—I set out for a walk around the

The lush riverfront has been a key component of Downtown Spokane's renaissance.



scenic downtown riverfront, which is anchored by lush parkland and crisscrossed by pedestrian bridges, and has been a focal point of a downtown renaissance over the past decade. After stopping for espresso and snacks at the hip coffeehouse, Thomas Hammer Roasters, I set out by car to explore farther afield. South of downtown along a sheer palisade, I pulled my car over on Cliff Drive to soak up the panoramic views of the downtown skyline. Next I checked out the lovely Browne's Addition neighborhood, home to dozens of gracious Victorian mansions (including the gay-friendly Roberts Mansion B&B, the exceptional Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture and a terrific neighborhood eatery, Italia Trattoria).

By 3 p.m., I was off to Sandpoint, Idaho, a town I'd never even heard of until a few years ago, when a woman whose PR firm represents the Sandpoint Chamber of Commerce (sandpointchamber.org) approached me on Twitter, extolling the community's laid-back,