



AUTO TOUR

AAA Washington Travel Services

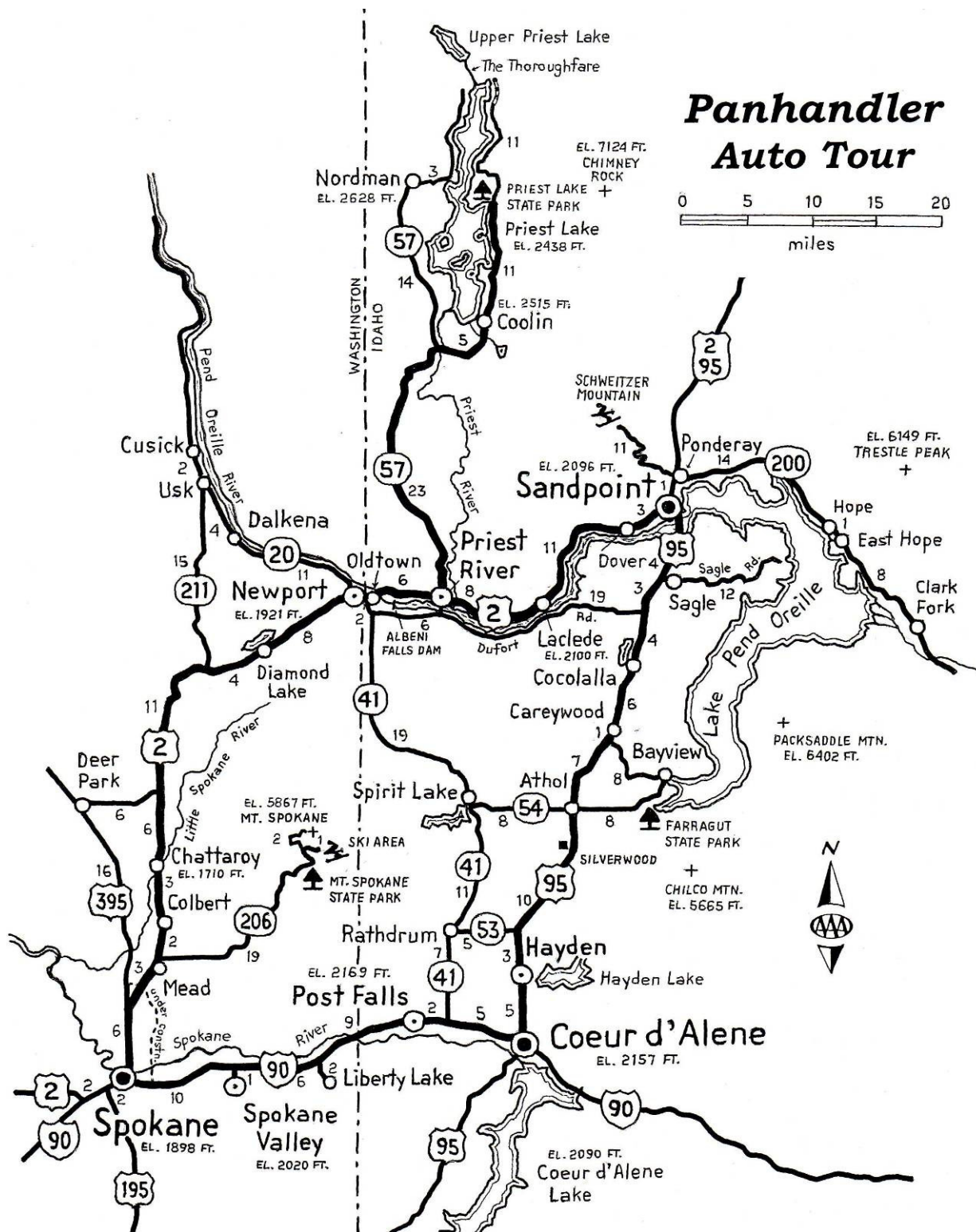
Idaho Panhandle

Idaho's aquatic jewels, Priest Lake and Lake Pend Oreille are popular day trip and weekend destinations. Whether it's boating, fishing, skiing or mountain biking the Lakes District has all the necessities to be as rustic or luxurious as you like.



A clear day on Priest Lake, with Bartoo Island in the foreground

The **Idaho Panhandle Auto Tour** covers 188 miles and takes about five hours to drive without stops. The trek veers north from Spokane along US 2 into the Gem State, then strikes north to Priest Lake on Idaho Highway 57. Upon returning to Priest River, the tour continues eastward to the anchor of Lake Pend Oreille, Sandpoint. After a scenic side trip to Schweitzer Mountain and/or the Pend Oreille Scenic Byway, the tour turns south on US 95 to its completion in Coeur d'Alene.



1. Spokane to Priest River (via US-2)

Our auto tour begins on Division Street in downtown **Spokane** (pop. 200,795, alt. 1,893 ft.). The six-mile drag is the city's commercial mecca – signage lines both sides of the thoroughfare like a hollowed-out canyon. Follow US-2 to the right when it splits off from Highway 395 and heads northeast.

Six miles down the highway (just past the Mead turnout) lies **Cat Tales Zoological Park**, a preserve of large cat species that doubles as a vocational school for prospective zookeepers. Visitors can observe lions, tigers, pumas and leopards as well as a number of reptile varieties. Guests aged 8 and older can also accompany keepers to hand-feed the big cats.

Highway 2 chugs northward another 17 miles through Spokane County farmland and the hamlets of **COLBERT** (pop. 120, alt. 1,834 ft.) and **CHATTAROY** (pop. 400, alt. 1,709 ft.). After crossing into Pend Oreille County, farms give way to the densely-forested foothills of the Selkirk Range. The pavement makes its great eastward swing toward Idaho. The cutoff road for Metaline Falls (an hour's drive north of US-2) at SR-211 appears a short distance after the highway plateaus.

Eight miles further along US-2 approaches **DIAMOND LAKE** (pop. 300, alt. 2,342). A number of small motor inns dotted the lake's shore along the highway in the 1950s and 60s before giving way to private homes and lodges. The lake is a favorite with trout fishers and paddlers.

Divided by the centerline at State Street, **NEWPORT** (pop. 2,120, alt. 2,115) and **OLDTOWN** (pop. 207, alt. 2,109 ft.) straddle the border of Washington and Idaho, respectively. The Idaho town was settled first in 1893 – and was originally known as Newport. After a train depot fire, Great Northern rebuilt on the Washington side. Newport became the last county seat to be established when Pend Oreille County was created in 1911. Newport hosts two annual festivals – Pioneer Days in July and the Pend Oreille County Fair in late August – and serves as home to the **Pend Oreille County Historical Museum**. The museum is housed in the town's restored 1908 train depot. Exterior exhibits include three log cabins and a railroad car display.

Newport is also Washington's gateway to the **International Selkirk Loop**, a 290-mile circuit through Washington, Idaho and British Columbia. Stretching from Kootenay Lake down to Lake Pend Oreille, the loop is the only federally-designated International Scenic Byway in North America.

Having crossed into the Gem State, our auto tour next passes the **Albeni Falls Dam** (pictured at right). The Army Corps of Engineers erected this structure, which features a 400-foot spillway, from 1951-55. The Corps maintains a picnicking area and a scenic viewpoint.



The visitor center features two short films and interactive exhibits showing the reach of the Northwest hydroelectric system. 50-minute guided tours to the powerhouse overlook are offered during the summer months.

Four miles up the road is **PRIEST RIVER** (pop. 1,909, alt. 2,082 ft.). Located at the confluence of the Pend Oreille and Priest rivers, this is the jumping-off point for adventurers into the **Idaho Panhandle National Forest**. The town has a bevy of swimming spots in the Pend Oreille and a free public boat launch is available at **West Bonner Park**.

2. Priest Lake (via Idaho 57)

State Highway 57, the **PRIEST LAKE HIGHWAY**, emerges north from Priest River and quickly dispenses with civilization. Dense old-growth ponderosa pine forest looms along both sides. The wide road bed is well-marked and excellent for trailers and RVs, and sufficient passing opportunities are available for speedier tourists. Once the National Forest is reached eight miles up the road the forest changes character slightly – the cleared-out undergrowth suggests a much more managed landscape. Cell phones are useless for a major chunk of this stretch of wilderness.

At Milepost 22 a crossroads is reached – West Shore or East Shore? The federally-managed western side has fewer public access points to the lake but has more services and attractions, while the state-owned eastern half features the state park and the lake's sole lakeshore town.

Side Trip – West Shore

Continue on Highway 57 north along the west side of Priest Lake. Six miles further along on the left is the small village of **PRIEST LAKE** (alt. 2,450 ft.), a campers' resupply point with food and gas available. Keep a sharp eye out for bicyclists in this particular area. Across the highway from the town's center is **Priest Lake Golf Course**, an easily-walkable public 18-hole layout. In the winter the course doubles as a cross-country skiing center.

Just past the northern edge of Priest Lake town, turn on Luby Bay Road, then make a left onto the dirt Lakeshore Road down to the **Priest Lake Museum and Visitor Center**. Adjacent to one of the lake's largest private resorts, the volunteer-staffed museum provides a glimpse into life in the 1930s with a retro-decorated kitchen and living room. Exhibits on forestry,

mining, recreation and natural history are also presented. The museum abuts a small day-use beach that represents the best public access to this side of the lake.

Three miles further north on Highway 57 a grassy patch breaks up the forested flatland. This is the Forest Service's local airstrip that is used as a base for *smokejumpers* – firefighters who parachute into the forest's most remote terrain to battle blazes. The landing zone is also available for general aviation. Directly across the highway is **Priest Lake Ranger Station**, an information center for four on-shore campgrounds as well as rustic campsites on Kalispell and Bartoo Islands in the center of the lake. Wildlife flourishes the further you get from the high road – deer are a common sight and bears lurk just beyond the human domain.

The hamlet of **NORDMAN** (pop. 120, alt. 2,628 ft.) is the last stop on the road at milepost 37 and the state highway ends shortly after. A turn onto Reeder Bay Road leads to a couple resorts and campgrounds and pavement ends after about three miles. From there, feel free to take the Forest Road north into the **Upper Priest Lake Scenic Area**. Residents rejected a proposal in the 1980s to build a road to circumnavigate the lake. The dirt road ends after ten miles at the Forest Service's Beaver Creek campsite.

The turnoff for the East Shore at Dickensheet Road marks the boundary between federal and state land. The road curves to the right and passes several camping units of **Priest Lake State Forest**.

After a swing back to the northeast and two more miles, Priest Lake's sole shoreside town, **COOLIN** (pop. 300, alt. 2,454 ft.) comes into view. Several lodgings and RV parks comprise the town's core, which triples in size during the summer months. Continue straight ahead as the road descends to Bayview Drive and **Bishop's Marina**. An inconspicuous public boat launch is down here – go past the souvenir-laden **Leonard Paul Store** for 200 yards.

Return up the hill from the shore and make a left onto Cavanaugh Bay Road – the beginning of the East Shore's main drag. This road is much different from SH-57 ... the centerline disappears at time and the pavement is much more narrow and twisty. The lake views are much more spectacular here, although the turnouts for picture-taking are much fewer and farther between. After the private Rocky Point turnoff the pavement's name changes to East Shore Road.

Eleven miles from Coolin lies the East Shore's major attraction, the Indian Creek Unit of **PRIEST LAKE STATE PARK**. The park features the lake's only dedicated public day-use area, a wide-ranging trail system and a slate of interpretative programs led by park staff. RV sites, cabins and tent sites are all supported. A boat launch and a camp store (serving gas, propane and diesel) are housed within park boundaries and pets are welcome.

While our auto tour turns back to Priest River here, further up East Shore Road is the state park's Lionhead unit. Access to the Upper Priest Lake Scenic Area's wilderness can be gained from Lionhead, but only on foot.

3. Lake Pend Oreille, Sandpoint & Schweitzer Mountain (via US-2 & US-95)

Retrace Highway 57 south back to Priest River and turn east on US-2. The highway traces the Pend Oreille River for 20 miles until the river empties into **LAKE PEND OREILLE** at the bedroom community of **DOVER** (pop. 517, alt. 2,100 ft.). Nineteenth-century French fur trappers named the lake after the earrings worn by the area's Native American tribesmen. The 43-mile-long lake emerged as a sport fishing destination for Kamloops trout in the 1950s and has attracted outdoor enthusiasts ever since.

Nestled at the western gateway to the lake is **SANDPOINT** (pop. 8,215, alt. 2,085 ft.), northeastern Idaho's flagship city. The Northern Pacific Railroad brought settlers to the area in the 1880s. Most of the town's early history was spent as a fledgling lumbering center and rail crossroads. As the valley was cleared, farming and ranching became more prevalent. These days, Sandpoint hosts a diverse economy and a thriving, growing populace (up 50 percent since 1990). The new arrivals are attracted to the city's mild climate – 30 inches of annual precipitation that falls mostly as snow. This is a true do-it-all destination – hiking, skiing, boating, fishing, golfing, shopping and much more.

Entering the city from the west on US-2, small brown signs point the way to Lakeview Park and the **Bonner County Historical Museum**. A small outdoor botanical garden showcases the local flora, while the museum's exhibits chronicle the timber and rail industries and feature dugout canoes from the Kalispel tribe. The park offers a popular public boat launch and other recreational facilities. Next door to the park is the War Memorial Ballfield, home of the *Festival at Sandpoint* concert series in mid-August.

US-2 joins up with the northern reaches of US-95 shortly before entering downtown Sandpoint as Pine Street. Turn left at First Avenue – ahead at Bridge Street is the turnoff for **City Beach** as well as the Amtrak station. One block further up at

First and Main is Sandpoint's performance hub, the historic **Panida Theater**. The 550-seat venue opened in 1927 as a vaudeville and movie house, then sat derelict for decades before being restored in 1985 and earning a spot on the National Register of Historic Places. Panida hosts an international festival for independent filmmakers each September and has a year-round concert calendar. Across from Panida is the flagship store of upscale women's apparel maker Coldwater Creek.

Ahead at Cedar Street turn right and check out Sandpoint's ode to Italy, the **Cedar Street Bridge Public Market**. This two-story structure pays homage to the famed Ponte Vecchio bridge and market in Venice. Wheel around and head west on Cedar, then turn right to follow US-95 to the north end of town. On your right is the **Greater Sandpoint Visitor Center**, a trove of information on local to-do's.

Just ahead the road splits and the **PEND OREILLE SCENIC BYWAY** (SH-200) trails off to the east. Five miles down the road is **The Idaho Club**, Idaho's most prestigious (and private) golf venue featuring the only Jack Nicklaus-designed layout in the state. The Byway stretches 33 miles in length to the town of **CLARK FORK** (pop. 575, alt. 2,080 ft.) and the Montana border.



Photo courtesy Schweitzer Mountain Resort

Continuing north, US 2/95 meets the cutoff road that treks eleven miles uphill to **SCHWEITZER MOUNTAIN RESORT**, the Idaho Panhandle's largest ski area. Schweitzer is comprised of 2,900 acres of trails and has ten lifts to whisk outdoor enthusiasts around the terrain.

Alpine skiers can descend from the 6,400-foot peak down to the village via Schweitzer Bowl or on the mountain's rugged posterior slope, Outback Bowl. Nordic enthusiasts can cover 20 miles of backcountry.

The resort village houses two lodges, a shopping and dining arcade and a sector of condominiums. During the summer, the resort transforms into a hiker's and biker's playground and is also popular with huckleberry pickers. RV parking is provided.

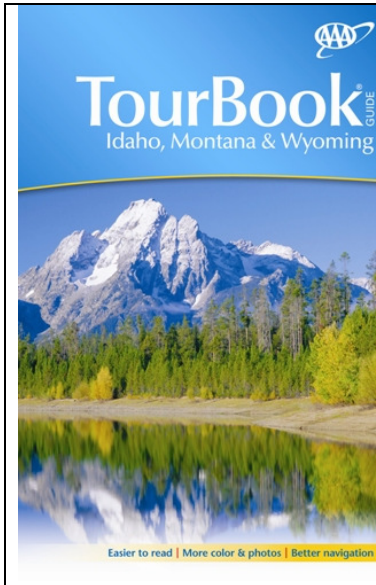
Returning to downtown Sandpoint, follow US-95 around the maze of one-ways and turn right on First Avenue. The roadway crosses Lake Pend Oreille on one of two spits of earth emanating from the city shore, collectively known as **Long Bridge**. The section off to the north carries passenger and freight rail traffic across the lake. Just across the lake a mile west of the highway is the **Sandpoint Fish Hatchery**.

US-95 proceeds south through alternating strands of shrub-steppe and wooded hills. Several turnoffs for lake recreation centers pop up on the left side of the road. Five miles after Long Bridge, take a left for a quick twelve-mile meander on Sagle Road east to the **Bird Aviation Museum and Invention Center**. Opened in 2007, this free museum is an educational hub for young minds to explore the world of invention. The airplane collection of its founder Dr. Forrest Bird, nearly two dozen aircraft in all, is also displayed.

Returning to the highway traveling south we pass **Round Lake State Park** and shortly after is **Lake Cocolalla**. Camping and boating are king throughout the entire panhandle, not just on Lake Pend Oreille. The small town of **ATHOL** (pop. 700, alt. 2,391 ft.) is the hub for two popular spots. The first is **Farragut State Park**, located two miles east on State Highway 54. Once home of one of the world's largest naval training facilities, the campus is now a sprawling, four-season recreation area that gives public access to the south end of the lake. Visitors can tour the World War II-era brig converted into a naval museum. Outdoor enthusiasts can ski on groomed cross-country trails, fly model airplanes on a special field, or merely do the 'usual' fish-boat-hike-bike combination.

Athol's second and more famous attraction, **SILVERWOOD THEME PARK**, is situated just south of town on US-95. Billed as the Northwest's largest theme park, Silverwood is home to three major roller coasters, a Victorian streetscape and an extensive section of kids' rides – over 65 rides and attractions in all. Admission is coupled with neighboring **Boulder Beach Water Park**, home to several long water slides and wading pools. The parks are open June, July and August, as well as weekends and holidays in May and September at Silverwood.

Highway 95 proceeds further south into suburbia, passing through **HAYDEN** (pop. 12,460, alt. 2,287 ft.) before reaching the end of the Auto Tour in Coeur d'Alene.



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Photos by Tony Mayer unless otherwise indicated, Map drawn by John King

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