

The Federal Writers' Project was a part of the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression of the 1930s. One of the Project's assignments was to produce descriptions of tours across Idaho. The text below is excerpted and edited from the description of Tour No. 4, which went from Blackfoot to Arco to Challis. One error is marked with an asterisk; one debatable claim is marked with “o”. The description of Arco is a striking example of the writers' craft.

Idaho – a Guide in Word and Picture

Prepared by Federal Writers' Projects

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TOUR NO.4

Blackfoot to Arco to the junction with U S 93, two miles south of Challis. 144m. State 27. **Lost River Highway.**

The Oregon Short Line Railroad parallels this route between Blackfoot and Mackay. Salmon River Stages use the highway between Blackfoot and Challis.

Accommodations throughout are less than average in hotels and tourist camps, and travelers who plan to spend some time in the region are wise to equip and provision themselves for an outdoor life.

State 27 proceeds out of Blackfoot (R) into the northwest, and soon leaves the fertile Snake River Valley to enter that enormous desolation of volcanic outpourings of which the Craters of the Moon are only a very small part. The contrast can be felt more deeply if it is remembered that State 39, which branches (L) at 5 m., turns south to SPRINGFIELD 20 m., in the vicinity of which is produced almost half of the Grimm alfalfa seed grown in the United States.

Right at 40 m. are the TWIN BUTTES and on the left BIG BUTTE, famous landmarks for emigrants in early days. Two of them, BIG and EAST BUTTES, are rhyolitic volcanic cones completely surrounded by Snake River lava and are admirable examples of steptoes (islands formed in a once-molten sea of lava). MIDDLE BUTTE is an upraised block of stratified basalt. Middle Butte rises above the plain 400 feet, East Butte, 700 ; but Big Butte rises 2,350 feet as a deeply sculptured mountain and terminates in two ridges about a mile apart, with a deep depression between that apparently is the remnant of a crater. This mountain can be scaled but has unusual abruptness of ascent on all sides. It is composed chiefly of nearly white rhyolitic lava which varies in texture from firm-banded layers to light pumice and black obsidian. The basalt spilled at its base and spread into sheets is black. This formidable monument is a favorite haunt of certain wild animals, including bear and deer; and on its northern slope is a young and thrifty growth of fir and juniper. From the summit of Big Butte a broad vista presents the geologic record of the Snake River plains. Middle and East Buttes also rise abruptly. At the summit of the latter is the remnant of a volcanic crater. In the vicinity of both are many caves and underground passages, most of which have doubtless never been explored; and for any person seeking the unusual or wishing to venture into what has not within the memory of living man been seen, these three desolate sentinels are a terrifying playground.

At 54 m. is the junction with State 29.

Right on State 29 are the LOST RIVER SINKS 20 m., where two rivers have long disappeared. As a matter of fact, not a single tributary reaches Snake River by surface travel from the high and rugged mountains lying west and north of its course between Malad River and Henrys (North) Fork, a distance of two hundred miles. In certain instances, as in the case of Big and Little Lost Rivers, the waters spread out in the marginal portion of the plain during the period of their greatest elongation and form shallow lakes. The chief reason these rivers are lost is the fact that the terrain across which they flow is rough and irregular, and evaporation and percolation in the lakes equal the influx. Big Lost River rises in the Sawtooth* Range and flows ninety miles into this desert of stone to form a lake and vanish; and the Little Lost River emerges from the Pahsimeroi Mountains and flows eighty miles to disappear ten miles east of the other sinkholes. Both of these rivers were overland tributaries of the Snake before volcanic upheavals buried

their channels and shook them out of their courses°. Their outlet, as well as the outlet of other streams that vanish in this area, is thought to be chiefly the Thousand Springs which gush from the walls of Snake River Canyon a hundred and fifty miles in the southwest.

ARCO 62 m. (5,318 alt.; 572 pop.) is the seat of Butte County and one of the loveliest of small Idaho towns. From some distance it strongly resembles a village in Switzerland. The present site is its third since 1879, the first of which was called Junction; but the U. S. Post Office Department did not look with favor on so many Junctions, and the name was changed, though whether the present town was named for a visiting Count Arco or for Arco Smith, an early settler, or whether it was named because the town is on a bend in the river, seems not to be known. The Lost River Range terminates in the picturesque Wildcat Peak which is the backdrop of this town. The caretaker of the Craters of the Moon National Monument is stationed here and will provide guides if desired.

1. Left from Arco on State 22 is the CRATERS OF THE MOON NATIONAL MONUMENT 20.5 m. Martin's Ranch 18.5 m. (R) is a post office only. At the Hailey entrance accommodations are available. The panorama in this area at sunset is overwhelming, for at this hour the fields of lava are utterly black and strangely unreal; and in sharp contrast to them is the high and ghostly beauty of the Lost River Mountains in the east. Persons intending to leave the roads in the Craters region to explore should wear rugged clothing and very rugged shoes.

2. Right from Arco a short distance on an unimproved road leading toward Arco Pass, a little-used wood road leads to the left toward Beaverland Pass, and from the end of the road it is about a mile by trail to the second most remarkable natural bridge in the State. This arch completely bridges the canyon with a span of about 125 feet and a height of about 50 feet. Of irregular diameter, it spreads into flanges at either end and is so rough on its surface that it is difficult to cross it and not a little dangerous.

For the lover of beautiful mountains, the drive from Arco to Challis is not comparable in massed splendor to the distance between Challis and Salmon City or to the glittering imperturbability of the Sawtooth Peaks west of Stanley Basin. But it is, nevertheless, a minor feast, no matter whether in great rugged torsos or in the low mounded extravagance of brown hills or in the

plump austerity of Mount Borah. From Arco, State 27 goes up the valley of Lost River, and attention is called at 82 m. to the contrast between the range on the left and the one on the right. It is difficult to believe that almost denuded mountains could be any lovelier than this Lost River spur on the right, though the range across from it is softer in contour and richer in color.

At 89 m. is the junction with an unimproved road.

Right on this road is PASS CREEK GORGE 9 m. on Pass Creek. This canyon, too, it seems, is often called the Royal Gorge of Idaho, and perhaps is worthier of the name than any other. This gorge, more than a mile in length, is very narrow, and its sheer walls, rising more than two thousand feet, leave only a slender path of sky line above. Favored as a picnic ground, the bottom of the canyon is forested and is traversed throughout by a cold mountain stream. Fishing in this stream and in others here is excellent. The walls of the gorge are two thousand feet of strata, the lower depth of which is dark blue limestone which grades upward into shale. Like any other magnificent canyon, this one comes most fully to life at sunset when the upper ledges are luminous with glory and the shadows are banked depth upon depth in the lower reaches.

MACKAY 90 m. (5,897 alt.; 777 pop.) is another sub-Alpine town in a lovely setting. It stands in a valley that once sheltered several boom towns, of which little or nothing remains, as well as gangs of lusty rascals who had things pretty much to their taste before the vigilantes came.

At 92 m. is the Cottonwood Grove dancing pavilion (R); and on the left at 95 m. is a lake, either blue or green, depending on the light, which is the storage and diversion point of the river. South of here the old bed of Lost River is dry. CHILLY 107m. is a ghost town of a few deserted shacks.

Left from Chilly on the Trail Creek road is TRAIL CREEK SUMMIT and a fine improved campground 25m. The distance to Ketchum is 43 m. This road proceeds through a closed game preserve on the Lemhi National Forest, and deer are often visible to those driving across.

DICKEY 111 m. still appears on highway maps but there is nothing here except a ranch on either side of the road. This is another ghost town. Mount Borah, straight east of it, is the highest known point in Idaho: though it stands at an elevation of 12,655 feet, it seems not to, perhaps because the tableland surrounding it is considerably more than a mile above the sea.

Much more impressive than Mount Borah itself in May and June is the incomparable mountain north of it with its colorful warm flanks and its deep and symmetrical ravines. This is Dickey Peak. Its lower slopes in spring and summertime look like a plush gray or green carpet, and its marvellously sculptured reaches look like golden velvet. Quite as beautiful is the range which runs north from it, visible as soon as the ascent is made out of Thousand Springs Valley.

At 123m. is a junction with a fair road. Left on this road by way of STAR CANYON is CLAYTON 24: m. on US 93.

At about 130 m. State 27 passes through the spectacular heaped ruggedness of GRAND VIEW CANYON, where the sheer walls are laid block upon block.

At 142 m. is the junction with U S 93, and two miles north is Challis.