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## The Rockies: Close encounters of the wondrous kind

Roger St Pierre hits the open road

Tuesday, 10 May 2011



Fireweed and the Teton Mountains

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The United States is jam-packed with wonderful sights – both natural and man-made. But for me the major joy of an American road trip is not these things but the bevy of colourful characters you meet en-route.

There I was, driving halfway up the long, winding 8,429 ft Teton Pass that would take me from Idaho across the state line into Wyoming when ahead I spotted a man pushing a shopping trolley bedecked with two large stars-and-stripes flags.

His name proved to be Ray Brown, a retired schoolmaster, and the business card he gave me revealed that he was engaged in "A walk across America supporting American history, the Constitution and the bill of Rights"

Staying in touch with his family by laptop and mobile phone, this fascinating character was both making a political point and fulfilling a dream he'd had from childhood.

I'd actually found many characters from the minute my flight from Chicago had touched down in Boise, the state city of Idaho and cited as the most remote urban area in the US – the nearest cities of any size being Salt Lake City (336 miles southeast), Spokane (379 miles north), Reno (425miles south) and Portland (430 miles west).

That leaves lots of wide-open country to explore in-between. The pioneer spirit lives on in these hills and eccentricity seems a natural lifestyle choice.

But while it's at the heart of a recreational and scenic wonderland, Boise is no backwater. Founded as an army outpost in 1863 it is now home to approaching 600,000 people and the corporate headquarters of several Fortune 500 companies.

There's a thriving arts and cultural scene, spacious parks, lots of trees, a vibrant downtown, numerous good restaurants and bars, abundant street art, an imposing Capitol building and, wait for it, the largest Basque community outside Spain.

That's why I was in town: to attend the unique Jaialdi International Basque Culture Festival – the largest such event in the world.

Michael Flatly eat your heart out! Basque dancing proved to be like 'Riverdance' on speed. The Basque sports, with lots of manic speed wood chopping, hay bale pitching and 20 more competitive challenges were spectacular too.

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