

BY KENDALL JONES

COWBOY PARADISE

Chico Hot Springs Connects with Visitors through Nature, Food and Drink



ADVENTURE À LA CARTE

Chico Hot Springs Resort offers all the typical Montana adventure opportunities, but unlike many resorts, you can do it right outside your door because most of the guide services and outfitters are onsite.

» The north entrance to **YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK**, America's first and best-loved national park, is just 30 minutes up the road. No need to stay in the wilderness when you're this close and daytrips are so easy.

» **HORSEBACK RIDES** are especially popular, operating out of Chico's 100-year-old barn. Options range from a one-hour ride around the resort's sprawling property (\$50) to all-day trips in Yellowstone (\$215). They also have ponies for the kids and carriage rides for people who aren't comfortable in the saddle.



» **YELLOWSTONE RIVER RAFTING** opportunities include 6-mile and 18-mile whitewater adventures and more leisurely, less soggy scenic floats, with prices starting at \$42.

» Looking to do something a bit out of the ordinary, visit in the winter and try your hand at **DOG SLEDDING**. Mush your own team of Siberian huskies for a half-day or full-day trek starting at \$250.

» Paradise Valley and its surroundings offer a wealth of other recreation opportunities, like **FISHING, HIKING, MOUNTAIN BIKING** and **HUNTING**, and the folks at Chico are happy to help you get moving in the right direction, whether you need a guide or not.

downstream from Yellowstone National Park, sits Chico Hot Springs Resort & Day Spa. This has been a destination for travelers, adventurers, sore bones and thirsty cowboys for over 116 years, some seeking a soak in the healing waters of the pool, others seeking a swig of the healing waters at the saloon. To a large extent, the place that locals simply refer to as Chico remains unchanged by the ages.

Although it's not known exactly when natives first discovered the warm, healing waters, it is documented that nonindigenous people have enjoyed the natural wonders since at least 1865. Throughout its storied past, the Main Lodge at Chico Hot Springs, which was built in 1900, has been a dude ranch, a hunting lodge, a hospital and a hotel.

HEARTFELT CONNECTIONS

The owners of this expansive, sprawling resort like to say that nearly everyone who visits Chico has some sort of connection to the place. If you go, they say you will discover or create your own unique connection.

I didn't know this until recently, but when my grandfather emigrated from Wales, he landed in Paradise Valley. When I visited last summer, I learned that in 1917 he helped construct a barn at what was then the Chico Warm Springs Hotel.

That barn still stands today, serving as the horse stables at Chico. I reached out and grabbed one of the large rough-hewn posts that holds the barn upright, my way of connecting to the man who came to America as a teenager and died before I could meet him. That was my connection to Chico.

To a large extent, Chico seems happily trapped in time. It remains what it's always been: a great place to relax, party, eat, drink and experience Montana. The resort is a perfect slice of authentic, modern Montana life, ranging from rustic to sophisticated, bustling to lonesome, serene to rowdy. This is not a high-tech, modern hotel,

The majestic Yellowstone River leaves the park that shares its name and meanders north for 60 miles between the Gallatin and Absaroka ranges, lazily finding its way to Livingston, Montana, and beyond. Along this path, and between those two mountain ranges, the river has patiently carved out a valley so beautiful it earned the name "Paradise."

It's hard to describe the splendor of Paradise Valley, except to say that pictures do it no justice and it can be easy for humans to feel dwarfed by its vast grandeur. Here, in south-central Montana, the wooded hillsides, jagged peaks, passive river, sprawling fields, farmlands and family ranches have provided the backdrop for movies like "A River Runs Through It," "The Horse Whisperer" and "Rancho Deluxe."

Huddled against the hills on the east side of the valley, 30 miles upstream from Livingston and 30 miles

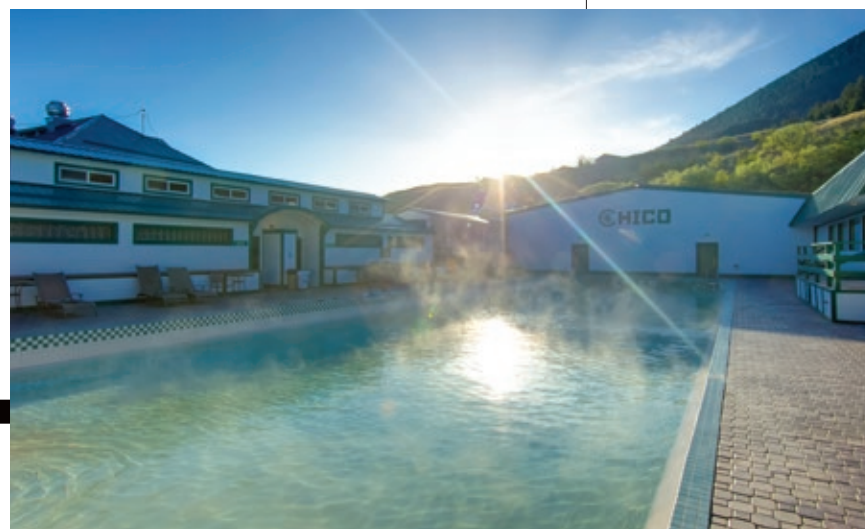


so communications can be tricky and your room key will be just that — a metal key, not a plastic card. The resort attracts single adults, young families, retired folks, thrill-seekers and any other sort of traveler, all of whom revel in the nostalgia.

Hospitable and comfortable, there's no denying that Chico is also a bit rough around the edges. One night you may find yourself hootin' and hollerin' at the Chico Saloon with a trail-dusted cowboy, rightfully worried that if you bump into someone playing pool you might get socked in the jaw. The next night you might recognize someone famous in the elegant dining room; the likes of Jeff Bridges, Dennis Quaid, Peter Fonda, John Mayer and other familiar faces who call the Paradise Valley home and Chico's is the finest restaurant in the valley, if not the entire region.

LAY OF THE LAND

Along with food and drink, the other enduring attraction at Chico is the fabled pools filled with mineral-rich, warm and healing water flowing naturally from the heart of Mother Earth. The hot water courses through the two pools so quickly that chlorine is not necessary. The larger pool averages 96 degrees Fahrenheit and the smaller pool 103 degrees Fahrenheit, year round.



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The pools are open to the public as well as guests, so consider taking a dip when they open at 7:00 a.m. for your most peaceful, relaxing experience, knowing that an afternoon plunge will usually involve lots of excited children. The pools are open until 11:00 p.m. and the later hours see a much thirstier, boisterous crowd fueled by drinks ordered from the saloon's service window.

The original Victorian-inspired inn, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, serves as the centerpiece of the resort. The Main Lodge is where you'll find the front desk, comfortably furnished lobby and the dining room, all of which are attached to the saloon, the pools and wedding grounds.

Located just off of the main lobby, Chico's dining room is decorated in cowboy-chic and offers a culinary experience that exceeds expectations. The service, atmosphere and food are definitely highbrow, but you won't need a jacket and tie. This is Montana, after all, so you won't feel underdressed in a T-shirt and jeans.

The menu features plenty of locally sourced protein, like rabbit, trout and bison, but also fresh seafood delivered regularly via FedEx. The award-winning wine list matches or exceeds anything you've seen in one of those highfalutin places that city slickers brag about, offering everything from affordable glass pours to carefully cellared bottles from renowned winemakers like Walla Walla Valley's Leonetti Cellar or Willamette Valley's Ken Wright Cellars. The bar creates craft cocktails using, when the season allows, fresh honey and herbs from the resort's massive garden and geothermally-heated greenhouses.

If you want an even more casual dining experience, the Poolside Grille offers good grub in a laidback, sit-down or grab-and-go atmosphere. The diner-style restaurant offers salads, burgers and fries, sandwiches and other pub fare, which they'll also deliver to your table next door at the Chico Saloon.

And speaking of the saloon, it should not be missed.

Paradise Valley is sparsely populated and there aren't a lot of places where the full-time residents can tip one back, so the resort's guests mingle with the local wildlife at this crowded watering hole, where they pour stiff drinks alongside craft beers from the region's many breweries. Dangling from the ceiling, dozens of random ball caps, autographed by famous and not-so-famous visitors seeking to create some kind of connection with Chico. On the weekends, the saloon hosts live bands, usually playing country-western and country-swing music for your dancing pleasure.

REST YOUR HEAD

After a day of overexertion or a night of overconsumption, and maybe both, you'll need a place to crash. Getting one of the 48 quaint, rustic rooms in the Main Lodge — the majority of which share bathrooms down the hall — is your most affordable lodging option, starting at \$61 per night. Though it's not exactly a peaceful backwoods getaway, and they make no promises about Internet connectivity, the Main Lodge is lively, at times rambunctious, and right in the middle of the party.

Attached to the Main Lodge, a room in the Warren's Wing, starting at \$145, also puts you in the center of things, but with larger rooms and a few more amenities and creature comforts, like Internet access, a coffee maker, contemporary furnishings and your own bathroom.



Just across the lawn, the Lower Lodge offers a slightly quieter option that will seem familiar to today's typical traveler. Rooms starting at \$145 have their own bathrooms and the other expected amenities. Prices and accommodations are similar at the Fishermen's Lodge, which is a bit more removed from the main facility.

Other cabins and cottages scattered around the resort provide a variety of options, like rustic log cabins starting at \$110, hilltop cabins with breathtaking views starting at \$245 and even a fully appointed five-bedroom mountain view house starting at \$445. Some of the cabins and cottages include kitchenettes, though many do not.

The array of lodging choices speaks well to the overall experience at Chico, where

there are plenty of options and opportunities. However you define recreation, they have you covered, from affordable to indulgent, from peaceful to clamorous. Pick your flavor of adventure for the day and your kind of fun for the evening. Whatever sounds good, Chico invites you to create your own, unique Montana experience.

The first time I visited Chico, it felt like I had come home to a place I'd never been before. I'm not the only one. Over the past 116 years, countless thousands of people have shared the feeling. ●

» BIG SKY, BIG BEERS

Montana ranks as one the nation's leaders in breweries per capita. You might feel removed from civilization, but there are 10 breweries within an hour of Chico. One thing you may notice, robust Scotch ales are especially popular around here. It must be something about life beneath the big sky. Montana brewers also offer plenty of great IPAs and other more familiar styles.

Thirty minutes from Chico, the small town of Livingston is quaint but surprisingly sophisticated, with two breweries to call its own. **KATABATIC BREWING** is located along the main drag across from the railroad depot, offering great brews in a comfortably cavernous taproom. A few blocks down the street and around the corner, **NEPTUNE'S BREWERY** offers a nice selection of beer in a cozy, eclectic space.

Another 30 minutes down the road, the beer-loving city of Bozeman proudly boasts seven breweries with one more, **MADISON RIVER BREWING CO.**, just beyond the city's fringes near the airport. Don't miss **MAP BREWING**, a recent addition to the scene, with its gorgeous taproom and awe-inspiring view of the Bridger Mountains. Also make a stop at **BOZEMAN BREWING**, the city's oldest and best-loved brewery.

» Visit montanabrewers.org to get your Montana Brewers Association Trail Map.