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Surrounded by spectacular wilderness, Jarbidge is one of Nevada's most remote towns—but it still knows how to party.

BY ZACK THOMAS | MARCH/APRIL 2009



Photo: Zack Thomas (all)

"Gone downtown to the pig feed," reads the note pinned to the door of the Tsawhawbitts Ranch Bed & Breakfast when my wife and I arrive in [Jarbidge](#). "Come on in." And miss the pig feed? Not a chance.

We idle along at the strictly enforced 10-mph speed limit. About a minute passes before the crowd comes into view, clogging the dirt main street between the Outdoor Inn, Red Dog Saloon, community hall, and Sinclair station, which make up "downtown" in this hamlet with a year-round population hovering around 20.

Blue woodsmoke hangs over the roofs and golden leaves of the cottonwoods, while pork sandwiches and beer flow freely. Yearly and summer residents and visitors from all over—perhaps 100 people in all—mill, gossip, and laugh. There’s a drawing for a deer rifle to benefit the local volunteer fire department and some smack-talk about the costume contest coming up later. It’s the Saturday before Halloween, the town’s last big party of the year.

Party Time



Jarbidge loves its parties and parades. The next morning, Krinn McCoy, our host at Tsawhawbitts Ranch, jokes that the town will throw together a parade for just about any reason: “Somebody will say, ‘Hey, there’s some people here from Washington that want to see a parade,’ and we have a parade.”

In addition to impromptu celebrations and the Halloween pig feed (*see photo at left*), Jarbidge hosts a Memorial Day party with live music and a barbecue; a two-day Fourth of July celebration with more live bluegrass, more barbecue, and a parade; a corn feed in early September; and a harvest dance in late September. The celebration centerpiece is Jarbidge Days, a three-day, mid-August celebration of all things Jarbidge, with a historical slide show, craft fair, and community yard sale; guided tours; kids activities; and—you guessed it—live music, free food, and a parade. This year’s Jarbidge Days, celebrating the town’s centennial, will quite possibly be the biggest party in Jarbidge history.

Frozen in Time

Like so many of Nevada’s remote and picturesque towns, Jarbidge sprang from a gold strike. After the first legitimate discovery in 1909, the town exploded to some 1,500 residents. By the early 1920s, Jarbidge was the most productive gold-mining district in Nevada, but by the end of the decade the boom was over, and Jarbidge became what it is today—a partially inhabited collection of old buildings along the banks of a mountain stream, delightfully isolated from the rest of the world by geography and weather.

If not frozen in time, Jarbidge certainly lags behind. On a snowy December night in 1916, the last stagecoach robbery in U.S. history was committed just outside of town. The tiny jail where the robber was held until his conviction and transfer to Carson City still stands. To see inside, ask for a key next door at the Trading Post, aka “The Best Little Storehouse in Jarbidge.” The town is one of the last in the U.S. with no cell-phone service; even land lines didn’t arrive until 1984, and every number in town starts 488-23, so locals tend to refer to only the last two digits.



The historical photos in the community hall (*right*), across from the Outdoor Inn, are a result of the hard work put into the Jarbidge Community Archives project by the Northeastern Nevada Historical Society. The building has changed

little since the boom days, when it housed the Commercial Club—a saloon, theater, and gathering place. If it's locked, the folks at the Outdoor Inn will open it. Spend an hour exploring the old cemetery, too, about a mile downstream from town.

An Unknown Paradise

The mountains, canyons, and streams surrounding Jarbidge are the perfect complement to the town's slow-paced charm, fascinating history, and nostalgic old buildings. The Jarbidge Mountains—a strange island of snow-crowned peaks rising to nearly 11,000 feet from Idaho's Snake River Plain to the north and Nevada's Great Basin to the south—is a virtually unknown paradise for campers, backpackers, off-roaders, mountain bikers, anglers, hunters, wildlife-watchers, cross-country skiers, and snowmobilers. "Jarbidge makes an ideal base camp for all kinds of outdoor enthusiasts," says Don Newman of Elko. "It's so remote that people are surprised when they find out there's a restaurant, rooms, gas, and store."

Some 150 miles of established trails beckon day hikers, backpackers, and horseback riders to explore Nevada's oldest wilderness area, Jarbidge Wilderness, established in 1964. One of the least visited wilderness areas in the country, it encompasses about 113,000 acres of wind-swept summits, yawning river gorges, dense fir and pine forests, aspen groves, and subalpine meadows resplendent with summer wildflowers. "You can spend a week up there and not see anybody at all," says Agee Smith of the Cottonwood Guest Ranch, which leads pack trips into the high country.

The most popular trailhead is at the end of the road that follows the Jarbidge River upstream from town. Fit hikers can make the 8.5 to 11.5-mile (depending on road conditions) round-trip to Jarbidge Lake in a day, but there are also several excellent two- to four-day loop hikes. Peak-baggers like to camp at gorgeous and aptly named Emerald Lake before scrambling up Matterhorn Peak, the 10,839-foot high point of the range.

Outside the wilderness area, a maze of old mining roads—some of them, like the pulse-pounding Bluster Mine road, climb thousands of feet up steep canyon walls—makes for exciting mountain biking and endless exploring via off-road vehicles. Campers and adventurous RVers enjoy numerous streamside campgrounds, both improved and unimproved.



The Jarbidge, Bruneau, and Marys Rivers start from the high country and are loaded with fish. The Jarbidge, which, unlike most of Nevada's streams, drains to the Columbia River system and ultimately the Pacific Ocean, is home to native Columbia redband trout and the world's southernmost native population of bull trout.

Redefining Remote

Ironically, it's Jarbidge's remoteness—it has a legitimate claim to the title of most remote town in the lower 48—that draws visitors from literally all over the globe. On the wall of the Tsawhawbits Ranch, a map of the U.S. bristles with pushpins marking guests' hometowns in every state. Intrepid European tourists find their way here with surprising frequency. "Our very first guests after we opened were Germans," McCoy says. "A lot of Europeans seem to have a real fascination with the Old West, and they come here looking for the last of it."

Jarbidge is 20 miles from the nearest pavement and 70 miles from the closest full-service town—tiny Rogerson, Idaho, about 18 miles north of Jackpot, on Highway 93. Elko County Road 746, which turns east from Highway 225 a few miles south of Wild Horse Reservoir, is the quickest and most scenic way to Jarbidge from Elko. Dense evergreen forests and aspen groves are punctuated here and there by lush meadows and sweeping vistas of peaks and canyons as the road winds over Bear Creek and Coon Creek summits—both just shy of 8,500 feet—before dropping steeply into the Jarbidge River canyon.

In good weather, this route is passable in carefully driven passenger cars. Make a loop by leaving town to the north and returning to the highway either at Rogerson or, via another 45 miles of dirt, at Wild Horse Reservoir. The road north from town follows the Jarbidge River through a dramatic gorge, its walls studded with strangely humanoid basalt monoliths or “hoodoos.” Some believe these hoodoos explain the Shoshone legend of the tsawhawbitts, a man-eating giant that their ancestors had trapped in the canyon. “Jarbidge” is an English corruption of the Shoshone word.

At any rate, if the giant were around today, he’d probably get a triple helping of barbecue, a cold beer, and a spot at the head of the next parade.

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