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THE SETTING SUN CASTS a delicate glow over this small Idaho town as I push open the gate to its namesake world-famous Lava Hot Springs. Mist rises into the cool evening air, and crystal clear mineral water bubbles from the gravel bottom of the nearest pool. I test the water with my toe before sinking in, my muscles relaxing after a day of exploration.

Lava Hot Springs has kept me moving from a morning tour of the historic buildings at Chesterfield Town Site to an afternoon ziplining across a spring green canyon. The pools are busy despite the late hour; children learn to float on their backs and couples talk and laugh as stars emerge in the darkening sky.

The thermal activity heating the 2.5 million gallons of water that flow through Lava Hot Springs each day is connected to the volcanic hotspot underneath Yellowstone National Park. A line of volcanic eruptions that began 12 million years ago strung out to the east across southern Idaho’s Snake River Plain, each eruption pointing to the giant caldera of present day Yellowstone National Park.

In the morning, rested and relaxed, I embark on a trip north and west toward Craters of the Moon National Monument to trace the route of those ancient volcanoes. The rolling hills of Pocatello give way to a flat expanse of sagebrush steppe, broken only by three large lava buttes standing sentinel on either side of the two-lane highway. This land, beautiful in its loneliness, caught the eye of nuclear scientists from the Argonne National Laboratory in Chicago in 1949, following World War II, a group turned their attention from weaponry to power generation. I can easily imagine why they chose this stretch of remote land to experiment instead of the busy outskirts of Chicago: it vast and sparsely populated, a place where you’re more likely to see an antelope than a person. The experimental reactor, EBR-1, succeeded in generating atomic power in 1955 and is now open for tours as a National Historic Landmark. I pull into to explore and climb the stairs to the top of the now-defunct nuclear reactor before pressing buttons in the control room and manipulating robotic arms.

I continue on the road to Craters of the Moon national preserve, past miles of sagebrush with rays of the early summer sun dancing off their pale green leaves. I roll my windows down, letting the warmth and sweet smell of wildflowers rush into the car. The road is flat and straight, stretching as far as the eye can see – and it seems as though I have it all to myself. Suddenly the iridescent glimmer of lava rises out of the sage, and I’m
surrounded on all sides by broken chunks of the dark rock.

The pines of lava grow taller and wilder, until the sagebrush recedes completely and all that is left is miles of black rock. Astronauts trained here for the moon landings of the 1960s, which I determine makes perfect sense, as I pull into the Visitor Center at Craters of the Moon. A well-designed interpretive display outlines the volcanic origins of the park, where the latest lava flows were mere 2,000 years ago.

Craters of the Moon, uniquely beautiful in all seasons, erupts in a riot of colour for a few short weeks in early summer. Wildflowers, some no taller than an inch, paint the landscape in vibrant shades of pink, yellow and red. The stark contrast between black lava and colourful flowers is a sight to behold on the 11-kilometre Loop Road. I stop to explore Inferno Cone, a 1,884-metre mountain of cinder, and make the short but steep hike to its summit.

Returning to my car, I drive the short distance to the Craters of the Moon’s caves. I pull on my backpack and start walking the bumpy line of asphalt poured as a trail. All I see is hardened waves of lava until a small opening appears to my right. I quickly realize the caves are underneath my feet. I switch on a flashlight and make my way down a metal ladder into Indian Tunnel, the largest of the caves.

Indian Tunnel is spacious yet dark, the jagged lava walls smeared occasionally with bat droppings and downy feathers. I think about the hotspot that pushed this lava to the surface, and the series of volcanoes that formed a path from Craters of the Moon to Lava Hot Springs. I breathe the cold, heavy air deep into my lungs. Indian Tunnel ends at a narrow opening, and after a bit of scrambling and wriggling, I emerge through the gap, blinking into the warm summer air.

When You Go

**WHAT TO DO:** The Lava Hot Springs World Famous Hot Pools are open for soaking year-round, and the Lava Hot Springs Olympic Swimming Complex (with diving platforms and waterslides) offers endless aquatic fun during the summer. Drive to nearby historic Chesterfield for a tour through the lovingly maintained remains of a pioneer town, and join Lava Zipline for an afternoon of "riding the lines." **Craters of the Moon National Monument** is open year-round as well, and no trip here is complete without a hike on the cinder-trail up Inferno Cone and a visit to partially collapsed Indian Tunnel. Be sure to bring your camera to capture the National Monument’s otherworldly landscape.

**WHERE TO DINE:** The Portneuf Grill and Lounge, located at the Riverside Hot Springs Inn in Lava Hot Springs, serves upscale meals featuring local ingredients paired with Idaho wines. Chef Alonzo Thomas prepares generous portions from his seasonally relevant menu. For a more casual atmosphere, local favourite Riverwalk Thai offers authentic Thai cuisine and a delightfully sweet Thai tea. On the way to Craters of the Moon National Monument, stop at Pickle’s Place for its famous fried pickles and hamburgers served without fuss.

**WHERE TO STAY:** The charming downtown of Lava Hot Springs offers accommodations that are within easy walking distance of the hot pools. Stay at the Home Hotel, built in 1918, for comfortable rooms and baths that fill with mineral water from the nearby hot springs. Campers can take their pick of one of the many RV parks in town, including the Lava Hot Springs KOA with campsites along the Portneuf River. At Craters of the Moon National Monument, a newly renovated campground offers 42 campsites for tents and small RVs. For less rustic accommodations, book a reservation at the Silver Creek Hotel, located 50 minutes west in Bellevue.