

May 3, 2008

**ENCORE**
***If You're Thinking of Retiring In...***  
**Western Outpost**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming's capital, has a small-town feel, rugged charms and a very big rodeo**

By **PERRI CAPELL**  
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For all its rich history, for all its raucous beginnings, Cheyenne, Wyo., is among the most unpretentious of Western cities.

It's that personality, coupled with the beauty of the high plains and the area's low cost of living, that's attracting a small but steady stream of retirees to this windy setting in southeastern Wyoming.

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[See "Cheyenne at a Glance"](#)


Or so it seems.

**Three's a Line**

"Three people is considered a long line" at the motor-vehicle office, says Lee Dix, 62 years old, who retired to Cheyenne with his wife, Beth Ellis, in 2000. "When we lived in Maryland and Virginia, we would have to set aside a half-day to do something that takes 10 minutes here."

Of course, new arrivals also find one or two blemishes -- most notably icy winters. Some people also wish the city was more cosmopolitan, says Darren Rudloff, president and chief executive of the Cheyenne Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. Residents with a hunger for Thai, Indian or other ethnic cuisine often head south to Fort Collins, Colo., home to Colorado State University (a 45-minute drive), or Denver (about 90 minutes).

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Even though it's the state's largest city, Cheyenne, with about 56,000 residents, has a distinctly small-town feel. Parking downtown is free. Driving across the 24-square-mile community can take less than 10 minutes. Each day, the whistles of more than 80 trains rumbling through the center of town can be heard clearly over what little traffic occupies local streets.

In particular, newcomers find that, in comparison with other places they have lived, nest eggs go further (taxes in Wyoming are among the lowest in the country), breathing comes easier (Cheyenne placed third on the American Lung Association's list of cleanest U.S. cities in 2004) and one's patience lasts longer.

**THE JOURNAL REPORT**

Still, Cheyenne is the state capital, and some retirees say it offers more than enough activities, especially for people seeking a somewhat slower pace after hectic careers.



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Read how Randy Pausch<sup>3</sup>, a 47-year-old college professor, came to teach his family about love, courage -- and saying goodbye. Plus, *The Best*<sup>4</sup> highlights some of the most interesting and valuable resources in four key areas: money, lifestyles, health and travel.

- See the complete *Encore*<sup>5</sup> report.

"You aren't going to get a lot of culture or sophistication. And there's a joke that when hunting season starts, you can't get your washer and dryer fixed," says John Whitehead, age 57, who moved to Cheyenne from Rockford, Ill. "But I really like it."

Cheyenne got its start in 1867, when the Union Pacific Railroad announced plans to pass through what was then a Dakota Territory outpost. More than 4,000 people set up camp before the first piece of track was laid. The settlement quickly gained a reputation for lawlessness. A mix of cowboys, gamblers and fortune hunters filled Cheyenne's streets, where "every other building was a saloon," according to the convention bureau's history of the city.

In the late 1800s, Cheyenne's large stockyards were the end of the line for cowboys driving herds of cattle across the West to be loaded onto Union Pacific trains. (With about 800 employees, the railroad remains the city's largest private employer.) Although the cattle pens have disappeared, the city has preserved its Western culture. Reminders include cowboy-clothing stores and eight-foot-tall cowboy boots painted whimsically by local artists and placed in front of museums, the train depot and other buildings. Gunslinger shootouts are held downtown daily in summer for tourists.

### Natural Air Conditioning

At an elevation of 6,100 feet, Cheyenne stays relatively cool in the summer. Temperatures seldom exceed 90 degrees during the day and typically fall into the 50s at night. Winds in Wyoming are the strongest of any state in the U.S., averaging nearly 13 miles per hour annually, reports the University of Wyoming.

"We haven't turned on the air conditioning in three years because of the breeze through the house when we open the windows," says Scott Allen, 74, a former researcher for the National Institutes of Health who retired to Cheyenne in 2005. That said, the same breezes that cool area homes in the summer make for winters that are "windy and raw," says Mr. Whitehead, the transplant from Illinois.

A lawyer, Mr. Whitehead visited numerous cities, small and large, during his time as a tour accountant for rock-music acts. Cheyenne and surrounding Laramie County, he says, eventually rose to the top of his list of possible retirement destinations -- in large part because of the low cost of living. There's no state income tax. (About half of Wyoming's budget comes from mineral leases.) The mean tax bill for a single family home in the city of Cheyenne in 2007 was \$1,183.27. In all, Wyoming's 515,000 residents have the eighth-lowest state and local tax burden in the country, according to the Tax Foundation, a research group based in Washington, D.C.

"The tax structure was a huge attraction," Mr. Whitehead says.

### Homes on the Range

Average housing prices have increased more than 50% in Cheyenne and outlying areas since 2000, but the rate of increase has slowed, and city housing prices remain lower than the U.S. median, according to Wendy Volk, a Cheyenne real-estate broker. At the end of 2007, the cost of a new home within Cheyenne averaged \$175,000, while houses just outside the city, which usually are bigger and have large lots, averaged \$259,000.

Ms. Volk says she has seen an increase in retirees moving to Cheyenne in the past several years. Some buy homes in Laramie County and designate them as their principal residences, while keeping second

homes elsewhere -- again, to take advantage of low tax rates.

"It's interesting to see how many people who come here have been taxed almost to death," she says.

Growth is evident in the area. Cheyenne has its own symphony, a regional airport with seven flights daily to Denver, a gleaming new library and an expanding junior college. The Cheyenne Regional Medical Center now has 150 doctors and recently opened a \$12 million hospice center.

A military presence, the F.E. Warren Air Force Base, helps keep employment rates stable. Jobs in federal, state and county offices account for about 28% of the city's work force. The Cheyenne Chamber of Commerce has been trying to diversify its employer base -- and companies are hiring, says Dale Steenbergen, the chamber's president and chief executive. "If 100 people walked into my office, I could find jobs for all of them," he says.

For many, the city is best known for its Frontier Days, a 10-day event each July billed as the world's largest outdoor rodeo. About 85,000 people travel to Cheyenne for "The Daddy of 'Em All," which includes a carnival, art show, parades, melodramas and music stars. The rodeo itself features top cowboys attracted by some of the largest purses on the circuit. For the city, the 103-year-old event is an economic windfall, providing hotels, restaurants and bars with most of their annual revenue. About 2,500 area residents work as volunteers at the rodeo, serving -- among other duties -- three free pancake breakfasts.

Mr. Dix, the former Maryland resident, says he has helped welcome visitors from as far away as Europe during Frontier Days. After retiring from his job as a systems analyst for IBM, he researched communities in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming as possible retirement homes. While touring the West, he and Ms. Ellis drove through Cheyenne and found themselves drawn to the town's affable nature.

"You get to know people very easily," Mr. Dix says.

--Ms. Capell is a writer in Idaho.

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### Cheyenne at a Glance

**Population:** 55,731

**Population (Laramie County):**  
85,384

**Median age:** 37

**Percent of population age 65  
and older:** 12%

**Total area of Laramie County:**  
2,685 square miles

**People per square mile,  
Laramie County:** 31.8

**Avg. wind speed:** 12.6 miles  
per hour

**Average high and low January  
temperatures:** 37 degrees/  
15 degrees

**Average high and low July  
temperatures:** 82 degrees/  
53 degrees

**Pct. of population over age 25  
with a college degree:** 23.5%

**Avg. monthly rent for two- or  
three-bedroom house:** \$860

**Median household income:**  
\$44,790

**Number of concerts annu-  
ally by Cheyenne Symphony  
Orchestra:** 6

**Golf courses:** 5

**Increase in passenger board-  
ings at Cheyenne Regional  
Airport, 2007 vs. 2005:** 26%

**Avg. hotel room rate:** \$89.29

**Number of city police  
officers:** 96

Sources: Census Bureau; Cheyenne Area Convention and Visitors Bureau; Federal Bureau of Investigation; National Weather Service; Wyoming Center for Business and Economic Analysis

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Write to Perri Capell at [encore@wsj.com](mailto:encore@wsj.com)<sup>6</sup>

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