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UNTAMED LANDS,
THE COWBOY SPIRIT
AND FRONTIER FUN



DISCOVER

MAGIC CITY

*FROM ITS LEGENDARY
FRONTIER DAYS TO ITS
ENDLESS ROLLING PRAIRIES,
CHEYENNE, WYOMING,
ENCHANTS AND DELIGHTS.*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY **SCOTT SCHILLER**

Horseback riders gallop through the countryside on Terry Bison Ranch.
Inset: Eight-foot-tall boot sculptures decorate downtown Cheyenne.

OF THE PLAINS



1867. THE WEST WAS YOUNG

and the Union Pacific Railroad was swiftly advancing across the Dakota and Wyoming territories. Along the way, supply depots and base camps sprang to life out of the dusty plains seemingly overnight. Cheyenne, Wyoming, which was declared the territory's capital two years later, was one such place.

Initially a rough-and-rumble railroad camp with a reputation for being as wild as they come, Cheyenne attracted all manner of bandits, gunslingers, outlaws and lawmen (including the legendary Wild Bill Hickok). In short order, it became the most well-respected and largest town in Wyoming. The transformation was so stunning, people took to calling it the Magic City of the Plains.

I can attest that Cheyenne's magic remains. In fact, Wyoming as a whole seems like one of the few places in America where an authentic Old West spirit is still alive and kicking.

I visited the capital for the first time to check out Frontier Days, a 10-day Western celebration and outdoor rodeo. Nicknamed "The Daddy of 'em All," Frontier Days has been held every July, without fail, for the past 120 years.

THE CITY I arrived one day before the event so I would have time to explore. After having a healthy dose of black coffee at the hotel, I headed out for a walking tour of the vibrant downtown.

Upon reaching the Cheyenne Depot Plaza, I took time to observe the beautifully renovated depot for which the plaza is named. Nowadays, the building houses a museum offering exhibits and interactive displays about railroad history and the rail industry.

It was here, in the wide-open plaza, that I caught a ride in a horse-drawn carriage.



A HORSE-DRAWN CARRIAGE is among the best ways to tour downtown Cheyenne. The Nagle Warren Mansion (left) was built by a wealthy cattle baron. Today, it's a charming bed-and-breakfast.



What a great way to see the sights! Our first stop, Boot Barn at the Wrangler, was just across the way. The shop has the largest selection of Western clothing, boots, belts and gear I'd ever seen. Expert hat shapers on staff will happily custom-fit any of the 500 cowboy hats they sell.

Next on my tour was the Plains Hotel, a National Historic Landmark that dates to 1911 and showcases a gorgeous (and massive) mission-style panel skylight in the lobby.

I was enjoying the rhythmic

clip-clop as the horses pulled along my carriage to the elegant Nagle Warren Mansion. Built during the 1880s, back when Cheyenne was the richest city of its size in the world, it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and now operates as a bed-and-breakfast.

Just a few streets over is the must-see Nelson Museum of the West, dedicated to preserving cowboy, Native American, *charro* (traditional Mexican horsemen), and military cultural artifacts. Its 11,000 square feet of gallery space is also home to a quite remarkable collection of Western art.

Finally, no visit to Cheyenne would be complete without a stop at the Wyoming State Capitol. In addition to being one of the most important buildings in the state, it is a notable structure along the city's skyline, with a shining dome of 24-carat gold leaf.

The dome will be covered with scaffolding until mid-2019 while restoration is completed, ensuring future generations will enjoy the shimmering sight in all its glory.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A herd of some 2,500 bison roam Terry Bison Ranch; a mission-style skylight graces the lobby of the historic Plains Hotel; *Hard to Leave*, one of many statues in the Cheyenne Depot Plaza; a Native American woman in traditional dress rides in the Frontier Days parade; custom hat-shaping at the Boot Barn in the Wrangler building; Wyoming's capitol dome gleams in the morning sun.



THE COUNTRY Just a half-hour's drive west of town is the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest, in which the Vedaauwoo Recreation Area lies. Pronounced vee-duh-woo and stemming from an Arapaho word that means "Land of the Earthborn Spirits," Vedaauwoo was a spiritual place for Native Americans. Today, climbers and campers flock to the unusual rock formations, which have been worn smooth by wind, ice and rain and rise some 500 feet.

Minutes away, at the foot of the Laramie Mountains, stands Curt Gowdy State Park. With 3,000 acres of varied landscapes and three reservoirs, this popular park offers extensive hiking and biking trails, as well as fishing, kayaking and tubing adventures.

I stopped by the Terry Bison Ranch, whose 27,500 acres are home to approximately 2,500 head of American bison, for an authentic Western experience. Fun fact: In 1910, then-Senator and ranch owner F.E. Warren hosted Teddy Roosevelt for dinner and drinks. Today, visitors can stay overnight or just for the day to enjoy wagon and horseback rides, concerts or a hearty meal at the Senator's Steakhouse and Saloon (its burgers are consistently voted among the best in the West).

But the ranch is perhaps most known for its train ride into the prairie, where folks are encouraged to touch and feed the bison. They are impressive beasts: Mature bulls can weigh up to 2,000 pounds and reach 6 feet tall.

It is a humbling experience to get so close to these giant creatures—and believe me, having your hand licked by a bison's huge blue-black tongue is not an experience you'll soon forget.

I ended the day with a leisurely trail ride atop my friendly steed, Jericho, through the sagebrush prairie. With the fading sun and the occasional rumble of thunder across the rolling hills, I felt as if I were living a scene from *Dances with Wolves*. Incidentally, bison

from this ranch were featured in that movie.

THE RODEO In a long-standing tradition, Frontier Days kicks off with an enormous (and free) pancake breakfast on the plaza. As with so many aspects of the event, volunteers help make it happen. (Frontier Days has a full-time staff of 15 and about 2,900 volunteers work throughout the year and during the event to ensure it all runs smoothly.)

The sun was shining warmly when I left my hotel at 9 to seek one of the few remaining shady spots along the Grand Parade route. It was exciting to take in some of the top marching bands in the nation, floats and dancers, and one of the largest assemblages of horse-drawn carriages anywhere in the world.

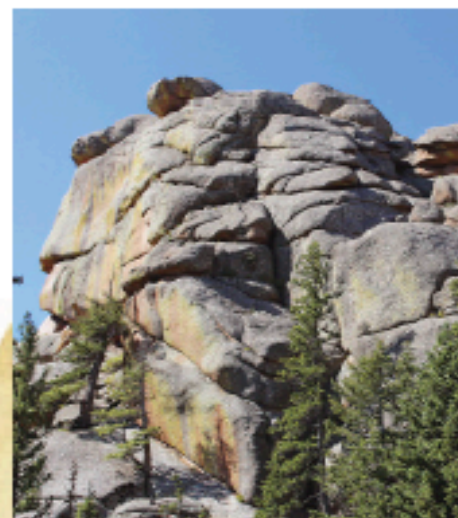
The warm smiles and the loud cheers filled me with pride; it was an honor to be a part of this event, even as a spectator.

Over the next 10 days, there would be games and food; a fair; rides; a powwow; a chuck wagon cook-off; Wild West shows with fancy Western riding; nightly performances by musicians and comedians; an art show; and, of course, the featured attraction: the world's biggest nationally sanctioned outdoor rodeo.

The rodeo spotlights thrilling competition in three categories. Roughstock events include bull riding, bareback bronc riding (a bronc, or bronco, is a half-tamed or wild horse), saddle bronc riding and rookie saddle bronc riding.

Timed events include steer wrestling, team roping, tie-down roping and women's barrel racing. A wild horse race and trick riding and roping competitions close out the day's events. It was thrilling to see the riders compete. I had never seen anything like it before in professional sports.

After weaving through the throng of people (total attendance for the event was 534,000), I was glad to find a seat in the stands.



1. VEDAUWOO RECREATION AREA

Rock climbers and hikers flock to this section of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest to explore the weathered outcrops of Sherman granite. fs.usda.gov/mbr



2. AMES MONUMENT

West of Cheyenne stands a 60-foot pyramid of pink granite. It was erected in 1882 as a tribute to brothers Oakes and Oliver Ames for their contributions to building the Transcontinental Railroad. At 8,247 feet elevation, marks the railroad's highest point (although the tracks have been relocated twice in the years since). wyohistory.org



3. CURT GOWDY STATE PARK

In the foothills of the Laramie Mountains, this park, named for Wyoming native and beloved sportscaster Curt Gowdy, has over 35 miles of hiking, biking and horseback riding trails. Fishing and canoeing are popular on the park's reservoirs. wyoparks.state.wy.us



4. NELSON MUSEUM OF THE WEST

The museum aims to preserve cowboy and Native American cultures, natural history, Western art and more. Rodeo, military and American Indian artifacts comprise the bulk of the museum's collection of more than 14,000 items. nelsonmuseum.com



5. TERRY BISON RANCH

This 27,500-acre ranch offers its visitors an array of experiences inspired by the Old West—from horseback rides to viewing and feeding bison from an open-air train. terrybisonranch.com



AT LEFT, FROM THE TOP: The author gets an up-close view of the action at the rodeo; barrel racing, one of many exhilarating Frontier Days competitions; a scene from the pow-wow at Indian Village.



Bronco riders get ready behind the chutes at Cheyenne's 121st annual Frontier Days.

“IT WAS THRILLING TO WATCH THE RIDERS COMPETE. I HAD NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT BEFORE IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS.”

With the bright sun high in the sky, the clouds of dust below and the countless cowboy hats in the crowd, the scene was as quintessentially Western as I could have hoped for. And the speed, strength and focus of the riders and ropers were truly extraordinary.

Of course, Native Americans have been part of the West since well before the railroad arrived, and they have played a prominent role in Frontier Days since 1898. Attending the powwow at Indian Village provided me with another fascinating experience. Witnessing

traditional dancers, musicians and storytellers deepened my appreciation for the earliest Americans and their struggle to retain the customs of their ancestors.

Cheyenne is indeed a magical city. Its roots reach deep into our nation's past, yet it also offers all of the comforts any modern traveler could want. If it's rugged adventure you seek, Cheyenne is a gateway to some of the loveliest landscapes and parks in America—if not the world.

If you're a history buff, there's enough of Old West and railroad

history to last a lifetime. And if art and culture are your passions, the city is brimming with intriguing museums, shops, galleries and historic homes. There's something for everyone.

If I am lucky, I will return to Cheyenne someday, to take in more of the town, to revisit the rodeo and to explore more of the countryside, either on foot or horseback. But my memories of this captivating place are so vivid, I know I can go back in my mind anytime, simply by slipping on my cowboy hat and boots. ☼