

Cheyenne: Celebrating the West

by Sandy Perlic

Take a look at the slogan of any city's tourism website and you'll get a pretty good idea what that city thinks it has to offer tourists. Estes Park, with its prime location near Rocky Mountain National Park, entices visitors to "Get into the Real Rockies." Glenwood Springs invites visitors to "Soak it all in." And Central City promises "The Richest Square Mile on Earth." So it should come as no surprise that with a slogan like "Live the Legend," Cheyenne, Wyoming, is all about the old West.

When my kids and I headed up to Cheyenne recently, it didn't take long to get that message. Flanking a large public square in front of the visitor's center are two enormous (and enormously colorful) cowboy boots. The eight-foot-tall footwear is a familiar sight at many landmarks around town.

The visitor's center shares space with the Cheyenne Depot museum in the restored railroad depot. The historic building is graced with a tall clocktower and arched windows and doors on the bottom floor. It was here that we purchased our tickets for a tour of the city.

Outside, we headed for the bright red trolley and settled into a couple of red cushioned benches. Our guide, Ron, wore the requisite jeans and cowboy boots, and wasted no time in trying to persuade us of Cheyenne's charms.

A transplant of several years, Ron declared he had no interest in moving again. "We've found home," he said. "Once you get past the wind, you've got it made."

We soon embarked on a drive by most of the interesting and historical sites in town, with Ron's narrative providing insight into Cheyenne's roots.

The town traces its beginnings to 1867, when workers settled the area to complete the Union Pacific Railroad. In its early years the town lived up to the image of the "Wild West," with 17 saloons accounting for half the buildings in town. The city was honeycombed with a network of underground tunnels that, among other things, provided a discreet way to visit the ladies who lived upstairs at each of the saloons. "This was a wild and woolly place in its day," Ron said.

But as the town grew, it attracted a wealthier citizenship and more cultural opportunities. The railroad provided a means to bring people and goods into the town, and a way to ship things out. Many ranchers settled the area, and the business of raising cattle began in earnest. Meanwhile, an opera house was built in 1882 and the "Cheyenne Club," a club for wealthy gentlemen, was established.

"By July 1988," Ron said, "Cheyenne became the wealthiest city per capita in the nation."

Some of the other interesting tidbits Ron shared were: Route 30, now Lincolnway/16th Street, was the first interstate in the nation. And the Plains Hotel had the distinction, in 1911, of being the first hotel to put a telephone in each of its guest rooms.

Although time passed and the town grew, Cheyenne never lost sight of its roots. Its largest tourist attraction, Cheyenne Frontier Days, has been an annual event since 1897. The 10-day celebration in late July is known for its rodeo, concerts and other entertainment.

Ron related all the facts and figures about the town in an easy, conversational way, but it was his anecdotes about the town's colorful past and its characters that truly brought the town to life. There was the story about the mason whose partner accidentally fell to his death. Fearing he'd be accused of murder, he covertly carried his deceased friend to the top of the church tower they'd been working on and encased him in the brickwork. Or the story of the mayor who had five houses on the same block built for his daughters so they'd have a place

to live once they married. Only none of them ever moved in.

In the end, once we'd finished our enjoyable trolley tour and spent time at many of Cheyenne's historical sites and museums, we had to agree with the town's website: the Old West is what Cheyenne does best.

Sidebar

If you go:

After checking out most of the attractions that our tour guide recommended, here's our picks for what to do in Cheyenne:

Cheyenne Street Railway Trolley – Don't miss this fun narrated tour. Departs from 121 West 15th Street, with the option to get off and reboard at museums and other points of interest around town. May through the end of September; call (307)778-3133 for a schedule.

\$10/adults and \$5/child ages 2-12. An extra \$5 per adult will pay for admission into the Cheyenne Depot Museum, Nelson Museum of the West, and Cheyenne Frontier Days Old West Museum, a savings of \$10 over the regular admission.

Wyoming State Museum – From geology and natural history to art, this museum's absorbing displays are worth a look. As a bonus, their hands-on history room will keep the kids entertained playing dress-up, riding the "horse," and playing in the teepee. Located at 2301 Central Ave. May through October, 9 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.; November through April, weekdays 9 a.m. - 4:30 p.m., Saturdays 10 a.m. - 2 p.m.; closed Sundays and holidays. Admission is free.

Cheyenne Frontier Days Old West Museum – Even if you're not crazy about Frontier Days, there's a lot to see and do at this museum. Check out their collection of horsedrawn vehicles and western art, watch a video or browse the colorful, attention-grabbing displays of rodeo events. For kids, there's a learning center and plenty of hands-on activities such as making beaded bracelets or necklaces, and stamping leather. Located at 4610 Carey Avenue.

Weekdays 9 a.m. - 5 p.m., weekends 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. Admission is \$6/adult, children 12 and under are free.

Nagle Warren Mansion – Stop into this lovingly-restored 1880s house for English High Tea, or stay the night in one of the bed-and-breakfast's charming rooms. Luxurious wallpapers, stained glass windows, and inlaid floors are some of the features of this beautifully-appointed mansion. Located at 222 E. 17th Street. High Tea served Friday and Saturdays from 2-4 p.m., \$9.95/person plus tax. Rooms from \$149/night. Call (800)811-2610 or see

www.naglewarrenmansion.com/reservations.html for reservations.

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