



Wild West's lingering spirit

Wyoming may be famous for cowboys but **Frank Walker** finds locals like nothing better than a good ghost story.

The receptionist at the grand old Plains Hotel in Cheyenne, Wyoming, apologises as she points towards the lift that will take me to my room on the fourth floor. Everything about this 98-year-old elegant hotel built by cattle barons is big – the foyer lit by a huge chandelier, enormous leather armchairs, the massive buffalo head over the vast open fireplace – but she has a warning about the lift.

“Sorry, but the elevator is quite small and only big enough for two people with their luggage at a time,” she says.

“They made them that way deliberately so cowboys wouldn’t be able to ride their horses into the elevator and take them up to gallop around the upper floors.”

Wyoming outlaws Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid have long passed on but coming out of the little lift are today’s version of Wild West rough riders – two fierce-looking, hairy, heavily tattooed, leather-jacketed bikers.

Their vests bear the insignia of Vietnam veterans but one of them looks too young to have been in that ugly war. A badge reads, “In memory of over 58,044 brothers who never returned, Vietnam 59-75”. It turns out they are like our Legacy, raising money on their long rides for relatives and friends who were killed or continue to suffer from the war. They are in Cheyenne for a convention. Outside the hotel where cowboys once tied up their horses, more than 50 Harley-Davidsons are lined up, US flags flying proudly.

The next morning over breakfast, hotel staff readily volunteer to tell the story of the resident ghosts. Back in the roaring 1920s, a local woman called Rosie was in the bridal suite on her honeymoon with her new husband, who said he would just duck down to the bar to get some champagne. Rosie waited and waited. Finally she went down to the bar only to find he had got the champagne but gone up to another room with a lady of easy virtue he’d met in the bar.

Rosie stormed up to her room, grabbed her husband’s pistol, then forced her way into the lady’s room on the fourth floor, catching her new husband with his pants down. She

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promptly shot them both dead, went back to her room and shot herself.

Hotel staff claim that since then, Rosie’s ghost,

dressed in white, has been seen walking the hotel corridors weeping, while the ghost of her husband is occasionally seen flitting about the fourth floor. Hang on. That’s my floor. I didn’t hear any bumps in the night or see a ghost with his pants down but the staff insist that one Halloween night in the foyer, a mannequin dressed up in red bordello clothing was knocked to the ground by a ghostly white figure.

Americans sure do love relishing their past, even the more sordid bits.

Across the road from the hotel is the original Wranglers store, filled with cowboy hats and boots. The sales lady proudly says the building used to be a bordello and shows me the windows where the ladies displayed their wares. The shop is offering a special “Stinky Boot Trade-In”, where you can get \$20 off new boots if you hand in your old ones. When I asked if this is part of President Obama’s “Cash for Clunkers” scheme, which offers cash for trading in old gas-guzzler vehicles for new fuel-efficient models, the sales lady frowns and through gritted teeth declares: “We wouldn’t take his money.” Wyoming, home of Dick Cheney, is clearly not Obama country.

Cheyenne began in 1867 as a graveyard for men killed during Indian attacks on the Union Pacific railroad. The first building was a bordello and it was a wild town. It grew on cattle money to become the capital of Wyoming.

The best time to visit is the second half of July during the two-week-long Frontier Days, the world’s largest outdoor rodeo and celebration of all things cowboy.

In June next year, the 150th anniversary of the Pony Express will be celebrated by re-creating the long ride of the mail carriers from Missouri to California. It will pass through Casper, about 260 kilometres north of Cheyenne, which also has an excellent museum on the Oregon Trail, the original settlers’ wagon train path that passed through where Casper now stands. Many walked the whole way pulling a cart and the museum has rigged up a cart on a treadmill for visitors to pull to show just how hard it was.

To the north lies Buffalo Bill country, where just about everything centres on the Wild West showman who became “very good friends” with Queen Victoria. William F Cody would sit on the porch of the historic Sheridan Inn holding



auditions for his show before adjourning to the huge bar that was constructed in England of oak and mahogany. And, of course, the Sheridan has a resident ghost. Katie Arnold lived and worked there all her life as a seamstress. Her ashes were interred in the wall of her third-floor room and staff say her benevolent presence is felt looking after the old hotel, twitching curtains and switching lights on and off.

Further west at Cody, a town built by Buffalo Bill for people on the way to Yellowstone National Park, is the huge Buffalo Bill Historical Centre, containing five museums and art galleries of the Old West. The town stages a gunfight at 6pm outside the old-fashioned Irma Hotel – named after Buffalo Bill’s youngest daughter – where the showman used to stay. And surprise, the old pub is said to have the ghost of Buffalo Bill himself. Bill Cody had an eye for the ladies and a few years ago, a frightened flight attendant appeared in her underwear in the breakfast room claiming a ghost had entered her bed. Her room was subsequently booked out for months.

The writer was a guest of VAustralia and Wyoming Tourism.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

V Australia offers direct, daily flights from Sydney to Los Angeles from \$1145 return and arranges connecting flights to Wyoming. See vaustralia.com.au for current specials.

WHERE TO STAY

Large rooms at the Plains Hotel, Wyoming, start from \$US109 (\$120) but book well in advance for peak times of Frontier Days in July. See theplainshotel.com.

The booking agency ZUJI.com.au can arrange great package deals to Wyoming.

See wyomingtourism.org for accommodation details and diary of events.





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Western charm
... (above) a diner
in Wyoming's
capital city,
Cheyenne; a
patriotic cowboy.
Photos: Getty Images



Free from fees, but at what cost?

THE SWITCHED-ON TOURIST
DAVID CARROLL

EVERYONE enjoys getting something for nothing, which is why I paid attention last month when online travel agency Expedia temporarily dropped its airline booking fees.

Clearly I wasn't the only one because Expedia claims the initiative has helped it attract one million visitors and proved (just in case you were in any doubt) that Australian travellers are passionate in their dislike of fees. In the face of such enthusiasm it has permanently scrapped the charges. In the meantime, rival agency Zuji had already done the same, in response to Expedia's no-fees promotion.

While no doubt grateful, travellers recognise that online travel agents, just like traditional travel agents, have to make a dollar to survive. So why would an agency cut its fees? The idea is that by dropping the fees the site will attract more customers, and once a person has booked a low-margin flight they are likelier to then buy a higher-margin product such as a hotel night or car rental.

In theory, the lost fee also could be partially offset by the increase in airline commissions that would flow from a jump in international flight bookings.

In Expedia's case, however, it has never charged a booking fee on international flights to or from Australia anyway (just domestic flights and international journeys between two points outside Australia).

Given Expedia's and Zuji's sister sites in the US have already run similar promotions with exactly the same outcome, their respective decisions to wave goodbye to airline booking fees in Australia weren't much of a surprise. The question is whether other online travel agencies will follow suit.

In essence, that's what has happened in the US, where the trend to drop booking fees was started almost two years ago by Priceline, a website mostly focused on hotel sales. After watching Priceline's flight bookings grow nicely and seeing airlines improve the quality of their own direct-booking

services, Expedia finally decided to match the move earlier this year. Its main rivals had no choice but to do the same or wave goodbye to customers. One online agency even upped the ante by ditching some hotel and car rental fees.

It would be nice if the same thing were to happen here, but unfortunately the Australian market is a little different from the US. For a start, Expedia may be a behemoth in North America, but here it's a much smaller player and lags behind rivals such as Webjet and Flight Centre, both of which have declined to go fee-free.

While Flight Centre has indicated it may consider reviewing the overall size of its booking fee, Webjet is taking a hard line, claiming there are strong reasons it attracts more travellers. For a start, its technology makes it easier for visitors to find, compare and choose flights. It also offers a broad product range. Within Australia it features all four domestic airlines, whereas Expedia doesn't include low-cost Tiger Airways or Jetstar's rapidly growing domestic and international networks.

So far its confidence seems justified. While Expedia's promotion may have lured it a million visitors, Webjet is reporting no effect on its growth rate. Indeed, it claims the percentage of its visitors who booked flights during the past month has increased.

Airline passengers are price sensitive, however, and Webjet's charges are not exactly trivial. It levies booking fees of \$19.95 (domestic) and \$29.95 (international), plus additional non-optional "price guarantee" fees of \$9.95 and \$19.95 respectively. So it can't afford to be complacent. Nevertheless, it is adamant travellers will remain happy to pay because of the services and choice it provides.

Only time will tell if that can hold true in the long term.

David Carroll's column on new travel technology appears monthly in *Travel & Indulgence*.