

# Ride 'em, cowboy

By Katherine Rodeghier  
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CHEYENNE, Wyo. — I admit I'm no hard-core rodeo fan, but when I learn I'll be in Wyoming in late July, I can't pass up a chance to attend Cheyenne Frontier Days, the nation's largest outdoor rodeo and western festival.

Sitting in the stands waiting for the bull riding to begin, I figure I'll stick around just long enough to see what this sport is about.

Before you can say yippee ki-ya, I'm on my feet hootin' and hollerin' with the rest of the crowd. Who knew watching a bull rider attempt to hang on to a 1,800-pound bucking beast for all of eight seconds could be so thrilling?

These bulls are BIG and they are MEAN, bucking so wildly that often all four hooves are off the ground. Those eight seconds seem like an eternity. When the favorite on the Championship Bull Riding circuit — a guy from Argentina — goes airborne after less than two seconds, the excitement in the stands soars. Suddenly, the \$100,000 world champion prize is up for grabs and riders who thought they didn't have a shot are looking beyond danger at dollar signs.

I find an element of thrill in all the rodeo events, but there's logic behind the bronc riding, cattle

More than a rodeo, Cheyenne Frontier Days celebrates culture, heritage of Old West

roping, steer and calf wrestling — all tasks required of working cowboys. But riding a bull? Insanity. I can only imagine it began with a bunch of cowboys seated around a campfire after a long day on the range and a few too many adult beverages, and one says, "I betcha I kin ride that thing."

## 'Daddy of 'em All'

A rodeo was the focus of Cheyenne's first gathering back in 1897, but the annual event now stretches to 10 days in late July and includes much more. Frontier Days draws 200,000 people to ticketed rodeos and evening concerts at Frontier Park in Wyoming's capital, a city of 60,000. Thousands more attend free events downtown: parades, pancake breakfasts, carriage rides and a gunfighter shootout.

Frontier Days bills itself as the "Daddy of 'em All," a term it trademarked. Ten rodeo events sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association draw about 1,500 contestants. They ride, rope



COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Weapons are loaded, but with blanks, for free shows put on by the Cheyenne Gunslingers.

and wrestle, vying for a \$1 million purse, a far cry from the \$25 in prize money back in 1897. The action takes place in the world's largest outdoor rodeo arena, measuring more than two football fields in length with seating on two sides for 20,000.

The best seats sit just above the chutes where animals are penned before cowboys mount them, the metal gate swings open and the contest between man and beast begins. Visitors walk onto the arena and can go inside the chutes on free, 40-minute Behind the Chutes Tours that also go behind the scenes for a close look at the animals in their corrals.

## More than rodeo

Some visitors never see a rodeo during Frontier Days because there's so much else to do. Concerts fill arena seats most nights. Headliners this year include Journey, Alan Jackson, Luke Bryan, Rasal Flatts and Toby Keith.

American Indian performers have been part of Frontier Days since 1898. In the Indian Village, a dedicated space inside Frontier Park, costumed members of several tribes perform authentic dances, play music and tell stories in free shows meant to educate



COURTESY OF CHEYENNE FRONTIER DAYS

Bucking broncs are just one of the thrilling rodeo events during Cheyenne Frontier Days.

the audience about Indian heritage and culture. Stands sell Indian tacos and other foods, and gift shops display Indian pottery, turquoise jewelry and leather goods.

Kids and adults find entertainment on the midway with carnival rides for all ages. Food vendors sell everything from typical festival fare to barbecue platters and steak dinners. Everyone, it seems, wears a cowboy hat and boots, the men invariably in jeans, the women in skirts or short shorts. At night, the Buckin' A Saloon opens to the over-21 crowd with music, dancing and libations.

In the northeast corner of Frontier Park, the Cheyenne Frontier Days Old West Museum remains open year round. It's noted for its large collection of horse-drawn carriages as well as displays of western art and exhibits on the history of Frontier Days. There's an interactive section just for children.



COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Crowds cheer on a rider as he desperately tries to stay on a bucking bronco during Cheyenne Frontier Days.

## Flipping for pancakes

One look at the long line for the free pancake breakfast and I'm ready to bolt, but a Cheyenne native takes me by the elbow and assures me no one waits longer than 20 minutes.

I find the end of the queue and move at a steady pace until I hit the pancake breakfast's rapid-fire assembly line. One person hands me a napkin, another a plate and so it goes: fork, stack of pancakes, butter, syrup sluiced from a gallon jug, slice of ham, coffee, milk



COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Everything from festival foods to a steak dinner can be purchased on the Midway in Frontier Park.

... GO. Before I know it, I'm seated at makeshift bleachers made of planks donated by the local lumber yard and am chowing down on flapjacks while watching a country

band. The local Kiwanis Club, which puts on the breakfast on three mornings of Frontier Days, has the routine down pat, serving 100,000

## If you go

For information and tickets:  
(800) 227-6336, cfdrodeo.com

Dates in 2013: July 19-28

Getting there: Flights to Cheyenne Regional Airport from Chicago are limited and none are nonstop. A bigger selection of flights can be booked to Denver International Airport, 90 minutes south of Cheyenne.

Parking: At Frontier Park, \$10. A Park-n-Ride shuttle service, \$10 per car, includes gate admission and is located off I-25 and Happy Jack Road.

Where to stay: Lodging during Frontier Days tends to book early. For a list of accommodations, contact Visit Cheyenne, (800) 426-5009, Cheyenne.org, or Wyoming Tourism, (307) 777-7777, wyomingtourism.org.

- Holiday Inn Cheyenne, I-80, two miles south of downtown Cheyenne, (888) 465-4329, holidayinn.com, from \$193.

- The Plains Hotel, 1911 boutique hotel downtown, (866) 275-2467, theplainshotel.com, from \$219.

Where to eat: A wide variety of dining options are available at Frontier Park. Among those in downtown Cheyenne:

- Sandford's Grub and Pub, 115 E. 17th St. One of a small chain of casual restaurants popular in the West, (307) 634-3381, thegrubandpub.com.

- Shadows Pub and Grill, 115 W. 15th St. Casual pub in the historic Cheyenne Depot where Ernest Hemingway once dined, (307) 634-7625, shadowspubandgrill.com.



COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

The Grand Parade features several equestrian entries, including a trick roper.

pancakes to 30,000 people gathered in Depot Plaza in the heart of downtown Cheyenne.

But the pleasure isn't just in eating pancakes, but in watching them being made. Cooks manning

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COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

The rodeo events during Cheyenne Frontier Days are held in the world's largest outdoor rodeo arena.

massive grills flip the flap-jacks, yell “catcher” and toss them with the trajectory of a fly ball at Wrigley Field. Boy Scouts, and other volunteers, make a run for them, catching them — they hope — on big trays. The scene makes for lots of laughs from both the spectators and participants.

On four other mornings, the Grand Parade kicks off from the Capitol and winds through downtown. Over a mile long, it lasts about 90 minutes and features horseback riders, folks in period dress riding in old carriages, bands, antique cars, precision drill teams and military units. A float with a wild west saloon and dance hall girls gets a big applause.

Cheyenne was a key link in the Union Pacific Railroad, the nation’s first transcontinental railroad, and the Union Pacific Depot is the last of the grand 19th-century depots remaining on the line. A downtown landmark open year round, the rosy sandstone building was completed in 1887 in Richardsonian Romanesque style. A map of the railroad is embedded in

the terrazzo floor of the Art Deco lobby with its original wood benches. A museum is devoted to railroad history.

Free horse-drawn carriage rides depart from the depot, as do narrated tours sold by the Cheyenne Street Railway Trolley. Passengers can stay aboard for the entire 90-minute tour or hop off and back on the trolley at stops along the way, including the Capitol, Historic Governors’ Mansion, Nelson Museum of the West and the Botanic Gardens.

Frontier Days visitors strolling downtown might be surprised to see a gunfight taking place, but it’s all in good fun and the bullets are blanks. The Cheyenne Gunslingers stage free shows depicting Old West justice from the 1890s, complete with jail breaks and “hangings.”

Another free attraction, always popular with Frontier Days visitors, has been canceled this year. The aerial performance by the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds was a victim of the sequester budget cuts.

• *Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by the Wyoming Office of Tourism.*