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HAVENS | THE TETON VALLEY IN IDAHO; With Jackson Priced Out, a Nearby Valley Takes Off

By MATTHEW PREUSCH
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RUSTY and Karen Vest and their three children journeyed to the Rocky Mountain West from their home in Tennessee 12 years ago for a grand loop through Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. Their vacation ended with a week in a rented house at the head of the Teton Valley in Idaho.

After that trip, Mr. Vest, who manages a building materials company, found himself frequently returning to this junction of Idaho and Wyoming, which some call Wydaho, to fish for trout and to unwind. "I've toured all over the U.S. and never really found a place I wanted to come back to again and again," he said as he ate fajitas with his wife at a community picnic one recent weekend in the Teton Valley.

But the valley and its largest town, Driggs, have a way of roping people in. It often happens the first time they get a clear view of the rugged and hypnotic Tetons to the east. So in 2006 the couple bought 120 acres of bottomland beside the Teton River, and they are reassembling a 180-year-old log cabin they shipped from Tennessee.

The Vests were back in the valley last month (their cabin is under construction), once again thrilled by the strutting sandhill cranes that come to the surrounding farm fields to feed after leaving their summer home at Yellowstone. "We love the wildlife -- the birds, the fish," Ms. Vest said. "That's what it's all about."

The Scene

The Teton Valley -- 15 miles wide and twice as long -- is cupped between the Big Hole Mountains to the west and the Tetons to the east, straddling the Idaho-Wyoming border. Along the valley floor, at 6,000 feet, the Teton River and its tributaries ramble through sagebrush, cottonwoods and irrigation lines.

In the 19th century the valley, then known as Pierre's Hole, was an annual gathering place for fur trappers. Later, it was settled by Mormon farmers and for decades was mainly an agricultural community full of conversation about potatoes, barley and ranching.

"It was hardscrabble here up until very recently," said Larry Young, a county commissioner.

Then, about five years ago, as people priced out of nearby Jackson, Wyo., looked elsewhere to build their second homes, a resort building boom started that has transformed the valley.

"Now we're working on the fifth gated golf course community," said Reid Rogers, president of the Teton Valley Chamber of Commerce.

The valley has a full-time population of about 7,800, but by the Fourth of July weekend, when most second-home owners arrive, there are at least twice as many people living there, and the place is also a year-round outdoor destination. "If I see more than five trucks at a stoplight, that's a traffic jam and I'm getting worried," Mr. Vest said. "And I'm getting a little worried with all this growth."

Driggs, the county seat and most populous town, is at the valley's center. It's there that Highway 33 intersects the road to Grand Targhee Resort, whose 2,000 acres of slopes served by lifts average about 500 inches of snow a year.

The small crossroads commercial strip consists of a few coffee shops, banks, outfitters, real estate offices and run-down car-repair shops. There is change afoot, however. You can now get biodegradable toilet paper at the Barrels and Bins organic grocery and a good Bordeaux at Alpine Wines.

"It's kind of a funny little town, when you drive in and see a dilapidated trailer on one side and a million-dollar home on the other," said Barbara Halmy Grundler, who, with her husband, Richard Grundler, spends most of the year in Driggs and the rest in Nantucket.

Most women don't wear makeup, and residents joke that a clean T-shirt (with sleeves, of course) is considered formal wear. But don't let the scarred and dusty boots fool you. They're just as likely to belong to a BlackBerry-addicted investment banker as to a dawn-to-dusk farmer.

If you want night life, that means a trip to the Knotty Pine Supper Club, "the Knotty," in Victor, where you can eat dinner and down a pint of Mighty Bison Brown Ale with the locals.

Pros

From Driggs, it's just a 15-minute drive east to trailheads that lead into the wildflower-filled gorges of the Jedediah Smith Wilderness area. Head in the other direction, and you'll find a network of single-track trails well-suited to mountain biking. And the Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks are just 45 and 90 minutes away.

Cons

Shopping is limited, as is medical care. To see a specialist means a one-hour drive to Idaho Falls, the nearest small city, or a trip across the Teton Pass to Jackson. During the long winters, cabin fever can set in if you aren't out in the snow.

Politically, local groups like Valley Advocates for Responsible Development and the Teton Valley Alliance battle over the pace and manner of development. "There are a lot of divisions," said Jeanne Anderson, who owns Dark Horse Books in Driggs. "Some about religion, some about how long you've been here, some about what you do."

The Real Estate Market

Residents like to say that the billionaires are forcing the millionaires out of Jackson and into Teton Valley.

The average sale price for a home has leapt from about \$248,000 in 2004 to \$326,000 last year, according to multiple listing service data compiled by Sotheby's International Realty in Driggs.

"People are coming from everywhere to get their little part of the West," said Tom Clinton, a partner in Potter Clinton Development, which is behind the 780-acre Teton Springs Resort near Victor and five other resort and housing projects throughout the valley. These range from a residential subdivision near Driggs to a resort with lots of up to 14 acres adjacent to a golf course designed by Greg Norman.

Typical second-home buyers are baby boomers involved in outdoor sports, generally professionals nearing retirement or already there.

Open land and building lots account for about half of all sales, as is evident at Potter Clinton's Teton Springs, where lots are marked with red and white signs bearing the names of their buyers: "The Horns, Cedar Rapids, IA" or "The Riggs, Sharon, CT."

In 1998, the assessed new construction for the year totaled \$3 million, said Mr. Young, the county commissioner. That figure is expected to reach \$300 million this year. Roads continue to finger into the foothills, ending in cul-de-sacs of modern log homes.

The weekly Teton Valley News keeps track of the number of new homes and subdivisions approved by the county. There were 4,500 approved lots in Teton County in 2004, Mr. Young said. If all pending building applications are approved, and Mr. Young expects they will be, there will be 16,000 lots by next year. "We grow subdivisions, not crops," said Ms. Anderson, the bookstore owner.

LAY OF THE LAND

POPULATION Teton County, which covers the valley, is home to 7,838 people, and Driggs, the county seat and largest settlement, has 1,253 people, according to 2006 estimates by the Census Bureau.

SIZE The county, with its three towns -- Tetonia, Driggs and Victor -- spread out along Route 33, is about 450 square miles.

WHO'S BUYING Active baby boomers from across the country.

GETTING THERE Commercial flights go to Idaho Falls Regional Airport, not much more than an hour's drive to the west, or Jackson Hole Airport in Wyoming, 45 minutes east over the Teton Pass.

WHILE YOU'RE LOOKING The Pines Motel & Guest Haus (105 South Main Street, 208-354-2774) in downtown Driggs is a 100-year-old log cabin that has simple rooms for between \$45 and \$90 a night. For full pampering, there is the 4,000-acre Teton Ridge Ranch (200 Valley View Road, Tetonia; 208-456-2650; www.tetonridge.com), which emphasizes outdoor activity. In winter, double-occupancy rooms range from \$545 a night to \$2,500 a night for a five-room lodge.

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