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HAVENS | RIDGWAY, COLO.

## A Mix of the Old and New West in the Rugged Rockies

By CINDY HIRSCHFELD

RIDGWAY, which sits hard up against the San Juans, the most rugged of Colorado's mountain ranges, used to be a place you just passed through on your way to the ski slopes of Telluride, a 45-minute drive away. Ridgway still serves as a portal to Colorado's southwest corner, but it has recently had a serious growth spurt, attracting young families priced out of Telluride as well as urban refugees and second-home buyers seduced by the gorgeous scenery, rural setting and smorgasbord of recreational options.

"Ridgway was asleep, but she's awake now," said Barbara Morss, a 31-year resident of the region who is an owner of the White Horse Saloon, a local beer-and-pool joint, and is volunteer president of the town's chamber of commerce.

Randy and Jennifer Charrette, in their mid-30s, moved to Ridgway in 2006 from the Boulder area after regularly visiting for eight years. They were in search of "more of a small-town setting" to raise their young son, Mr. Charrette said. The couple opened a bike shop, and immediately "the community was behind it 100 percent," he said.

The panorama of the serrated Sneffels Range to the southwest, dominated by 14,150-foot-high Mount Sneffels, and the Cimarron Range to the east rivals any in the state. "I've been everywhere in Colorado, and it's the most beautiful place I've ever seen," said Howard Owen, of Austin, Tex., who bought a six-bedroom house on 10 acres in the Log Hill Village area three years ago.

After selling a condo at Keystone ski resort in Colorado, Mr. Owen and his wife, Karen, chose Ridgway as a getaway and eventual retirement spot because of the relatively low elevation (just under 7,000 feet) and an attractive house price. "But the views were what sent us over the edge," he said.

### The Scene

Even as it shakes off its slumber, Ridgway, established in 1891 as the northern terminus of the Rio Grande Southern Railroad, retains an Old West flavor. Roads in the historic downtown — where east-west streets bear the first names of the town founders and north-south streets the names of their wives and daughters — are gravel, though paving is planned. Ranches, among them Ralph Lauren's 22,000-acre spread six miles from town, still occupy much of the county.

Residents form an eclectic stew of ranchers, environmentalists and outdoors fanatics, a modern-day Western mix. Elite mountaineers call the town home in between expeditions to Nepal. Green-building advocates carry on the legacy of the late actor and environmentalist Dennis Weaver, who built his solar-powered Earthship house there in 1989 (it is on the market, for \$3.3 million).

Full-time residents and second-home owners alike talk of a close-knit and welcoming sense of community.

“We have more friends here than we have in Florida, and we’ve been in Florida for 23 years,” said Pam Baker, who spends summers in Ridgway while her husband, Steve, an orthopedic surgeon, shuttles back and forth from Port Charlotte. “Our friends are ranchers, artists, teachers, cowboys.”

Carol Dahlstein, of Pasadena, Calif., appreciates the casual ease of social interaction when she and her husband spend time at the century-old farmhouse they bought in 1991. “I love it that people just drop by,” she said.

Ridgway, in other words, is not a place for misanthropes. Spend a few days in town — browsing the well-stocked shelves at Cimarron Books and Coffeehouse, combing through the half-dozen antiques stores, indulging in a chocolate martini and homemade cheesecake at Drakes Restaurant — and you’re apt to encounter familiar faces.

#### Pros

Recreational opportunities, many of them in the nearby Uncompahgre National Forest, fan out in every direction. In winter, residents go cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and snowmobiling. The nearby Ouray Ice Park lures ice climbers — and spectators — from around the country, while the San Juan Hut System draws hardy backcountry skiers. Downhill skiers and snowboarders head to Telluride or to Silverton, an hour south.

Summer options include hiking or mountain biking on miles of Forest Service trails, climbing 14,000-foot peaks, four-wheeling along some of Colorado’s hairiest roads, and boating and swimming in the reservoir at Ridgway State Park, just north of town.

The occasional craving for culture can be satisfied by a quick trip to Telluride. The Bakers say they drive over to attend ballet, classical music concerts and the Telluride Bluegrass Festival. But they relish retreating to Ridgway.

“We’re close enough to enjoy the amenities,” Ms. Baker said, “but we don’t have to live in the tourist town.”

#### Cons

Ridgway has a small grocery store, but the nearest large supermarket is in Montrose, 25 miles north. The closest movie theater is there, too. As for night life, an evening’s highlight for many can be getting to bed early to rest up for the next day’s outdoor adventure.

Air access via the Montrose airport is generally good, though schedules are reduced in spring and fall, Mr. Owen noted.

Overdevelopment is a fear in the area. Ridgway updated its master plan in 2000 to control growth and maintain it at 5 percent annually, said Greg Clifton, the town manager.

### The Real Estate Market

Alan Stapleton, managing broker at the Ridgway Real Estate Corporation, says that a dwindling supply of developable land in both the town and surrounding Ouray County has caused land prices to double in the last three years, and home values have appreciated 30 to 50 percent in that span.

But compared with Telluride, where the median price of a single-family house in 2006 neared \$2.3 million, according to Mike Shimkonis, an agent at Telluride Properties, a Ridgway bargain is not an oxymoron.

Despite Ridgway's historic commercial buildings, many houses in town were built in the last 20 years, with several new subdivisions. "It can be hard to find a nice home in town for under \$350,000," said Shari Gardner, an agent with ReMax Cimarron.

Vacation-home buyers gravitate toward areas with larger lots — with or without houses on them — several miles out of town, especially in Log Hill Village; the Divide Ranch and Club (formerly Fairway Pines), a 702-acre golf course development that recently changed hands; and Pleasant Valley. "The baby boomers and retirees are ready for more elbow room," said Mr. Stapleton, "but with a real strong community base."

House prices in these neighborhoods start in the mid-\$400,000s but can surge to the high six figures and beyond. According to several local agents, while houses under \$400,000 usually sell in two to six months, those listed at \$1 million plus can easily stay on the market for a year to 18 months.

As desirable homesites become harder to find and construction costs rise, buyers will increasingly seek out pre-existing and spec houses, Ms. Gardner believes.

"It used to be people would come and didn't even want to look at houses," she said. "They wanted to build their own homes. Spec homes have really caught on in the last two years."

### Lay of the Land

POPULATION 752, according to a 2005 estimate by the Census Bureau.

SIZE Two square miles.

LOCATION Southwest Colorado, around 300 miles driving from Denver.

**WHO'S BUYING** Second-home owners from Sun Belt states, retirees, telecommuters and workers in Telluride, all attracted by climate, price and a small-town lifestyle.

**GETTING THERE** Most people fly into the Montrose Regional Airport, 29 miles away, which has flights all year from Denver and, in winter, from several other major cities.

**WHILE YOU'RE LOOKING** The adobe-style Chipeta Sun Lodge and Spa (304 South Lena Street, 800-633-5868; [www.chipeta.com](http://www.chipeta.com)) offers 25 Southwestern-style rooms, suites and condos for \$95 to \$215 a night in winter. The lodge has a restaurant and is just a couple of blocks from the historic downtown. The Ridgway-Ouray Lodge & Suites (373 Palomino Trail, 800-368-5444; [www.ridgwaylodgeandsuites.com](http://www.ridgwaylodgeandsuites.com)) has 52 motel rooms for \$65 to \$95 a night.

The Doghouse BBQ Bistro (257 Sherman Street, 970-626-3193), a two-level restaurant and sports bar decked out in vintage mining equipment, is a popular spot for entrees like North Carolina-style pulled pork sandwiches (\$7.99) and dry-rub baby-back ribs (full rack, \$21.99). Wash it all down with one of 12 beers on tap (\$4 for a pint).

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