BY PETER CORBETT

Cody's Center of the West at 250

The Buffalo Nation exhibit captures the essence of the American bison.

Americans celebrating the 250th anniversary of our nation might be serious consider a visit to northwestern Wyoming to immerse themselves in the Western experience. Specifically, Cody, Wyoming, the town founded in 1896 by William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, the Wild West showman. The town of 12,000 at an elevation of 5,000 feet is about as Western as it gets. Wide open Wyoming is second only to Alaska in the lowest population density in America.

Cody is a gateway to the eastern entrance to Yellowstone National Park, a scenic 52-mile drive, away. Plus, there's plenty to do in Cody. Most notably, we suggest a visit to the Buffalo Bill Center of the West with its five museums. Other attractions include:

— Buffalo Bill's 1902 Irma Hotel, named for his daughter.
— Old Trail Town with a collection of restored cabins and buildings relocated from across Wyoming. That includes the Mud Spring Cabin, said to have been a hideout for Kid Curry and the Sundance Kid.
— The town's Nite Rodeo, staged nightly since 1938. Catch the rodeo from June 1 to August 31.

The Center of the West features the Buffalo Bill Museum, Cody Firearms Museum, Whitney Western Art Museum, Plains Indian Museum and the Draper Natural History Museum. Rebecca West, CEO of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, recommends spending more than one day to fully appreciate the overall collection. Admission of $23 for adults is good for two days.

"Our mission is to cultivate the enduring spirit of the American West," she said. "We're open, and we are really eager to have people come and experience the West here at the center."

The Center of the West put together a special exhibit, titled *Buffalo Nation*, for the semiquincentennial. It runs through January 30, 2028.

"We pick up where filmmaker Ken Burns left off with his 2023 documentary on the American bison.

In the early 1800s, North America had tens of millions of bison. By 1900 it was estimated that fewer than 1,000 survived a commercial slaughter.

"We wanted to look at the development of not only the American West, going way, way back, even into prehistoric times, and look at it through the lens of the American bison. That was the primary idea," West said.

Visitors are greeted by a large-scale audiovisual experience featuring bison and other interactive technology in the museums.

The Cody Firearms Museum offers an exhibit on the Winchester model 1873, a lever-action rifle known as "The Gun That Won the West." It was manufactured in New Haven, Connecticut, by the Winchester Repeating Arms Co., which is celebrating its 160th anniversary.

The rifle was popular in its day for its ease of use, firepower and a magazine of 14 rounds, said Danny Michael, Cody Firearms Museum curator.

"You could fire it as fast as you can work the lever action," he said.

Another featured exhibit is a collection of the *Arms of the (American) Revolution*. It runs through October 26.

Elsewhere in Cody, the Irma Hotel is worth a visit to stay overnight, dine or have a drink. The hotel's Silver Saddle Lounge has a cherry wood bar, a gift from Queen Victoria to Buffalo Bill. A mock shootout is staged most summer evenings outside the hotel.

Cody is a late bloomer of a Western town, established a few years before the dawn of the 20th century.

Prior to Cody's development, the Bighorn Basin had open-range cattle ranches, a few buffalo, a few Native Americans living there, said Brian Beauvais, Park County archivist. "Not a lot of fences. It was all government land and people roaming around and cowboys shooting each other and getting drunk and being bored as hell," he said.



The original Hawken rifle, knife and scabbard carried by legendary mountain man Jeremiah Johnson are on display at the Cody Firearms Museum at the Buffalo Bill Center for the West in Cody, Wyoming.

Courtesy Buffalo Bill Center of the West



Bill Cody's childhood home in LeClaire, Iowa, was moved by train to Cody in 1933. Courtesy Carol Highsmith Collection, Library of Congress

WHERE HISTORY MEETS THE HIGHWAY

FIRST STOP
Cody Country Visitor Center, 836 Sheridan Ave., is in the heart of downtown Cody in an historic building next to the City Park.
codychamber.org

A HANDFUL OF WESTERN MUSEUMS
Buffalo Bill Center of the West has five museums featuring exhibits on Buffalo Bill, Plains Indians, firearms, natural history and Western art.
centerofthewest.org

BUFFALO BILL'S HOTEL IN CODY
Visitors can dine, drink and stay at Buffalo Bill's Irma Hotel, built in 1902 and named for his daughter.
irmahotel.com

CASSIE'S WYOMING WATERING HOLE A Cody landmark for more than a century, Cassie's is a steakhouse, saloon and drive-through liquor store.
cassieswyoming.com

GET MESSY EATING TEXAS-STYLE BARBECUE
Fat Racks, a downtown BBQ joint, has been serving its baby back ribs, brisket and pulled pork since 2015. The pitmaster is from Denton, Texas. **fatracks.com**

KICK UP DUST AT A RECREATED 1890 TOWN
Old Trail Town features restored historic cabins and buildings rescued from around Wyoming. Open May 15 to September 30.
oldtrailtown.org

Over the years, Cody has become a hub of guest ranches. The Shoshone Lodge & Guest Ranch, with roots going back to 1924, is near Yellowstone's east entrance. The Double Diamond X Ranch became a dude ranch in 1931 on the South Fork of the Shoshone River. It has nine rustic cabins and offers guided fly-fishing outings.

Cody and Yellowstone also offer plenty of options for adventures.

"I just love the access to outdoor recreation here," said Beauvais, a Cody resident for 15 years. "It's just so easy to get outside and not have to deal with crowds like down in Colorado. You can just fish, hunt, go hiking, go kayaking or rafting on the river."

Peter Corbett has been exploring the West for the past half century and spent 35 years as an Arizona journalist.

