

Where Outdoors is the Way Up

by:Wendy Knight

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WEDGED between old stockyards and a boarded-up packing plant on the western edge of town, the kayak park is not easy to find. But it is just the kind of thing that draws outdoor enthusiasts to Ogden, Utah.

Of the 15 paddlers gathered at the park, on the Ogden River, one Saturday this spring, nearly half were from Salt Lake City, 35 miles away, while one man drove 90 miles from Provo for the day.

“Ogden is rocking right now,” said Craig Haaser, 44, a potter born and raised in Ogden who was among the paddlers at the park that day.

Set in the western foothills of the Wasatch Mountains, Ogden, a city of approximately 83,000 people, is fast gaining on places like Boulder, Colo., as a destination for extreme sports.

Miles of mountain biking wind through the Wasatch-Cache National Forest within minutes of downtown, and the Ogden and Weber Rivers provide ample opportunity for in-town kayaking and canoeing. In addition, Snowbasin Resort, the site for the 2002 Olympic downhill and super G ski events, is less than 20 miles up Ogden Canyon.

Among several new developments in town is the 125,000-square-foot Salomon Recreation Center that will include a climbing wall, a surf rider pool, a bowling alley, a dance studio, a wind tunnel and a Gold’s Gym. The center, which is to open this summer, is part of a multimillion-dollar entertainment and residential complex called the Junction that will occupy 20 formerly decrepit acres downtown.

While the 2002 Olympics helped raise Ogden’s profile, it is the efforts of city officials, outdoor-company executives and real estate developers that are transforming the town, a former railroad hub.

The city is poised to be “the high adventure Mecca of the country,” said Mayor Matthew Godfrey, 36, over a chopped salad at Rooster’s Brewing Company on Historic 25th Street.

The mayor, who took office in 2000, says he sees outdoor recreation as a means to a vibrant and financially sound community.