

Off to Resorts, and Carrying Their Careers



Kevin Moloney for The New York Times

Stephanie and Bill Faunce moved to Steamboat Springs, Colo., from Los Angeles to raise their two sons.

By JOHN LELAND
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- STEAMBOAT SPRINGS, Colo. — Time was you could tell the urban refugees in places like this: corporate achievers who quit the rat race to open a bed and breakfast or a candle shoppe.



The New Urban Refugees



Kevin Moloney for The New York Times

Jim Moylan, a lawyer, moved from Chicago and runs his business from Steamboat Springs.

Jim Moylan represents a new tribe in this bucolic mountain town, named for its loud sulfur spring. Mr. Moylan, 59, is a lawyer who specializes in securities and commodities work. When he moved from Chicago in 2003, he did not downscale his career for the small town, keeping his secretary and associates in Chicago and his clients around the country. He conducts his practice by fax and e-mail, just as he did in Chicago.

In Steamboat Springs, Mr. Moylan dug into local affairs, joining three city committees, the Rotary Club, his church finance council and the editorial board of the daily newspaper. "I just wanted to get involved in the community," Mr. Moylan said, sitting in a bookstore/wine bar off the town's main street.

As technology enables people to live and work wherever they want, increasingly they are clustering in resort playgrounds like Steamboat Springs (pop. 9,315) that have natural amenities, good weather — and, now, lots of people like themselves.

In places like Nantucket, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Teton County, Idaho, the migrants are creating hybrid communities, implanting urban incomes, tastes, careers, ambitions, restaurants, cultural activities and networking opportunities into small towns that until recently could support none of these, and for which there has been little planning and still no consensus.

"You are seeing a transformation of rural communities," said Jonathan Schechter, executive director of the Charture Institute in Jackson, Wyo., a nonprofit organization that studies small recreational towns.

Into quiet resort spots the migrants have come, laptops on their knees: fund managers from New York, software developers from California, consultants, proofreaders, engineers, inventors. "The same processes that led to the suburbanization of the United States after World War II," Mr. Schechter said, "are now producing a virtual suburbanization in places like Jackson or Steamboat Springs."

From 2000 to 2006, population in the 297 counties rated highest in natural amenities by the [United States Department of Agriculture](#) grew by 7.1 percent, 10 times the rate for the 1,090 rural counties with below-average amenities, the department reported.

In towns that once emptied after the ski season or the beach season, these "location-neutral" migrants are complicating the traditional dynamic between tourists and locals. Here as elsewhere, average homes have become unaffordable for teachers, firefighters and others — the people who created the good schools and community closeness that newcomers said drew them. The rate of change "is causing a whiplash," Mr. Schechter said, "because the towns don't have the political and economic systems in place to deal with them."

Routt County, which includes Steamboat Springs, is one of the first places to identify these new émigrés as a source of economic growth and, paradoxically, community stability. A 2005 survey found that as many as 1 in 10 year-round households was involved in a location-neutral business. Unlike retirees and second-home buyers, who are also roosting in vacation towns, they send children to the local schools. "Without kids, you don't have a community," said Scott Ford, a counselor at the Small Business Resource Center at Colorado Mountain College.

Cloistered in home offices, isolated from the local economy, location-neutrals are often invisible even to one another, except when they appear on local committees.

Many work as hard as their urban counterparts, often juggling commitments in several time zones, but can step from their offices to a hiking trail or mountain stream.

In Steamboat Springs, a pawn shop and loan store amid the expensive restaurants on the main drag illustrates the growing inequality in a region that produces few middle-income jobs. Each day 1,500 workers commute to Routt County from neighboring Moffat County, an hour away. Meanwhile, the airport, once filled with tourists, caters to people in business suits.