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In praise of Boise

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Why space really is the final frontier in the internet age


MOUNTAIN bikes hang from a rack in the offices of Baliho, a software firm in Boise, Idaho. Many Baliho staff cycle to work, including the boss, Pete Gombert. Asked why he moved to Boise, Mr Gombert raves about the quality of life. The sun shines for 300 days a year. Crime is as rare as the colossal steaks. And the great outdoors is only a few blocks away. Mr Gombert loves to fish, hike and ski. Also, since both of his children have taken up golf, he selflessly plays with them at weekends.

There is a lot of space in Boise. A 25-mile green belt runs through the city. The nearby foothills are latticed with biking trails. At 3,000 people per square mile, the population density is less than a twentieth of Manhattan's. Yet although Boise is remote—the nearest big city is 340 miles away—it is no backwater. Since 1978 it has been home to Micron, a large semiconductor firm. (The local potato billionaire was an early investor, leading to inevitable jokes about the shift from chips to microchips.) A cluster of high-tech start-ups has appeared. Surprisingly, between 2005 and 2007 Idaho generated more patents per worker than any other state.

Brain workers like to live near each other. It is easier to keep up with the latest ideas if you keep bumping into other people who work in the same field. As Alfred Marshall, an English economist, wrote in 1890: in industrial clusters "the mysteries of the trade become no mystery, but are, as it were, in the air." That is why geeks flock to Silicon Valley and financiers converge on New York. But such clusters can become victims of their own success. When a hotspot gets too hot, it becomes expensive to live there, which spurs some brainy people—especially those with children—to migrate to places that are not quite so hot but more liveable. The population of the Boise-

Nampa metro area has nearly doubled in the past two decades, sparking a property bubble. Yet housing is still laughably cheap: \$150,000 buys you a spacious house with a garden. In the nice parts of Palo Alto, it buys you a poky flat.

The internet lets people compare cities and neighbourhoods by whatever criteria matter to them, from house prices to commuting times. That gives a boost to remote but agreeable locales. Also thanks to the internet, people can now live far from the madding crowd and yet remain abreast of its ignoble strife. "What Karl Marx called 'the idiocy of rural life' no longer applies," writes Joel Kotkin, a demographer, in a book called "The Next Hundred Million: America in 2050". A brain worker in Boise has the same access to technical and market information as her rival in San Francisco. In her leisure time, she can download the same books and films. She may not have the same choice of avant-garde theatre, but that is a sacrifice she may be content to make.

America's hinterland is often mocked. Cosmopolitans dismiss it as "flyover country". Many assume that nothing interesting happens there. Yet as America's population expands, much of the growth will occur where there is space. Mr Kotkin predicts a resurgence of the heartland, as Americans move away from the coasts in search of more room. The same forces will attract immigrants to places that have traditionally been lily-white. The Boise metro area already has a population that is 17% ethnic minority, mostly Hispanic or Asian. Restaurants serve Japanese cuisine with an Idaho twist: huge portions. "Life is easy here," says Jinye Huo, a software engineer at Baliho, whose home in Boise is four times larger than her old flat in Beijing.

Others are less bullish about America's wide open spaces. Many greens would prefer it if everyone lived in tiny energy-efficient urban apartments. Some go further. Deborah and Frank Popper, two academics from the north-east, once proposed emptying much of the Great Plains and creating a national park for buffalo. More pragmatically, Edward Glaeser of Harvard University argues that improvements in transport and communications technology will make "idea-producing" cities even denser. When new ideas can easily be sold around the world, he argues, the rewards for generating them rise, and brainy people will be lured to Boston and New York with ever-fatter pay packets.

Different strokes

Both Mr Kotkin and Mr Glaeser could be right. Some of the next 100m Americans will choose to live in towering mega-cities. Others will crave backyards big enough to play softball in. Who lives where will depend on public policy (zoning rules, petrol taxes, etc), on natural constraints (water, energy) and on individual tastes. But however birth rates and migration patterns change, America's geographical size will be a huge advantage. It means that Americans can keep reproducing and welcoming immigrants without their country ever feeling crowded. If the population doubled, it would still be only a quarter as crowded as Britain is today, and less than a hundredth as crowded as Singapore. Vast swathes of land are almost empty. David Bieter, the mayor of Boise, says his city could easily double in size again.

Wide open spaces and the struggle to settle them are the keys to American culture, argued Frederick Jackson Turner, a historian, a century ago. The practical skills and rugged individualism of the frontiersfolk made the country prosperous, decentralised and democratic. Turner overstated his case, but America is far more decentralised than other rich countries. In Britain "there's London, London and London," says Mr Kotkin. In America there are scores of hubs. There is also a libertarian streak in America's most sparsely-populated states. Only 10% of Idahoans trust the federal government, says Greg Hill, a professor at Boise State University. Butch Otter, the state's governor, rebelled against both Obamacare and George Bush's Patriot Act. "Don't tread on me" was one of the first slogans of the American revolutionaries; and in the open spaces, no one needs to tread on anyone else.

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