

Spokane



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An aerial photograph of Spokane, Washington, showing a mix of urban development and natural scenery. The city is built on a hillside, with a dense cluster of buildings in the center. A large river flows through the city, with a bridge crossing it. In the foreground, there are green fields and some large, modern buildings. The background shows a valley with a highway bridge and distant hills under a clear sky.

Business Leader

New, expanding and relocating companies are thriving in Spokane | By Treva Lind



ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S fastest-growing private companies, ISR/SprayCool, moved its headquarters to the Spokane area four years ago. The draw: the area's technically skilled workforce. Ready access to skilled workers is key for the company, which posted 618 percent revenue growth from 2001–2005 and reached \$43.7 million in 2005 sales (2005 was the most-current year for which figures were available as this story was being written). In fact, in 2005, *Inc.* magazine ranked ISR 286th on the magazine's annual list of the nation's fastest-growing private companies, while Deloitte's 2006 Technology Fast 50 rankings placed ISR No. 9 among the fastest-growing Pacific Northwest companies.

ISR's workforce has grown nearly as fast as its revenue—from 95 in 2002 to more than 220 today.

The company was launched with just two employees in 1988 when Renton, Washington-raised engineer Don Tilton was in a doctorate program at the University of Kentucky. He developed technology that cools high-performance electronics by using a cycled fine mist of liquid—sprayed in a thin layer—that evaporates as it cools. As electronics grow more powerful, they consume more power and thus generate more heat. So much, in fact, that as devices get smaller, faster and increasingly complex, they generate more heat than can be effectively cooled by air. ISR's SprayCool products address heat, noise and space concerns for next-generation technology.

After various moves during the company's first decade, it relocated in 1997 to Clarkston, Washington, after Tilton took a temporary teaching position at Washington State University. However, by 2002,

In 2006, *Inc.* magazine rated the vibrant Spokane area one of the best midsize U.S. cities for doing business. The region also has been touted as one of the world's top "Intelligent Communities," thanks to its excellent technology infrastructure.

Department of Defense contracts and other business had created the need to relocate to a city offering a larger pool of skilled engineers.

"We looked at a number of locations in the Northwest and settled on moving near Spokane," says ISR CEO Jeff Severs.

When the company relocated to Liberty Lake, 15 miles east of Spokane, it found not only talent, but also the dedication it had come to expect from Eastern Washington employees. "It may be rooted in the strong agricultural background of the region, but people here are just good people with a good work ethic," Severs says.

He adds that the region's quality of life helps him attract and keep excellent employees. "Where else can you drive just an hour or two and be in some of the most pristine streams for fly-fishing, and drive just an hour in another direction to be on the ski slopes?"

The company now leases 73,000 square feet in two buildings, has a research center it opened in 2004 near Washington State University, and operates satellite offices in Seattle (opened in 2005) and Silicon Valley (opened in 2006). While much of its business comes from government contracts with customers such as Pacific Northwest National Laboratory and the Air Force Research Lab, ISR has made inroads

commercially, in part through products that offer a greater-than-threefold increase in the amount of computing power that can be installed in data centers.

THE STORY OF ISR—a business relocating to and/or expanding in the Spokane area—is a story that's increasingly common in this region known for its affordable cost of living, quality lifestyle and trained workforce.

In 2006, for instance, *Inc.* ranked Spokane 30th among "150 Best Midsize U.S. Cities for Doing Business." The magazine analyzed the performance of midsize cities—those with between 150,000 and 450,000 jobs—in current-year employment growth as well as in average annual job growth.

In addition, a 2006 second-quarter ranking by the Council for Community and Economic Research, which measured regional differences in the cost of consumer goods and services in 311 urban areas, showed that Spokane's cost of living was below the national average (which is always stated as 100), with an index of 95 compared with 156.1 for Los Angeles and 115.3 for Seattle. For instance, Spokane's median home price was just \$175,000 at the end of 2006.

With a population of 440,000, Spokane County serves as a regional hub for business, transportation and services in fields such as health care, education, manufacturing/technology and aerospace, all buttressed by a strong financial-services industry.

In addition, good technological and physical infrastructure is strengthening the area's appeal:

- A 100-block downtown area with outdoor high-speed broadband wireless—called the SpokaneHotZone—offers dual uses: two-hour free public access and a secure domain for fire, police and other city crews.
- A roughly 30-block "Terabyte Triangle" among downtown buildings offers

one of the densest concentrations of high-speed connectivity in the United States.

- The Virtual Possibilities Network (VPnet)—utilizing 200-plus miles of fiber optics contributed by energy-services, information and technology company Avista Corporation—is a nonprofit consortium of education, private and public groups, including Pacific Northwest National Laboratory. The participants are interacting for cooperative research, joint grant pursuits, support of incubator businesses and e-learning, such as between rural and urban sites.

VPnet provides high-speed links to 17 member sites, including universities, school districts, private companies and Sirti, a state-funded economic-development agency in Spokane that works to accelerate the development and growth of Inland Northwest technology companies.

- Such leading-edge technology led to the region's being named, in 2004, as one of the world's Top Seven Intelligent Communities of the Year by the Intelligent Community Forum, which selects vibrant digital-age cities.

- In 2005, *Popular Science* listed the region No. 2 nationally for medical and emergency technology, second only to San Diego. Spokane scored high thanks to the number of hospitals and health care providers with advanced information technology and the percentage of emergency vehicles under computer-aided dispatch.

- Spokane also scores high in safety: A 2005 *Forbes* online edition ranked Spokane as the fifth-safest U.S. city in terms of rareness of natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes and tornadoes, a major benefit for businesses concerned with productivity and data storage.

- In 2006 a \$75 million, 100,000-square-foot expansion of the Spokane Convention Center opened downtown.

- More than \$108 million in improvements at the Spokane International Airport are taking place. They include a passenger-screening area, new concessions, taxi lanes, a new air-traffic-control tower, a 3,000-foot extension of the main runway, and improvements to an existing heavy aircraft maintenance complex. The improvements are scheduled to all be completed by 2010.

Airport spokesman Todd Woodard notes that there is substantial airfield infrastructure, and affordable real estate at the airport and nearby, including 5,400 acres zoned "light industrial"—all attractive to businesses whether they need a manufacturing plant or speedy access to business

destinations for people and products.

- Businesses also have many product-to-market options via roads and railroads, while roadway commuters find relatively smooth travel on east-west Interstate 90 and other routes; the average commute time is 21 minutes.

It's NO WONDER Spokane has also gained the attention of real estate investors and entre-

preneurs. New restaurants, housing developments, upscale condos and other projects are going up to meet demand related to business and residential growth in the county. For example, an 80-acre urban village called Kendall Yards, just north of downtown, has a green light from city planners for up to 2,600 apartments, townhouses and condominiums, with 1 million square feet of commercial space

Tax-Incentive Benefits

Over the past five years, more than 35 companies in greater Spokane have saved more than \$6 million while expanding their operations—thanks to tax breaks.

Businesses in manufacturing, research and development, and software development can apply for Community Empowerment Zone (CEZ) tax breaks on new equipment, construction and labor costs related to expansions or renovations. Businesses can get tax credits, deferrals and exemptions via the state-government program, which is designed to encourage site improvements and job growth.

A Community Empowerment Zone is an area the state designates as low-income, based on Census figures. To qualify for the tax incentives, companies must be physically located in a CEZ or hire residents from a CEZ. Spokane has the most active CEZ program among six in the state, according to the Washington Department of Revenue. Since 2001, the 35-plus companies qualifying for Spokane's program have launched capital investments totaling more than \$76 million, with 1,200 new expansion jobs—591 of those going to residents of a CEZ.

There are essentially two main ways companies can save money:

- * A company with operations inside the zone can qualify for a business and occupation (B&O) tax credit by hiring new employees from the zone. If the business increases its workforce by at least 15 percent in a year, it can receive a \$4,000 B&O tax credit for each hired employee from the zone who makes \$40,000 or more, including benefits, or a \$2,000 credit for each employee making under \$40,000, including benefits.

- * A company inside or outside a zone can get a seven-year deferral on sales-and-use tax for building materials, renovation costs and taxable equipment purchases related to production if it hires one resident of a CEZ for every \$750,000 spent. In addition, if the business makes the hires and does the capital investment it promised to do during the seven years, the tax deferral becomes a full tax exemption. If the company makes fewer hires or does less capital investment than promised, it pays a portion of the tax, with the amount depending on how close the company came to meeting its commitment.

Hollister-Stier Laboratories and Huntwood Industries are among the Spokane area companies that have benefited from the CEZ tax breaks.

Hollister-Stier Laboratories, located within a CEZ, has hired more than 125 new employees over the past two years and saved more than \$1 million through the CEZ program while doing a \$2 million warehouse expansion. The company fills vials with its own pharmaceuticals and those of other companies. It plans to use the tax breaks on an additional \$30 million expansion of its 135,000-square-foot site, adding 51,000 square feet by early 2008.

Huntwood Industries, located outside a CEZ, gained tax savings by hiring CEZ residents. The major U.S. custom-cabinet manufacturer opened a \$50 million, 547,000-square-foot Liberty Lake factory east of Spokane in January 2006 and hired 200 new employees for a total workforce of around 800.

On January 31, the Spokane Area Economic Development Council, which has assisted companies with the CEZ process, integrated into one organization—Greater Spokane Incorporated—with the Spokane Regional Chamber of Commerce, in a move designed to streamline governance and resources around four regional objectives: business recruitment and expansion, workforce development, public policy and business support. Spokane's CEZ program will continue to operate as in the past to benefit Spokane County businesses. —T.L.

intermixed. Envisioned as a place for everyone from college students to retirees, Kendall Yards has a design plan that connects it to the nearby Centennial Trail for hiking and biking.

Since 2001, the Spokane Area Economic Development Council has assisted more than 60 businesses with relocation or expansion, including 30 from outside the region and 33 in-area businesses.

Company executives often talk about Spokane's "lifestyle advantage," says 2006 EDC President Jon Eliassen, who has now retired as he planned with the integration of the EDC and the Spokane Regional Chamber of Commerce. The new organization, called "Greater Spokane Incorporated," streamlines business access to resources, support and services. It is led by Rich Hadley, past president and CEO of the Chamber.

"Executives came to my office who had been sent to Spokane by their companies, and so many times they said, 'I've never lived in Spokane before; I never wanted to live here before. Now I don't want to leave Spokane,'" Eliassen says.

"A lot of things are going on in our core city and in the county that make for a very unique lifestyle. People realize, 'I can be a half hour from the lake, 15 minutes from the airport and have all these amenities.' There's a combination of things that make an affordable lifestyle near a vibrant downtown."

Here are just a few examples of thriving business sectors in Spokane County:

Health Care

With four full-service hospitals, the region hosts the largest concentration of medical services between Seattle and Salt Lake City. Sacred Heart Medical Center and Children's Hospital is the second-largest hospital in Washington state, based on number of beds, and is a leader in heart- and kidney-transplant services. It is also a major training facility for robotic heart surgery.

Deaconess Medical Center, Spokane's next largest hospital, offers a highly regarded cardiac care program.

New bioscience technology endeavors have emerged, as well, with more than 500 ongoing studies and clinical trials.

All told, the area has more than 1,000 healthcare businesses, powered by a workforce exceeding 29,000. This sector accounts for 14 percent of wages in Spokane County, with an estimated annual payroll of more than \$1.2 billion.

Inland Northwest Health Services is

Hollister-Stier Laboratories, a pharmaceutical company, is increasing its filling-line capacity and doubling its lab space as part of a \$30 million expansion of its site.

one of the health-related companies that consider Spokane a prime location. Inland operates one of the nation's first Regional Health Information Organizations: a network offering health-care providers instant access to 2.6 million medical records from 38 hospitals. Electronic files with special patient ID numbers give medical professionals instant and current information, a plus when a patient goes from a rural to a city facility for advanced treatment, or for emergency-room visits.

Premera Blue Cross is another company that values Spokane's economic climate. In 2005 Premera chose Spokane for a \$12 million, 135,000-square-foot expansion—creating 250 new jobs—to house core operations such as membership and billing, claims procession and customer service.

Last year, a pharmaceutical company, Hollister-Stier Laboratories, announced a \$30 million expansion of its 135,000-square-foot Spokane site, adding 51,000 square feet to double lab space, build offices and increase its filling-line capacity. Hollister-Stier produces its own allergy-shot product line and also contracts with pharmaceutical firms—from startups to giants—to sterily fill liquid pharmaceuticals into vials. Last year it also added 70 employees to a base of 350 workers and purchased 6.5 acres of adjacent space for future growth.

Education

The area's K-12 education system, with nearly 30 school districts, is considered among the best in the state. Indeed, Spokane can lay claim to being one of the brainiest metro areas in the country. The U.S. Census' 2005 American Community Survey report showed that more than 91 percent of county residents age 25-plus have a high school degree or higher—compared with 84.2 percent nationally. In addition, approximately 7,000 college



DEAN DAVIS PHOTOGRAPHY

degrees—from associate to doctorate—are awarded in Spokane County each year.

Eighteen area higher-education institutions make it easy for students to pursue advanced degrees, and the state's second-largest community-college system offers more than 230 technical programs and degrees, from biomedical classes to manufacturing-technology courses.

"Another thing that is galvanizing national interest in Spokane is the development of higher education via the University District," says Eliassen from the EDC. "It makes for all kinds of education, training and research right here, which is powerful."

The downtown University District includes campuses and/or programs for Washington State University Spokane, Eastern Washington University, Gonzaga University and Community Colleges of Spokane. And last year WSU opened a Sleep and Performance Research Lab, one of only four such labs in the country. The school also has an award-winning Design Institute, which focuses on green design and sustainability, and a Daylighting Design Lab, which helps designers use daylight effectively.

WSU is also focusing on commercializing its research—in areas ranging from nanomaterials to computational modeling—and that activity is expected to lead to even more companies setting up shop in the area, along with residential growth.

Developers are already renovating warehouses and industrial spaces to create condos and apartments.

Additionally, if state legislators support funding this spring, University of Washington first-year medical and dental school classes will begin in fall 2008 at the Riverpoint Campus, which is already home to WSU Spokane as well as some EWU programs.

Spokane would join first-year teaching sites under the umbrella of WWAMI (an acronym for the program's states: Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana and Idaho), which allows 20 University of Washington medical students to do first-year studies outside Seattle before joining classmates in Seattle their second year. WSU Spokane is partnering with the University of Washington on the program, and WSU Spokane faculty will be teaching many of the first-year classes.

The Spokane area already serves as a clinical training site for UW third- and fourth-year medical students.

Riverpoint also is part of the Regional Initiatives in Dental Education program, in which eight students study a first-year UW dental curriculum that complements EWU's dental-hygiene program. In addition, second- and fourth-year dental students use the Spokane area as a clinical training site.

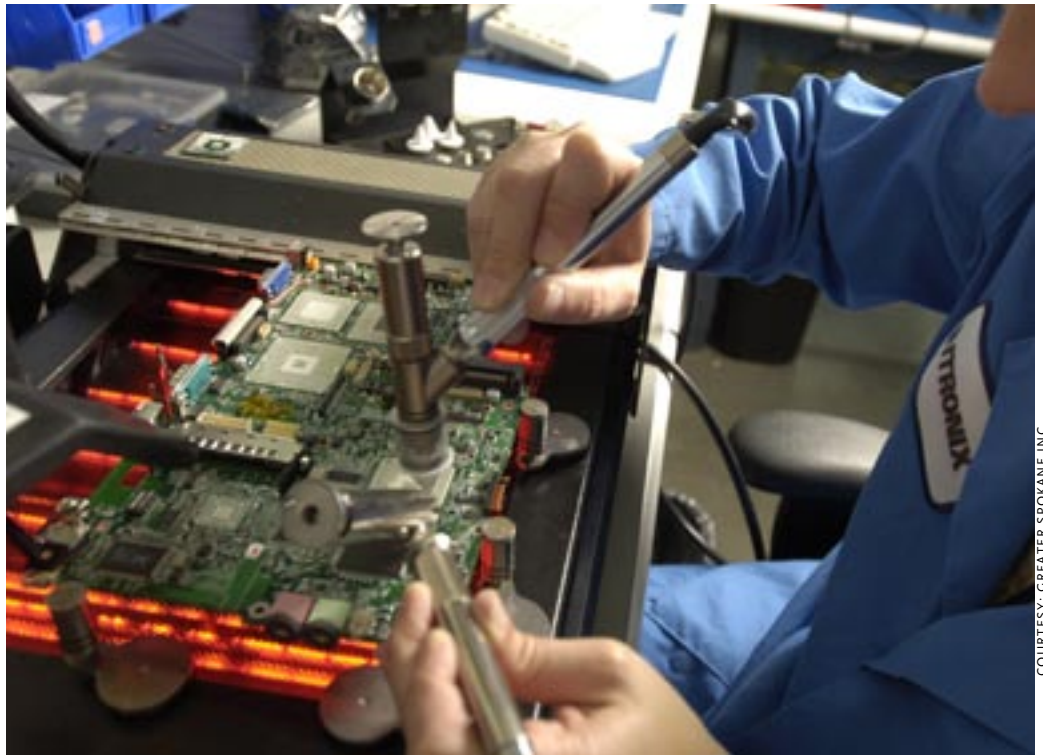
Manufacturing/Technology

Manufacturing and technology have long been economic backbones here. More than 500 manufacturing firms, with total workforce exceeding 18,500, create products ranging from rugged wireless laptops to airplane floor panels.

Here are just a few examples of that manufacturing and technology success:

- Itronix, a General Dynamics company that builds rugged wireless computing systems—from laptops and handhelds to tablet PCs—used by mobile workers in military, utilities, transportation and other fields, has about 400 workers in Spokane. In 2006, it expanded into a \$9.5 million, 107,000-square-foot site.

- World Wide Packets, which ranked No. 11 in Deloitte's 2006 Pacific Northwest Technology Fast 50, makes broadband networking devices. Started in 2000, it has had 552 percent revenue growth over



COURTESY: GREATER SPOKANE INC.

the past five years and employs 125.

- Itron Inc., a company rated No. 29 by Deloitte, makes metering and data-collection software and hardware, and systems for global energy and water industries. With about 450 employees in Washington state, Itron moved this fall into a 200,000-square-foot building and reported five-year sales growth of 145 percent.

- Purcell Systems, founded in 2000, ranked No. 319 on the 2006 *Inc.* list of 500 fastest-growing private companies. It had sales growth of 425 percent over the past three years. Purcell manufactures outdoor cabinets to house and to power network lines and wireless equipment for telecom carriers.

- PCO Inc., started in 1999, ranked No. 488 on the 2006 *Inc.* list. It makes industrial and residential security equipment emphasizing digital video-surveillance products. The company had three-year sales growth of 309.6 percent and reported revenues of \$21.1 million during the period.

- Huntwood Industries, a leading U.S. custom-cabinet manufacturer that began in 1988, opened a \$50 million 547,000-square-foot factory in Liberty Lake early last year.

- Kaiser Aluminum landed major contracts in 2006 and plans a \$105 million expansion at its Spokane Valley plant as part of supplying Airbus and Boeing. Kaiser also serves as a leading

Itronix—which builds rugged wireless computing systems for military and business use—expanded last year into a \$9.5 million, 107,000-square-foot site.

producer of fabricated aluminum products for aerospace, general engineering, automotive and custom industrial applications.

To ensure long-lasting success, Spokane area manufacturers are focused on continuous improvement. For instance, in 2005, more than 18 manufacturers forged the Inland Northwest Lean Management Consortium to improve efficiency of their processes and to improve training programs.

The consortium has since grown to represent many industrial sectors, including durable goods, technology, food processing, banking and general merchandise distributing.

Aerospace

Nearly 50 companies and institutions throughout greater Spokane and into Idaho provide products and services to the global aerospace industry, thereby contributing an estimated \$43 million in annual average wage impact to Spokane County, along with providing some 1,200 jobs.

Rocket Engineering Corporation—which has 46 employees and specializes in replacing existing piston engines with more-efficient and more-reliable turbine

engines—is among the notable companies in this field, along with Kaiser Aluminum, Goodrich Corporation and ISR.

Various aerospace businesses are participating in a 33-company Inland Northwest Aerospace Consortium that started last spring with the goal of expanding Spokane's role in manufacturing aerospace materials and parts. In November, the consortium received a \$56,250 state grant to do a study to determine how the area can become a "center of excellence" in the aerospace industry.

One member, Triumph Composite Systems Inc., which has 450 employees, makes the composite floors that airplane passengers walk on, the ducting that provides passenger and equipment ventilation, and a variety of flight deck parts and systems.

Triumph Composite Systems' 394,000-square-foot complex supplies the company's products to Boeing, Airbus and other aerospace businesses. The company won a contract last year to provide the floor-panel system for the Boeing 787 Dreamliner, an award estimated at \$49 million.

THE REGION'S ECONOMIC STRENGTHS—from excellent infrastructure to tax incentives, from qualified workers to lower costs of doing business—create a recipe for business success, says Eliassen from the EDC.

"We've continued to see economic growth from the West Plains to the Idaho border. It is relatively easy for businesses to find a well-trained workforce here and have access to anywhere in the United States by air, road and rail."

Those strengths are complemented by outstanding quality of life, including lower housing costs, shorter commute times and easy access to diverse recreation, he says.

"We also are seeing more younger people looking to Spokane as the place they want to raise a family, and those who moved away looking for ways to come back. We're so connected to mountains, lakes and recreation that people want to live and work here." ■

Treva Lind is a Spokane-area writer.

Alaska Airlines (800-ALASKAAIR, alaskaair.com and Horizon Air (800-547-9308, horizonair.com) fly daily to Spokane. For more information on doing business in Spokane, contact Greater Spokane Incorporated, 800-SPOKANE, www.greaterspokaneincorporated.org.

Play List

Enjoying
Spokane's
superlative
recreation



MY MOTHER, who is afraid of heights, was not buying my claim that a gondola ride 50 to 70 feet above the Spokane River is a must for every Spokane visitor. Mom, Dad and I had spent the afternoon at Riverfront Park, where we'd whirled round on the 1909 Looff Carousel, walked flower-edged paths, taken in an IMAX show, and stood on a suspension bridge to enjoy the spray from thundering Spokane Falls. Mom was ready to call it a day. **W**hen she did finally agree to the sky ride, it wasn't my safety assurances or my dad's cajoling that swayed her. It was aesthetics. When we left the suspension bridge and rounded the corner to the Spokane Falls Skyride, Mom took one look at the lilac-painted aluminum-and-glass bubbles cabling over the river and declared them just too cute to be risky.

The gondola Skyride—which opened in 2005 after replacing a gondola ride that had been created for the 1974 World's Fair—is just one of the many Spokane attractions that delight residents and visitors. In fact, it was the area's abundance and quality of recreation that drew my family here. Ten years ago, my husband, Bob, daughter Leah and I stopped in Spokane as part of a road trip to determine our next zip code. Our dream-town checklist wasn't very long: We wanted four distinct seasons, lots of outdoor recreation, good schools, a lively downtown and affordable housing. Spokane delivered on every count.

The city's claims to recreational fame were impressive—there are 76 lakes and 33 golf courses within an hour's drive, several ski resorts within two hours, hundreds of miles of hiking and biking trails, and excellent river rafting (complete with tasting of local wines)—but we found that the written information didn't do justice to the beauty and variety of the reality.

It wasn't long after our move that my daughter asked why we didn't have a lake cabin like everybody else—living in Spokane seemed to automatically confer the deed to lake property. While we haven't bought a waterfront cabin, we skip from

Left: Rafters enjoy a trip down the Spokane River with Pangaea River Rafting, which launches whitewater, flat-water, bird-watching and wine-float trips just minutes from downtown Spokane. **Below:** A climber scales the granite Minnehaha Climbing Rocks.



SPOKANE REGIONAL CVB/ALAN BISSON



Above: Purple aerial gondola cars give visitors a grand view of 75-foot Spokane Falls at the 1911 Monroe Street Bridge. One of the architects for the bridge was Kirtland Cutter, who also designed Spokane's Davenport Hotel.

Below: Scenic Mount Spokane is one of the many excellent ski areas located near Spokane.

lake to lake depending on what we feel like doing.

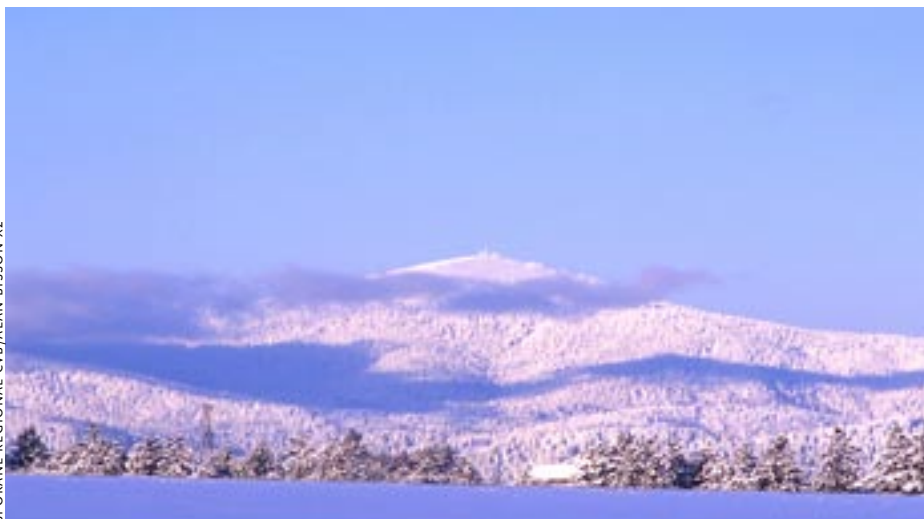
Trout or perch fishing? I can't get my husband to stop rattling off his favorites, from Rock Lake to Deep Lake to Coffee Pot Drainage and more. People watching? College kids, local families and scores of tourists fill the beach at Lake Coeur d'Alene. Hiking, cross-country skiing and ice-skating? All are available at tucked-

away Spirit Lake. Weekend escapes? Idaho's lightly developed Priest or Pend Oreille. Houseboating? Long and lazy Lake Roosevelt. They're all within two hours of our house. And renowned Hells Canyon—one of the deepest river gorges in North America—is just two hours to the south, and offers great whitewater boating, wildlife viewing, and Native and pioneer historical sites.

Parks Place

Even closer to home are the area's justly famous parks. For instance, Riverside State Park gives us more than 10,000 acres of open space in which to roam, to picnic, to plop on a bench with a book or to run Fido through the trees.

If 100-acre Riverfront Park is Spokane's Mom-approved urban green space, Riverside State Park is its "wild thang." This is where we take rambunctious wee ones, high-energy teens and our alpha friends to experience miles of hiking and biking trails. When we stand on the park's 1930s-era swinging bridge, I challenge each visitor to find the Bowl and Pitcher formation in the massive basalt monoliths at



SPOKANE REGIONAL CVB/ALAN BISSON X2

the river's edge. (Truth be told, I still can't spot it.)

Another favorite green scene is the South Hill area's Manito Park, a 90-acre gem that benefited from the recommendations of the Olmsted Brothers, a firm led by the son and stepson of Frederick Olmsted, designer of New York's Central Park. The brothers, who were founding members of the American Society of Landscape Architects, visited Spokane in 1913.

Thanks to their input, the park retained native elements such as plants, rock formations, ponds and hills, but also includes play structures and sweeping grass lawns.

In addition, it has wonderful and diverse gardens. If we're feeling refined and orderly, we wander the park's French Renaissance-style Duncan Gardens. If we're contemplative, the Nishinomiya Japanese Garden is a no-passport-required ticket to Zen tranquility. The Rose Garden and Lilac Garden are appealingly romantic, while I get planting ideas for my home at the Perennial Garden, and on a chilly day, the steamy Gaiser Conservatory draws me in like a tropical rainforest.

Sixty-five-acre Finch Arboretum, less than five miles west of downtown, is awash in shades of green in spring and

summer, then each fall, orange and gold shoulder their way into the limelight. Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge, 23 miles from city center, is a bird-watcher's nirvana. More than 50,000 feathered friends call it home or migrate through annually.

When my now-teenage daughter was little, we made seasonal pilgrimages to Green Bluff, a collection of family farms at the foot of Mount Spokane. I have perfect memories and treasured photos of us picking flats of ruby-red strawberries, reaching high for juicy apples and poking through pumpkin patches in search of potential jack-o'-lanterns.

The Barn on Trezzi Farm, a recent addition to the mix, offers frozen homemade meals for sale and gives us a reason to visit Green Bluff during the brumal season. Stephanie and Davide Trezzi craft an authentic Italian soup (made with vegetables from their farm and other Green Bluff farms), pasta sauces and polenta—perfect winter meals to enjoy at home over a bottle of Spokane wine, conveniently purchased at nearby Townshend Cellar.

Snow Motion

Our favorite winter activity, however, is skiing. Thanks to the fairly predictable snowfall that coats the surrounding Selkirk and Bitterroot ranges with an average of 300 inches a year, we can skip from ski hill to ski hill all season. The three of us learned to downhill at Mount Spokane, less than an hour northeast of Spokane, and so popular with locals that we're apt to ski down a run with a sign at the top that notes it's "sponsored" by our dentist or accountant. Vista House, a 1934 former fire lookout, is tucked on the backside of the mountaintop, and welcomes guests with snacks and hot drinks.

49 Degrees North, about an hour north of Spokane, has the long, steep runs we needed to bring our skills up a notch. Apparently, the sisters from Spokane's Mount St. Michael parish agree. More than once we've seen them on the slopes, maneuvering their turns in full-length, bright-blue habits. It gives the phrase "Go with God" a whole new meaning.

Since Spokane is a mere 30-minute drive from Idaho, we quite naturally call two Idaho ski resorts "local." Silver Mountain Resort, an hour east of Spokane, has come a long way from its humble beginnings as Jackass Mountain. Today an alpine village and luxury condos have been added at the mountain's base, and a high-speed gondola whisks skiers and riders to

the top.

And then there's Schweitzer Mountain to the north. The couple sitting next to us on the high-speed quad might as easily be from Phoenix as from Spokane. All of us are drawn to the mountain above Lake Pend Oreille by its range of thrilling ski and snowboard options.

Trails Mix

Glorious snow hangs around our mountains till March or April, after which Bob and I are ready to stow the ski gear, pull the bicycles out of the shed and start pedaling. Trails range from urban to wilderness, paved to gravel, flat to screaming-radical. On the 60-mile Centennial Trail (37 miles are in Washington, 23 in North Idaho) we've cycled alongside the Spokane River, through neighborhoods, through state and city parks, past a university, past a shopping mall and past the Minnehaha Climbing Rocks in the city of Spokane Valley, where we've also been tempted by the aroma of Krispy Kreme doughnuts. We've seen coyotes, rabbits, hawks, marmots, deer and more than one slithering garter snake.

There are no urban distractions on the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes, which we access just 45 miles south of Spokane, and we've spotted moose, marmots and otters along the route. The rail-to-trail jewel is an asphalt ribbon running 73 miles through North Idaho from Plummer to Mullan, past lakes, rivers, historic mining towns and vistas so stunning that I have yet to adequately record them with my camera.

Rafting and Wine Tasting

For all the time I've spent hiking and biking alongside the Spokane River or showing it off to visitors, I'd never actually rafted it till last summer. But when Pangaea River Rafting launched its wine-float trip, I signed up in a heartbeat.

It took less than 10 minutes to drive from downtown to the put-in, and within half an hour of donning life jackets and hearing the safety drill, we were paddling away from city commotion. By the end of the afternoon, we'd spied great blue herons, ospreys, ducks and wild yellow iris. We'd also passed under bridges, and paddled by a Frisbee-golf range and assorted riverfront homes. Capping it all off was a gourmet lunch accompanied by Spokane wines.

Ten years ago, Pangaea might have offered wines from Washington's well-established southeastern or Puget Sound wineries, but today it's possible

Signature Events

Athletes from around the world come to Spokane to compete in two "biggest-in-the-world" events, which also attract hundreds of spectators from across the globe.

* Bloomsday, the longest timed footrace in the world, goes from serious to silly thanks to its 50,000 or so participants. Locals content to walk the 12K dress up in goofy costumes, while athletes from around the region and elite runners from as far away as Kenya dress as lightly as possible. The race takes place the first Sunday in May. www.bloomsdayrun.org.

* Downtown Spokane streets close for Hoopfest, the nation's largest three-on-three basketball tournament, the last weekend in June. More than 6,000 teams participate each year and include kids as young as third graders, wheelchair athletes, baby boomers and primetime hoopsters from across the country. www.spokanehoopfest.org. —L.H.M.

to swirl and sip numerous Spokane-crafted varieties.

“The wine industry is going crazy here, there’s such demand,” says John Allen, owner of the Vino!—WineShop in downtown Spokane. “Enterprising, creative local winemakers benefit from our close proximity to the vineyards in the Yakima Valley, Walla Walla Valley, Horse Heaven Hills and Rattlesnake Hills.”

We may import the grapes from nearby areas, but our vintners are homegrown or recently (and permanently) transplanted. According to Allen, when you combine wine-savvy locals who have the time and money to invest in production with a sophisticated population base that enjoys the fruits of the vintners’ labors, you have a thriving wine scene.

From venerated establishments such as Arbor Crest and Latah Creek to buzz-generators such as Mountain Dome and Barrister, Spokane’s 11 wineries create award winners that help support Washington’s ranking as the No. 2 premium wine-producing state in the nation and its reputation for notable wines. Barrister, for instance, just last year received—for its 2002 Columbia Valley Merlot—the Platinum Award at the Critics Challenge International Wine Competition.

All this urbane sipping is in line with Spokane’s growing culinary sophistication. In less than two years, at least 30 restaurants have opened downtown and in outlying neighborhoods, with choices including Asian fusion, Pacific Rim, organic and regionally harvested dishes.

A sushi restaurant called Raw and a steak, seafood and sushi place named Bluefish are both packed each night with couples and singles. Brand-new Isabella’s fills its menu with the freshest of the fresh and plans to harvest veggies from its rooftop garden. Every bun and loaf of bread baked at The Davenport Hotel’s Palm Court comes from Shepherd’s Grain, a sustainable-agriculture cooperative based in rural Harrington, about 50 miles west of Spokane. And the folks at Latah Bistro, about five miles south of downtown, are on a first-name basis with area farmers who provide the restaurant’s fresh fruit, vegetables, organic beef and chicken.

In addition, dozens of nightspots swing open their doors for films, music and live theater at venues that range from cineplexes to funky old playhouses, from the elegant opera house to the multipurpose arena. And by the end of this year, the Art Deco Fox Theatre will open after a

\$22 million renovation.

Wander downtown on a weekend night and you’ll see bustling streets and the meet-and-mingle crowds jockeying for position at places such as the ultra-cool Bistango Martini Lounge, the Steelhead Bar and Grille, and the elegant Davenport Hotel Peacock Lounge.

Great Greens

No story about the Spokane lifestyle is complete without a glowing golf report. “Spokane is the best golf value in the country,” says resident Brad Moeller, and he should know. Brad worked for Ping

You can see why
Spokane was the
place my family
decided to settle. It
offered everything
we wanted.

Golf and has played at some of the best courses in the United States.

Thirty-three private and municipal courses within 10 to 30 minutes of downtown offer heavily treed fairways, lush greens, challenging holes and rock-bottom fees. At less than \$30 for 18 holes—even on Saturday mornings in summer—golf is a real bargain in Spokane.

Indian Canyon, for instance, has drawn golfers since it opened in 1935 and is consistently listed among the top 25 public courses in the United States by *Golf Digest*.

“Generations of Spokane families play golf at Indian Canyon,” says Spokane native Gail Goeller. She took lessons there as a youngster and intends to teach her grandchildren how to play golf at the course.

Other favorites include MeadowWood, which promises enough variety that you’ll need to pull every club out of your bag, and the Creek at Qualchan—a tough, wooded and hilly course with five ponds—that meanders along Latah Creek.

YOU CAN SEE WHY SPOKANE was the place my family decided to settle. It offered every-

thing we wanted. The only thing we hadn’t counted on was the need to expand our budget for recreation gear. When we moved to Spokane, our outdoor equipment included a modest assortment of biking, hiking and camping stuff. A decade later, we have four pairs of snow skis, two road bicycles, three mountain bikes, two pairs of in-line skates, cowgirl clothes, new hiking boots and river sandals for all. There’s just no end to the outdoor gear we need around here. **S**

Linda Hagen Miller enjoys writing about the outdoor recreation near her home.

Alaska Airlines (800-ALASKAAIR, alaskaair.com) and Horizon Air (800-547-9308, horizonair.com) fly daily to Spokane. On July 1, Horizon Air will launch nonstop jet service between Spokane and Sacramento, and add nonstop jet service between Spokane and Los Angeles. For more information about Spokane-area recreation, call the Spokane Regional Convention and Visitors Bureau at 888-SPOKANE or go to www.VisitSpokane.com.

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