

Where You Will Live the Longest

According to a Harvard study, the top seven counties for life expectancy are in Colorado. Is there something magic in the air there? TIME's correspondent from top-ranking Clear Creek County investigates

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A few hardcore ski bums might have awakened Tuesday morning and blinked their eyes in disbelief, but Clear Creek County, Co., where I live, ranks first in the U.S. for longevity, according to a Harvard School of Public Health study appearing in the Sept. 12 issue of *Public Library of Science Medicine*.

In fact, seven Colorado counties are the top seven ranked counties in the nation, all with a life expectancy of 81.3 years. And it hardly seems coincidental that all seven — Clear Creek, Eagle, Gilpin, Grand, Jackson, Park and Summit — lie either on, near or adjoining the Continental Divide and are spectacularly beautiful.

Dr. Ned Calonge of the state health department told the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver that there's nothing magical about high-country air. He thinks the longevity results are because Colorado residents have active lifestyles, low smoking rates and the lowest-in-the-nation numbers for obesity.

Maybe.

But I'd beg to differ on the "nothing magical" part. How can you taste water just five miles from its snowfield source — before any treated sewage comes close to touching it — and not thrive, even if just a little? The darkly dense forests here stimulate the imagination. The alpine tundra tantalizes the spirit. In *Last Child in the Woods*, the author Richard Louv argues that today's overly wired children suffer from nature-deficit disorder because they are so transfixed by indoor recreation. Louv also mentions nature's "healing" aspect — how studies have shown that prisoners and hospital patients do better if they have at least visual access to the natural world.

Nature doesn't heal everyone, of course. There are tourists who come to Colorado's high country and end up with blinding headaches and debilitating nausea from the altitude. There are locals who, reaching a certain age, decamp with their oxygen bottles to Denver.

But among those who stay, there's at least one constant: even in their dotage, people remain full of life. The question is: why?

It could be the space. In Clear Creek County, there are 184,191 acres of public land, which means approximately 19.75 acres of national forest for each of our 9,322 residents. You don't spend a lot of time waiting in lines.

Or is it the recreation? Of the top seven counties, Gilpin has a state park, portions of two national forests, and no supermarkets; Grand County is the western portal to the state's most primo real estate, Rocky Mountain National Park; and Summit has three ski areas: Breckenridge, Copper Mountain and Keystone. Eagle County (where Vail is located) has 19,316 registered voters and 44,421 registered vehicles, an average of 2 1/2 vehicles per voter.

One thing is certain: money doesn't buy old age. In Jackson County, which has a population of just 1,454, the median household income is a meager \$31,821. That's much less than the national average of \$41,994. Lots of freezers stocked with venison. Lots of pickups with rebuilt engines.

But you don't need demographics to understand why, at these altitudes, you stay lively. It's because it's too risky not to. Disregard the dark clouds coming over the Divide and you'll get slammed by bad weather. Don't look closely at the droppings in the driveway and you might not realize they belong to a nearby ferocious animal. Fail to notice the morning ice along the creek and you won't order your propane or woodsplitter in time before winter. And that slight movement up on the ridge that you catch in peripheral vision? Depending upon the season, it could either be a rock slide or an avalanche.

Your senses stay alert at these altitudes, and that alone must help prolong life. It worked for our forebears at least. Remain attentive and you might make it on the trail to Oregon. Lose focus for a moment and wham! — you're bear meat.