

These 18 towns are perfecting the art of living well — places where conservation is more important than development, bike makers and breweries and farmers markets thrive, and Whole Foods is considered a big-box store.

by ROBERT EARLE HOWELLS

PUT YOUR OUTDOOR LIFE FIRST

DURANGO, CO



In its taste for fleece and proximity to aweinspiring mountains, Durango often gets compared to Boulder 20 years ago. But with

its isolation, modest size and population (16,000), and a down-home, just-folks genuineness, Durango clearly doesn't aspire to Boulder's growth, and it will never be a bedroom community for any metropolis.

Tucked down in the southwest corner of Colorado, where the San Juan Mountains meet the arid Colorado Plateau, Durango has plenty of trademark Rocky Mountain beauty. But what distinguishes it from places like Boulder - or dream towns like Aspen and Vail - is how protecting its way of life and defining qualities is built into the town charter as well as its collective zeitgeist. Residents voted years ago to tax themselves to raise funds for parks, open space, and trails, all of which it has in crazy proportions relative to its size — 1,575 protected acres in town alone. Volunteers fervently maintain local trails through a nonprofit called Trails 2000, which boasts 2,000 members - that's 12 percent of the total population.

The high-desert city, cleaved by the Animas River and perched 6,500 feet high

at the stoop of the San Juans, has just enough oil and gas, ranching, and clean tech to support a handful of coffeehouses doing fairtrade brews, four microbreweries (seriously—it's the water), and fine community arts and theater programs in an Old West downtown. The presence of four-year Fort Lewis College lends an additional cultural boost, but Durango is also decidedly laid-back, the kind of town where a shopkeeper is likely to lock up early and post a GONE SKIING sign when fresh powder falls at Purgatory, just 24 miles away.

High-paying gigs are scarce, but plenty of locals are happy to work two jobs for the right to live in a place so blessed by geography and sunshine. A mile south of downtown, the RiverGate complex has lofts overlooking the Animas, with views of the La Plata Mountains and hop-on access to the town's main bike path. Cars are left parked for weeks at a time as kayaking, fishing, hiking, and mountain biking are right out the door, as are millions of acres of Forest Service and BLM land. A Durango ritual that speaks volumes is visible on any summer Friday, about 5 PM — it's the Animas River clogged with tubers nursing beers and hailing one another as they drift through town - happy hour in a happy place.

MODEL CITIZEN

JEREMY DAKAN Manager, Pine Needle Mountaineering



Colorado-born Jeremy Dakan did stints in such hallowed outdoor havens as Bend, Oregon; Park City, Utah; and Salt Lake City before coming to Durango four years ago and taking a job at outdoor shop Pine Needle. And he plans to stay: He's lining up loans to buy the shop when its current owners retire. "If it's not snowing, we're out riding our bikes. I can ride to work, ride to my favorite fishing spot, ride home at lunch, and I can run my dog by the river," he says. "It's a real community, not like a lot of resort towns. People live here because they want to be here—there's a lot of overqualified waitstaff in Durango. I'm not going to get rich, but I'll make a decent enough living."

MIX WITH ARTISTS AND ATHLETES

SARASOTA, FL

"It's Florida for people who hate Florida," says a Sarasota booster. In other words, it's the rare subtropical city that has decided to revoke its anything-goes attitude toward expansion, where being active means more than steering a golf cart. Voters approved acquisition of 35,000 acres of open land to bring the county total of acres off-limits to development to 80,000. Sarasota is home to the Ultimate Frisbee national championships; the rowing scene is huge; and people bike to work on a growing network of trails. And while prim arts like opera have always flourished here, more avant-garde fare is on the upswing. (Electronica grabs the stage during April's Vinyl Music Festival.) The Ringling College of Art and Design cranks out video-game and other digital designers, and HuB is a local epicenter for networking artists, media, and software companies that rent space there.



LIVE IN "SILICON PRAIRIE"

DES MOINES

Once synonymous with boring, Des Moines has acquired a bit of urban-hip sheen — a new sculpture park with \$40 million in art pieces (including a De Kooning), new top-tier restaurants, and offices linked by skywalks in a once-somnolent downtown. It's also the flagship of an area of the country now known as Silicon Prairie. Tech, particularly agriculture biotechnology, is creating jobs and drawing younger workers, and Dell has a strong presence here too. Unemployment is low, and the cost of living is IO percent under the national average, while home prices are a whopping I2 percent lower than the norm.

START SOMETHING

MEMPHIS

Lots of cities are doing what they can to encourage start-ups, but in Memphis it seems the whole city is starting something

— be it a tech company or a garage band - and everybody wants to help one another. Innovative entrepreneur backers like EmergeMemphis steer fledgling tech firms toward seed money, while LaunchMemphis runs start-up boot camps, often led by members of Memphis's many-tentacled music community. So it's no surprise that the Memphis Symphony might play Bach at the Cannon Center one night and the next take the stage at a club with boho rocker Harlan T. Bobo, thanks to the orchestra's "music without boundaries" program. Memphis also has a half-dozen farmers markets, and Project Green Fork certifies restaurants for going green and buying local.

FORGET THE RECESSION

FARGO, ND

Fargo is a city on the rise in a state with low taxes (and going down), a budget surplus, and low unemployment (4 percent). It also has the biggest Microsoft campus outside Redmond, so we're not just talking about assembling tractors. You'll find clean air and even some nascent hipness (HoDo Lounge martini bar!) in a revitalized downtown full of historic but urbane brick buildings and North Dakota State students.

FIND COMMUNITY

NORTHAMPTON. MA

Here's the kind of place Northampton is: When I2O acres of nearby historic farmland came up for sale, locals said, "We want it." The town of 29,000 formed a nonprofit, Grow Food Northampton, determined to raise money to buy the land and establish a community farm. They held forums, launched a Facebook page, and in less than a year had the \$675,000 they needed. Now this town of Smith College professors, urban refugees, and tech workers is in the organic-food business. The farm will also provide plots to locals and produce to food banks and shelters.



KEEP YOUR BRAIN IN SHAPE

HUNTSVILLE, AL

This city of 400,000 near the southern Appalachian foothills — where Monte Sano, with its 14 miles of hiking and biking trails, rises to 1,600 feet — is the home of the U.S. Space & Rocket Center and the NASA-affiliated Marshall Space Flight Center, which employs 2,500 scientists. The "Rocket City" also has minor-league baseball and hockey teams. You can nab a four-bedroom home for around \$200,000 and pay under a grand a year in taxes for it.

RAISE AN ATHLETE

FRISCO, TX

One of the fastest-growing cities in the U.S. hit its stride via an ingenious formula: Build state-of-the-art sports venues to attract professional teams, then use the tax boon to create a fiscally healthy paradise for jocks. The result: a booming and hyperactive community of soccer moms and baseball dads whose offspring are involved in countless athletic programs and have superb places to play. Frisco, 25 miles north of Dallas, soared from 33,000 to IIO,000 and has a median age of 32. Revenue from the minor-league ballpark, hockey arena, and MLS soccer stadium gets recycled to benefit parks, bike paths, public art, and a historic downtown.



LIVE IN A BIG CITY DESIGNED FOR GETTING OUTSIDE

MINNEAPOLIS



Minneapolis's endemic love affair with water and woods — and playing in both — has always driven city planning. Parklands,

the Mississippi River, Minnehaha Falls, and a chain of 22 lakes have been part of the city's fabric since its inception. Today, Minneapolis has so many parks that no resident is farther than six blocks from green space.

And with everyone constantly running, skiing, biking, canoeing, or skating, it only made sense to link the parks with bike trails. Hence an ever-growing, 128-mile network of lanes and paths, including the city-spanning Midtown Greenway, has encouraged a remarkable (4.3%) rate of bicycle commuting. Add in warrens of single-track mountain-bike loops (e.g., Theodore Wirth Park, Fort Snelling State Park) that morph neatly into cross-country ski trails in winter, and there's no doubt why *Bicycling* magazine last year named Minneapolis the country's top bike city.

But isn't winter the gorilla in the room? "If you live here, you just get used to the fact that it's cold and snowy for six months at a time," says Stephen Regenold, a native who writes a syndicated outdoor column and has a website called Gear Junkie. "You put on some winter gear and snowshoes and trek into the woods at Three Rivers Park. Staring up at the stars, you might as well be 400 miles north."

Minneapolis has acquired a bit of multicultural hipness in recent years, and its eclectic arts district with converted-warehouse galleries and ethnic eateries add tangible livability. Downtown and the adjacent northeast have revived those once-ghost-town districts with condos and artists lofts. By now, flourishes that might be considered trendy elsewhere are simply built into Minneapolis's DNA — a huge organic, eat-local scene spurred by no fewer than 17 farmers markets. (The biggest one dates back to 1937.) It's a city that not only exercises daily but knows how to live well, too.

MODEL CITIZEN

JOSHUA KLAUCK Bike-shop and coffeehouse owner



Nothing represents Minneapolis's love of the outdoors and the artisanal more than Joshua Klauck's Angry Catfish bike and coffee shop, housed in a converted hardware store "that was pretty much a shithole." Klauck spruced it up with the help of a grant from his local neighborhood association and now sells the two things he loves most: top-notch organic brews and handmade bikes. "I'm inspired to sell bikes that inspire me." Klauck, of course, rides to work every day, yearround, weather be damned.

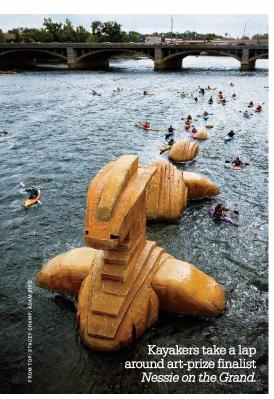
TAKE A CHANCE ON A CRAZY IDEA

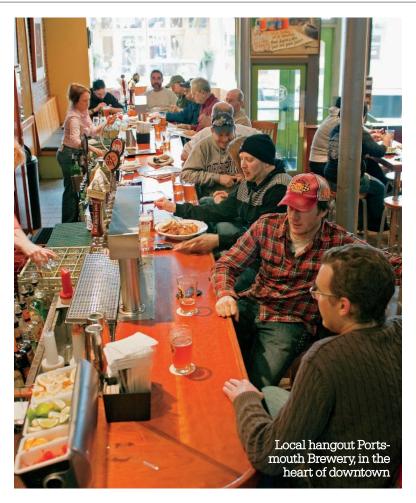
GRAND RAPIDS

↑ \$82,370 \$ 20% LOWER **※** 158 DAYS Few cities anywhere do more to support creativity than Michigan's second-largest metropolis. Entrepreneur Rick DeVos, scion of an

Amway founder, is the brains behind Momentum, which awards budding entrepreneurs \$20,000 and a 12-week start-up boot camp, as well as ArtPrize, the world's largest art competition, which shells out \$450,000 among 10 winning artists, who then install their work in approved venues. (A public vote determines who gets the dough.) Both befit a city whose roots and image are steeped in design consciousness, from early days as a furniture center to being the present-day home of Herman Miller, Steelcase, and the Kendall College of Art and Design.

That energy spreads throughout the city: the highest number of eco-friendly LEED-certified buildings per capita in the U.S., a college that awards degrees in sustainable business, an abundance of public art, and a district of galleries called Avenue for the Arts. The latter typifies the city's walkable clusters — like Gaslight Village and East Hills — which in turn display the artisanal and culinary vibe of a town with 10 craft breweries and top restaurants helmed by grads of the local culinary institute.





BECOME A LOCALIST

PORTSMOUTH, NH



The idyllic harbor town on New Hampshire's 17-mile stretch of coast bears some of the better attributes of its neighbors — the coastal beauty of Maine and the cultural vigor of Massachusetts — but Portsmouth is decidedly New Hampshire. That means no income tax, no sales tax, and a fierce pride in localism, which is fostered through innovative programs designed to promote

homegrown resources and talent and to protect the town's heritage.

A couple of decades ago, city planners decided to reel in would-be mall-goers by spiffing up the historic downtown — slowing down traffic, adding comfy spots to sit. Locals take an active role in city planning through a program called Portsmouth Listens, which helps guide the town's master plan by way of small study groups held around town. Having won kudos from entities like the National Trust for Historic Preservation, local planners "understand that people don't say, 'Hey, let's go to Portsmouth because it has a Banana Republic,'" says Tom Holbrook, whose independent RiverRun bookstore is among dozens of small businesses that benefit from the museum-quality ambience of a walkable city core.

That cultivated local flavor also attracts plenty of visitors (Portsmouth is an hour's drive from Boston), who help support more than a dozen nearby theaters and more than a hundred eateries, in a town of only 21,000. Chefs join area growers and businesses in Seacoast Local, a major eat/shop-local campaign, and a huge farmers market continues right through the winter by retreating to a greenhouse. What is not so idyllic is the cost of housing, but the economy is doing well here and some bargains can be had. (Historic brick homes in the Atlantic Heights neighborhood, a quick bike ride to downtown, are in the mid-\$200,000 range.) Today the nearby Navy shipyard employs 5,000 civilians, and the town is a hub of high-tech, biotech, and design firms. A group called eCoast works to connect start-ups with angel investors, and its members stage a monthly eBrew to network over hand-pulled pints. After all, brewing too is part of the fabric of Portsmouth history.

BE A PART OF THE CITY OF THE FUTURE

NEW ORLEANS

New Orleans isn't just rebuilding; it's reinventing itself with an entrepreneurial energy and urban activism that

have transformed the city into an exciting laboratory for urban design. "A lot of us were forced to burn our boats after Katrina — to ask, 'Do I really want to be here?' says Robbie Vitrano, whose healthy-pizza chain Naked Pizza opened in a building that was once under six feet of water. "But if you love the city, the question became, 'How do I best use my footprint?'"

New Orleans's template for the future has basically been drawn up by devoted locals, who favor neighborhood-driven development and an influx of entrepreneurs from all over the country, and who see this as one of their generation's biggest challenges. Ground zero for the movement is the once-quiet Warehouse District, an elegant yet funky mix of repurposed traditional and industrial buildings near the river. These days it's a buzzing spot to live, work, and play. "The neighborhood has become a magnet for people from all over who want to help rebuild one of America's great cities," says Tim Williamson, cofounder of the Idea Village, which links local start-ups to corporate brainpower and seed money. "Now they're connected to the soul of New Orleans."

That spirit is in obvious contrast to the clumsy efforts of post-storm FEMA, which is why a scarred New Orleans has spurned a top-down makeover in favor of more focused development. Case in point: the architecturally striking, reasonably priced (well under \$200,000), very green, and seemingly storm-proof homes built by programs like Brad Pitt's Make It Right in the Lower Ninth Ward and architect William Monaghan's Build Now. While many of the hardest-hit neighborhoods won't truly bounce back for years, the showcase homes inject grace notes of optimism and a new way of thinking.

Traditional neighborhoods like Faubourg St. John, which was spared the worst of the flooding, are emerging as havens for creative types as well. Citywide, the qualities that have always earned New Orleans such deep affection are back and better than ever. Traditional music is thriving, and the city has more restaurants (about 1,000) than prior to the storm. New bars seem to open every month, like Robert LeBlanc's gastro-pub Capdeville and Cole Newton's midcity dive, Twelve Mile Limit. Meanwhile, enterprises ranging from Mr. Chill's barbershop to Renee Brown's Bayou Brew Wellness Tea have used seed money to rise up and prosper. Five years ago, the city's population stood at less than half its pre-Katrina total (455,000). Today, it's more than 70 percent of the prestorm total — and growing.

ESCAPE THE CROWDS JACKSONVILLE, OR

Evening picnickers
at the Britt
Music Festival



Jacksonville's 19thcentury, gold rush-era downtown is on the National Register of Historic Places, but the town's old-fashioned

look, feel, and values are more a product of ethos than edict. The core is protected, and the local Woodlands Association has preserved woods and trails all around it. But the Craftsman and Queen Anne cottages are tidy from pride, not law. There's no proscription against golden arches or chain stores, but "if someone tried to open one, there'd be a bloodbath," says a local merchant. The town of 2,700 may have only one gas station and no neon signs, but it's not totally cut off: Nearby are Crater Lake and Oregon's latest wine region, Applegate Valley, which is producing some of the country's best pinot noir. Jacksonville is largely a town of shopkeepers and telecommuters; if that's not you, look a few miles down the road to Medford or touristy Ashland for work.

DO THE CALI COAST RIGHT

SAN LUIS OBISPO, CA



San Luis Obispo is a city very clear about what it is not — Los Angeles or San Francisco, although it lies exactly halfway between the two — and what it is: a place favored by sublime geography, whose endurance is assured by smart city planning. The old Spanish mission town is cradled among hills just far enough inland to be out of the Central Coast fog belt, but close enough to the ocean for a prebreakfast surf session. It's not too

big or too small (population 45,000), too hot or too cold (85 degrees is a hot day; 65 degrees is chilly), too busy or too sleepy. Its only extreme might be beauty: tree-lined streets leading to the 1794 mission, a pedestrian-only heart of town, oak-studded hills. Just outside city limits are an emerging wine region and the kind of rolling country lanes that roadies dream about.

SLO, as it's known to locals, got some major ink last year in a book called *Thrive* by Dan Buettner. Citing "stratospheric levels of emotional well-being" in a Gallup-Healthways poll, he profiled the town as one of the happiest in the U.S. That's by design, not happenstance. Ordinances keep development from creeping up the city's signature hillsides. SLO banned fast-food drive-throughs years ago, and it was the first city in the country to nix indoor smoking in public places. (It recently adopted an outdoor ban that is among the nation's toughest: no smoking on sidewalks, in parks, or in the downtown Mission Plaza.) Mom-and-pop and Starbucks live together in peace, and no one dares to suggest cleaning up Bubble Gum Alley, where a million or so wads of gum decorate a pedestrian walkway.

A big part of the cool vibe comes from state university Cal Poly, which is also one of the biggest employers in the region. Newer job opportunities include solar and high-tech companies, and telecommuting is a viable option. It's also near a major agricultural area. No one moves to San Luis Obispo to get rich, but the strawberries at the farmers market are awesome.

MODEL CITIZEN

ERIK JUSTESEN Landscape architect



Cal Poly grad Erik Justesen has his dream job heading up projects that have a direct effect on his own quality of life. As CEO of RRM Design Group, which focuses on urban- and green-building projects, he designed the new bike trail linking the downtown waterfront to Morro Rock harbor beach. "I parlayed my passion for cycling into a unit of our company that specializes in parks and trails," he says. "We take a lot of pride in making these things happen. And then we get to ride them. That's an amazing feeling of satisfaction."



PROTECT A PARK

LOUISVILLE. KY

Louisville recently declared itself a "City of Parks" and embarked on an initiative to preserve open space (including a new 4,000-acre parkland corridor). Locals are enjoying a renaissance downtown in the old Whiskey Row, where former distilleries and warehouses are now restaurants and lofts. And Louisville still has its distinct neighborhoods, like Bardstown, rich with Victorians and eclectic eateries, and magnolia-draped Old Louisville, with its many pedestrian-only streets.



LIVE IN THE PAST

PHILIPSBURG, MT

Tucked in the Rocky Mountains between Missoula and Butte, with a ski area down the road, superb trout fishing right in town, and a complete absence of chain stores, Philipsburg is an off-the-grid paradise. Merchants in the 3.5-block historic downtown, reminiscent of its old mining days, shelled out a quarter of a million bucks and a lot of sweat equity to put up historic streetlights, and they stage fundraisers for flags and flowers to hang from the lampposts. Philipsburg also has a soda fountain that serves phosphates and sarsaparilla, four saloons, the oldest operating opera house in the state, and, of course, a fly shop.

GROW THE RIGHT WAY

GREENVILLE, SC

Booming Greenville has a lot to beat its chest about. The North American home of BMW and Michelin, it boasts a revitalized, pedestrian-friendly old downtown with a cool throwback ballpark, all linked by free trolley service; a zealous cycling community; and a group called Upstate Forever that keeps a watchdog's eye on open space and clean waterways. But the most telling recent development is the NEXT Innovation Center, where tech start-ups, entrepreneurs, and even angel investors rent and share space, coffee, and brainpower. The creative vibe here is so strong that walls are covered with writable surfaces so eurekas can get scribbled down anywhere, anytime.

GO GREEN

FLAGSTAFF, AZ

It's fitting that Flagstaff's version of an incubator for start-ups mainly seeds green businesses and has a youthful flair. The eco-minded college town of 60,000 sits at 7,000 feet beneath the San Francisco Peaks and is surrounded by the world's largest forest of ponderosa pines. Plus it's the home of Southwest Windpower, the world's largest maker of small-scale wind