



Visit the Country's Coolest New Hotel

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By Radha Marcum, Senior Editor

It was a nearly 100-degree summer day in Bozeman when my husband, kids, and I pulled up at The Lark hotel, our car loaded to the max with camping gear, bikes, dog, and a nearly empty cooler. At 4:45 p.m. a small crowd was already queuing at Victory Taco, the hotel's permanent on-site food truck and ice-cream stand. Kids and their wilted parents wolfed down guac and chips or salted caramel cones, while hip twenty-somethings did the same. Which were the hotel guests and which were the locals? They were indistinguishable.

This is exactly what designers of The Lark were hoping for when they bought the 38-room property—an aged, abandoned hotel built in the 1960s. Where most lodging properties are designed to give you an all-in-one sleep, eat, play experience, the Bozeman-based architecture firm Thinktank Design Group envisioned it as a hub for guests to get out and go.

Destination Exploration

Though the hustle and bustle of downtown and the Victory Taco scene was just outside our room, once we stepped beyond the plant-bordered threshold and into the corridor that protects the rooms, things began to settle down. Rooms are smartly designed to feel spacious and maximize functionality, each uniquely decorated with art commissioned from local artists and craftspeople. Our room was all about local geography.

"Welcome to The Lark!" was handwritten into the little blue "field journal" notebook left for us on the desk. Staff had handwritten a list of events/activities (examples: "Bogert Farmers' Market today from 5:00–8:00 p.m." or "Hiking in the Hyalite Area, Grotto or Palisade Falls"), as well as a couple dog parks and half a dozen places to eat.

The Lark staff act as guides, explains Keith Comiso, general manager. They know all things Bozeman, from downtown cafés, bars, and restaurants (all within walking distance) to the spectacular trails and activities in no less than five nearby mountain ranges. In fact, the entrance to Yellowstone National Park is just an hour and a half away.

"We try to create an experience for our guests like they are in the know as much as a local," says Comiso. "Our goal, opposite of other hotel properties, is not to keep our guests in the hotel as much as possible. We are here to attract visitors to downtown and encourage them to explore what Bozeman has to offer," he says.

From Road Hotel to Modern Comfort

We started with a quick tour of the property. Adjacent to the reception area and map room, the hotel has a living room-like space, filled with natural light and comfortable chairs, which looks out onto a patio with ample seating and fireplace: ideal spaces for relaxing and gathering with friends or family. The hotel has a dedicated "map room"—with USGS maps—to plan excursions.

Transforming the property to create comfort and a sense of community was an exciting challenge, Erik Nelson, owner of Thinktank Design Group, tells me later. "We focused on reusing the existing building structures and materials, reinventing what the motor lodge could be. We wanted it to be a place of respite at the end of the day, where visitors could gather and share stories or meet locals or other travelers."

"The entire property was restored by local Bozeman craftspeople," Comiso explains. No bland hotel artwork was shipped in from warehouses elsewhere. Ten local artists created informative pieces of art specifically for The Lark, "developed to inform our guests about local Montana information, wildlife, mountains, and so forth," says Comiso. Patrick Hoffman, the Bozeman High School art and ceramics teacher, served as the art director on property.

A Sign of the Bozeman Times

A consummate college town, Bozeman was just beginning to refill with Montana State University students tootling around on beat-up cruiser bikes and swarming for Wednesday-night karaoke at the Bacchus Pub across the street. But Bozeman has become a thriving, family-friendly hub for business and is one of the fastest growing small cities in the US too. Just down Main Street, the Cowboy Café's sidewalk chalkboard advertised urban-sounding "soy-milk almond honey latte." Bozeman is no cow town.

"We hope our guests walk away from the experience having met great local Bozeman people, eaten incredible local food, and more in-the-know about Bozeman and Montana than they would have expected," says Comiso. With several major ski areas in short driving distance from The Lark, my husband and I are dreaming of a snowy return. Enjoy untrampled powder, like locals? Yes, please.

Visit The Lark.

