

Bozeman is a hub for exploration

Great beasts, past and present

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BOZEMAN, Mont. — Unless you're planning a vacation trip to Jurassic Park, you may never get closer to the great prehistoric lizards of the primeval past than at Montana State University's Museum of the Rockies.

One of America's pre-eminent collections of dinosaur bones is contained within the walls of this museum, including 13 full skeletons of *Tyrannosaurus rex*, more than anywhere else on earth. All were discovered in and around eastern Montana, due in no small part to the efforts of the university's world-renowned paleontology studies program.

Just as *T. rex*, the largest of all dinosaurs, once roamed the Great Plains east of the Rocky Mountains, the largest mammals in modern North America continue to wander the region today. Bison and grizzly bears, moose and elk have imprinted prairies, river valleys and alpine slopes from the Yellowstone ecosystem to Glacier National Park.

For the traveler looking to explore the area without sacrificing creature comforts, no city is as perfectly located as Bozeman.

A sophisticated town of 44,000 on Interstate 90, Bozeman is a mere 80 miles from the north entrance of Yellowstone National Park. It's located midway between the headwaters of the Missouri River and the Yellowstone River at an elevation of 4,800 feet. This university community has a selection of lodgings, restaurants and lounges of which Bend might be envious, and the accessibility of outdoor recreation, from skiing and kayaking to fishing and hunting, is certainly the equal of Central Oregon.

And even if Bozeman does have one foot in the very distant past, its other is pointed far into the future, as its outstanding American Computer & Robotics Museum can attest.

Main Street

Today, downtown Bozeman is a delightful place to spend a few days. Unique shops and restaurants, coffee bars and brewpubs line both sides of Main Street for eight blocks between North Third and Wallace avenues, with the historic, seven-story Baxter Hotel, built in Art Deco style in 1929, rising above all. The renovated Baxter is now a residential and commercial property with ground-floor dining, but we found two other great places to stay nearby.

The LARK Bozeman is a 38-room hotel in the heart of downtown that began life in 1963 as an Imperial 400 hostelry. Shuttered in 2009, it was reimaged by new owners, who kept the Streamline-era design and reopened in 2015 with a thoroughly modern look not unlike Portland's Ace Hotel. A map room just off the lobby desk offers assistance to visitors looking for hiking and sightseeing options in the area, and a large Victory Taco outlet in a vintage Spartan trailer stands just outside the front door. Currently undersea is a 29-room expansion due for completion next year.

The Element by Westin is a new five-story hotel, one block north of Main Street, built to eco-friendly LEED standards published by the U.S. Green Building Council. In addition to a modern fitness center and swimming pool, it offers free bicycle loans to guests who want to get around the local area without driving. There's a complimentary breakfast bar, an outdoor barbecue patio, and kitchenettes for guests who want to do their own cooking.

But there are so many fine dining choices downtown, why would you? The duck I enjoyed at Open Range, accompanied by a glass of Oregon's Sokol Blosser pinot noir, was some of the best I've had anywhere; it was served on a semolina gnocchi cake with mushrooms, kale and roasted tomato. My dining companion felt the same about her pork chop with chimichurri sauce and crispy Brussels sprouts.

A night earlier, in the basement digs of the Copper Whiskey Bar & Grill, the steak was amazing. We weren't in town long enough to check out a third, highly recommended restaurant, Bisl Food, also on Main Street. But a breakfast at the Cateye Cafe, on a side street with Cajun pretensions, offered a spice-driven recovery from a later-than-usual night with plenty of student energy among live-music venues.

That vibrancy comes to a peak during several annual events — a winter festival in February, the Sweet Pea arts festival in August, the Bozeman Ice Festival in December — but it seems to never be far from the surface in this lively town.