

by Peter Schlesinger

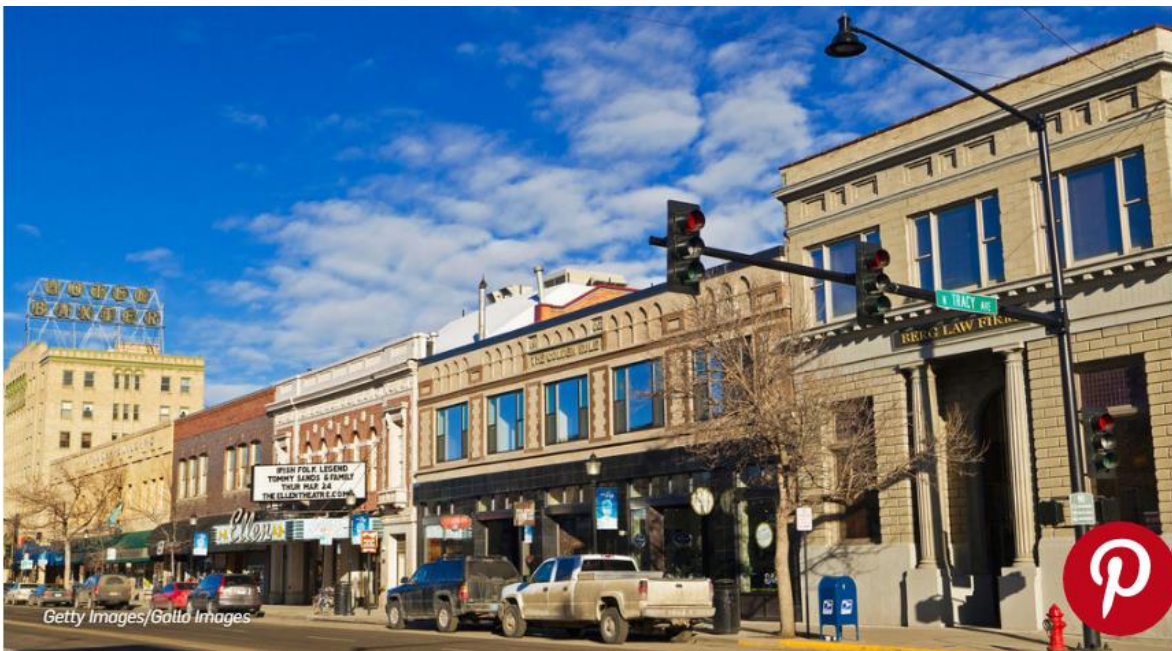
“I’m in love with Montana,” wrote John Steinbeck in his road-trip memoir *Travels with Charlie*. “For other states I have admiration, respect, recognition, even some affection. But with Montana it is love.”

Travel + Leisure readers showed similar devotion to Big Sky Country in this year’s America’s Favorite Places survey. Three of the mountain town winners are in Montana, where the northern Rockies meet the Great Plains. The rapid change in elevation near towns like Missoula makes for some of the country’s steepest skiing, bringing winter visitors year after year.

“The mountains are our backdrop, playground, and really the center of our community. As my grandmother always said, we live in God’s cathedral,” says Cameron Combs, a Montana native whose family has run a ranch near Bozeman since 1959.

In the annual America's Favorite Places survey, readers of all stripes evaluate hundreds of cities and towns across a range of categories, from the friendliness of the locals to the quality of the pizza. Unlike *Travel + Leisure's* World's Best Awards, which encourages readers to weigh in on travel experiences across the globe, the America's Favorite Places survey is a way for locals to share what their hometowns do best.

When it comes to mountain escapes, it's clear they're looking for more than just access to a ski lift or a pretty view. Some readers want history: a Rocky Mountain mining town reborn as a luxe resort, or a storybook New England village. Others are looking for arts and culture, such as at a Southwest artist community or a restaurant mecca in the Southeast.



No. 12: Bozeman, Montana

It used to be that visitors to Yellowstone or the Big Sky Ski Resort would fly into Bozeman and immediately drive out. But *Travel + Leisure* readers have finally caught on to the Montana town's charms. Behind the red-brick façades of downtown's Main Street, laid-back restaurants, adventure outfitters, and cafés teem with both out-of-towners and locals—many of them students at Montana State University. Everyone converges at newcomer boutique hotel *The Lark*, which transformed a drab 1960s motel into the town's hippest hangout.