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8 Naturally Great at Playgrounds

Parkland areas give a boost to active lifestyles By Jay Clarke

Few people who have grown to love America's vast national preserves during vacations over their working lives, what could make a better retirement home than living close to some of them? Many attractive towns are within easy driving range of some of America's most remarkable natural sites -- our national parks, forests, refuges, monuments and historic areas as well as the many state preserves. Some may be close to spectacular mountain scenery, and others may provide easy access to pristine rivers, virgin woodlands or historically important sites.

"Durango is fabulous for us. We ski, we hike, we bike, we go horseback riding," says Sandy House, 64, who moved with her husband, Mike, from Connecticut in 2002. "The difference is that I can pull out of the driveway, turn left and go skiing, while Mike can turn right and go fly-fishing."

The Bracees first visited Durango in 1994 and bought a condo for the next year. But when a house became available, they decided to move full time. Mike, 65, who was a hedge fund manager, consulted with his partners and they agreed he could do his work just as easily from Colorado as from Connecticut. Sandy, who headed training programs for Gillette and then for Coors North America, retired and they moved west.

Another couple, Hal and Sharon Holiday, went another direction. They chose West Virginia for its natural amenities.

"We moved here because of its natural history," she says. "It's easy access to trails and lakes," says Hal, 65, a college professor who still teaches for a couple of autumn months at Bard College in Massachusetts. "We both love to hike." He and Sharon, 64, first visited eight years ago, but after they retired, they moved permanently near Lovelady.

Neither too big nor too small, the towns profiled below were chosen for their proximity to some of America's natural resources. Some have been attracting retirees for years. Others are emerging targets for retirees with active lifestyles, particularly the baby boomers.

Durango, Colorado

The joke here is that Durango residents are so caught up with outdoor recreation that they can't park their cars in garages because they're filled with outdoor gear. That's hardly surprising, as Durango is surrounded by nearly 2,000 miles of hiking and biking trails and millions of acres of public land.

Any notion of the year-round doors here, however, is a summer fly-fishing, kayaking or rafting on the Animas River, hiking or biking in the San Juan National Forest, horseback riding or jeep riding in the backcountry, or riding on the famous Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, which takes a scenic, winding journey through the rugged mountain wilderness. In winter, residents can ski at the well-known Purgatory Mountain just up the road.
A yearly fall festival draws crowds to the streets of Bend, an outdoor enthusiast's haven adjacent to national forests and the Cascade Range in central Oregon.

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Bend, Oregon

From the summit at Pilot Butte State Park here, one can get a wonderful view of the Cascade Range to the west and the high desert to the east. Particularly striking is the special sunset glow on the snow-covered volcanoes that punctuate the horizon... the Three Sisters, Mount Jefferson, Black Butte and Mount Hood.

Here on the dry side of the Cascades, Bend makes a wonderful base for outdoor-targeted folks. Hiking and mountain biking trails are close by. White-water rafters can shoot down the Deschutes River, which runs through the middle of town. It's also a favored site for world-class fly-fishing. And you can add horseback riding, rock climbing, skiing and ecological exploration, all within a few miles of town.

Some of the nation's best rock-climbing sites are found at Smith Rock National Park, with their wood turned to stone and ancient fossils. And to the south of Flagstaff lies one of Arizona's most celebrated features: the red-rock country of Oak Creek Canyon, known for its colorful landscapes.

Unlike Phoenix where summer temperatures can rise to well above 100 degrees, Flagstaff rarely exceeds 90 degrees because of its high elevation, about 7,200 feet — a benefit that has attracted many retirees to the city.

And because the city is home to Northern Arizona University, it enjoys a lively college-town ambiance. Flagstaff Medical Center, a 270-bed hospital, is the major regional trauma center. Arizona's Southwest Chief serves the city from Los Angeles and Albuquerque.

Population: 59,746
Climate: High Low
January 43 18
July 82 50
Cost of Living: Above average
Housing costs: The median home price in Flagstaff, Bellemont and Munds Park was $349,000 for the second quarter of 2020, according to the Northern Arizona Association of Realtors.


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State Park, a half-hour drive north of Bend. More than 1,500 climbing routes lie within the park; best time to climb is in spring and fall.

In winter, skiers and snowboarders head for Mount Bachelor about 22 miles west of Bend on the Cascade Lakes Highway. The ski resort, which gets 300 inches of snow a year compared to Bend’s paltry 52 inches, also offers guided dog-sledding tours and has Nordic trails and a tubing park.

In recent years, Bend has begun to attract more retirees, lured by not only outdoor adventure possibilities but also access to some excellent golf courses. The sprawling Sunriver Resort, for example, has four golf courses as well as several tennis courts.

On the east side of Bend, visitors to the Newberry National Volcanic Monument can explore more than 400 cinder cones and miles of basalt flows along with alpine lakes full of trout and salmon. Some popular fishing spots are also found east of Bend, and nearby is the High Desert Museum, with its excellent exhibits and wildlife.

Bend itself is the largest city in central Oregon. A home is average $205,000 and more than 500,000 people live in central Oregon, plus the Bend Chamber of Commerce, (541) 388-0999 or www.bendchamber.org, Matt Bend, (541) 217-8684 or www.visitbend.com.

Montana

Montana is a great place to retire. The state is a mix of mountainous terrain, forests, and open plains. The capital city of Helena is located in the southeastern part of the state and is known for its historic architecture and picturesque setting.

Yellowstone National Park, the world’s oldest national park, is located in northwestern Wyoming and is known for its geothermal features, such as hot springs, geysers, and thermal pools. The park is a great place for outdoor enthusiasts and nature lovers.

The Blackfeet Indian Reservation, located in southwestern Montana, is home to the Blackfeet Nation, one of the oldest and largest Native American tribes in the region. The reservation is known for its rich cultural heritage and traditional practices.

Wyoming

Wyoming is a state in the western United States known for its rugged mountains, vast open spaces, and diverse wildlife. The capital city of Cheyenne is located in the southeastern part of the state and is known for its history and cultural heritage.

Yellowstone National Park, located in northeastern Wyoming, is one of the most visited national parks in the United States and is known for its geothermal features, such as hot springs, geysers, and thermal pools. The park is a great place for outdoor enthusiasts and nature lovers.

The Crow Indian Reservation, located in central Montana, is home to the Crow Nation, one of the largest Native American tribes in the region. The reservation is known for its rich cultural heritage and traditional practices.

Utah

Utah is a state in the southwestern United States known for its diverse geography, including canyons, deserts, and mountains. The capital city of Salt Lake City is located in the northwestern part of the state and is known for its cultural and educational institutions.

Canyonlands National Park, located in southeastern Utah, is known for its stunning rock formations and canyons. The park is a great place for outdoor enthusiasts and nature lovers.

The Navajo Indian Reservation, located in northeastern Arizona and northwestern New Mexico, is home to the Navajo Nation, the largest Native American tribe in the United States. The reservation is known for its rich cultural heritage and traditional practices.

California

California is a state on the west coast of the United States known for its diverse geography, including mountains, deserts, and coastal areas. The capital city of Sacramento is located in the northwestern part of the state and is known for its history and cultural institutions.

Yellowstone National Park, located in northern Wyoming, is one of the most visited national parks in the United States and is known for its geothermal features, such as hot springs, geysers, and thermal pools. The park is a great place for outdoor enthusiasts and nature lovers.

The Hopi Indian Reservation, located in northwestern Arizona, is home to the Hopi Nation, one of the oldest Native American tribes in the region. The reservation is known for its rich cultural heritage and traditional practices.

Arizona

Arizona is a state in the southwestern United States known for its diverse geography, including mountains, deserts, and canyons. The capital city of Phoenix is located in the central part of the state and is known for its warm climate and cultural institutions.

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