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Special Report

America's Best Cities For The Outdoors

Rebecca Ruiz, 05.12.08, 4:50 PM ET

Come summertime, urbanites often envy those living in bucolic spots like Big Sur, Calif., Aspen, Colo., and Burlington, Vt. It's easy for city dwellers to forget, however, that there are plenty of possibilities in their own backyards.

In [Jacksonville, Fla.](#), for example, 103,000 acres of green space include several "specialty" parks with unique draws: The Ray Greene Park features a BMX course for off-road bikers; the Lannie Road Park is designed for pilots of radio-controlled model airplanes; the 500-acre Tillie K. Fowler Regional Park, with its trails, wetlands and conservation programs, is meant for naturalists.

[Seattle](#) residents can tune out while running a stretch of the city's 75 miles of trails. These paths take runners and walkers through the Washington Park Arboretum, the sandy beaches along Elliot Bay and a grassy, secluded park with a view of the city's skyline.

[In Depth: America's Best Cities For The Outdoors](#)

Other outdoorsy cities include [San Diego](#), [San Jose, Calif.](#), [Phoenix](#), [Tampa, Fla.](#), [Austin, Texas](#), [Las Vegas](#), and [Virginia Beach, Va.](#)

Behind The Numbers

Local getaways can be a godsend to stir-crazy urbanites, but when considering which cities are best for the outdoors, we looked at more than just park land. [Click here for complete methodology.](#)

Using research from the nonprofit organization Trust for Public Land, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency, we gathered data on parks spending per resident, park land as a percentage of city land, recreation facilities, air quality, precipitation, sunshine and temperature extremes for 40 major cities.

Both Seattle and Jacksonville entered into the top 15, and even cities known for inclement weather, like [Minneapolis](#) and [Boston](#), ranked high. Still, it was [San Francisco](#), home to both Frisbee-tossing hippies and endurance-athlete venture capitalists, which ranked first.

Ideal weather conditions--sunshine two-thirds of the year, temperatures that rarely rise above 90 degrees or dip below freezing, and an annual average of just 63 days with precipitation--were major factors. San Francisco also outspent every city on our list, save Seattle, by allocating \$252 for parks and recreation expenditures per resident. In return, residents enjoy 5,770 acres of park land, which includes community gardens, public golf courses and miles of shoreline trails.

Transforming Cities

Some cities that ranked poorly on our list are actually in the midst of major improvement projects. Coming in at No. 35, [Memphis, Tenn.](#), is in the beginning stages of overhauling a former prison-run farm into a 4,500-acre park in the heart of the city. Alex Garvin, president of real estate planning and consulting firm Alex Garvin and Associates, says the park will be "an extraordinary attempt to create something for the 21st century."

Though Garvin's firm is consulting on the Shelby Farms project, he hesitates to specify what aspects of the park will be cutting-edge, only that he expects to see multiple and varied opportunities for physical activity and recreation. With adequate funding, the public will be able to enjoy the redesigned park within five to 10 years.

[Full List: America's Best Cities For The Outdoors](#)

Salvaging land that has long been unmanaged can often take a decade or two, but the results are remarkable. In 1996,

officials in [Denver](#) launched an initiative to restore a 10.5-mile corridor along the South Platte River that had been plagued by neglect and pollution. Paths along the river banks are now a destination for cyclists and joggers, artificial white water rapids have been "installed," and several surrounding parks now feature ball fields, tree-lined promenades and a skate park. Denver ranks 13th on our list.

Peter Harnick, director of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for City Park Excellence at the Trust for Public Land, says that while quantity of city park acreage is important, quality is equally imperative. Cities, he says, should spend a minimum of \$90 per resident for parks and recreation programs. This money is divvied out for competing costs, including park maintenance, tree planting, upkeep of facilities and after-school recreation programs.

Park Perks

In Minneapolis, which ranked seventh, high per-resident spending and efficient management have served residents well. Though the city endures 154 days of the year with low temperatures 32 degrees or below, 15% of the city's land is devoted to parks. (The average for cities on our list was 10.5%.)

The 5,400 acres of park land are put to efficient use: There are activities for every season, including sailing lessons and kayaking at Lake Harriet in the summer and trail walking and cross country skiing at golf courses during the winter. The city also maintains a bandshell venue for summer concerts, a wildflower garden, bird sanctuary and 23 outdoor skating rinks.

How do you plan on spending the summer? Weigh in. Add your thoughts in the readers comments section below.

Despite pressure on some cities to cut funding for parks and recreation during economic downturns, Dr. Laura Brennan Ramirez, president of the St. Louis-based public health research and consulting company Transtria, says city planners and developers are looking for innovative ways to provide city dwellers more opportunities to enjoy the outdoors.

In [Washington, D.C.](#), advertising company Clear Channel Outdoor has partnered with the city's department of transportation to provide bicycle rentals for an annual membership fee of \$40. The bikes, available at 10 locations around the city, can be checked out for three hours at a time.

D.C. already ranks in the top 15 on our list for its high per-resident spending, moderate weather, large percentage of park land and high number of recreation amenities. But with innovative programs like this, first-class cultural offerings and great jobs, the urbanite may finally have an alternative to countryside envy.

Methodology

To determine which of the 40 largest cities were best for the outdoors, we used research from the nonprofit organization Trust for Public Land, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). We included the following data: spending per resident, park land as a percentage of city land, number of recreation facilities, precipitation, sunshine, temperature extremes and air quality.

For spending, park land and recreation, we used fiscal year 2006 data collected by the Trust for Public Land, which gathered information from city municipalities. To measure recreation opportunities, we looked at the number of ball diamonds, tennis courts and pools and created a Forbes.com recreation index.

For sunshine, precipitation and temperature extremes, we used annual averages from NOAA. For air quality, we used data from the EPA and averaged the number of days between 1999 and 2006 when the air quality index for all pollutants rose above 100. Index values between 100 and 500 are considered unhealthy and/or hazardous. We ranked the cities in each category and assigned them total scores.

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