



Health

## Best Cities For The Outdoors

Rebecca Ruiz, 05.12.09, 6:00 AM ET

San Franciscans are known to brag about their exceptional quality of life--especially when it comes to the outdoors. As it turns out, they're not exaggerating.

The bayside city enjoys sunshine for two-thirds of the year, and the balmy summers turn to mild winters. But it's not just pleasant weather that makes San Francisco so ideal for its active residents. The city has set aside 18% of its land for parks and spent \$268 per resident on parks-related projects in the fiscal year 2007.

Those reasons combined are why [San Francisco](#) ranks as the best city for the outdoors for the second consecutive year. In general, Californians are a lucky bunch: [San Diego](#), [San Jose](#) and [Sacramento](#) all ranked in the top 10, while [Los Angeles](#) tied for 11th with [Austin, Texas](#).

### In Depth: Best Cities For The Outdoors

Cities that topped the list offer residents a mix of outdoor activities, including community gardening, access to urban forests and miles of hiking trails. Though few of the measures change drastically from year to year, the [recession](#) may have a long-term impact on these rankings since many cities have been forced to cut back their parks budgets significantly. Both Phoenix, which fell from fifth place last year to eighth place this year, and Philadelphia (which remained 29th), have eliminated positions or services. Even San Francisco has made similar tough choices.

### Behind the Numbers

To determine which of the 40 largest cities are best for the outdoors, Forbes used research from the nonprofit organization Trust for Public Land, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The Trust for Public Land provided data on spending and park land, which it collected from city municipalities.

Data on the weather were collected from historic averages maintained by NOAA. Forbes looked at air quality in each city's county seat between 2000 and 2007 and averaged the number of unhealthy days during that time. Some cities have different averages than last year since the threshold for ozone pollution was lowered in 2008. [Click here for the complete methodology](#).

The aforementioned top cities--which are joined by [Virginia Beach, Va.](#), [Jacksonville, Fla.](#), and [Seattle Wash.](#)--performed well in the categories measured: parks spending, percentage of park land, recreation facilities, air quality, sunshine, snowfall, precipitation and temperature extremes.

While San Francisco took the top spot for the second straight year, Detroit, Mich., fell to the bottom of the list once again. Among the 40 cities ranked, Columbus, Ohio, (No. 39), Milwaukee (No. 37) and Indianapolis (No. 38) also performed as poorly as last year.

### Park Perks

San Francisco may be well known for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area--its 75,500-acre crown jewel--but the city doesn't rely solely on that flagship park to meet the needs of its outdoorsy residents. It maintains more than 230

parks, in addition to hundreds of athletic facilities, including tennis courts, baseball diamonds, golf courses and swimming pools. Residents also have access to more than 40 community gardens.

The [Tampa, Fla.](#), parks department refers to the city's 7.8 million trees as an urban forest. Just northeast of the city, residents can escape to the 16,000-acre Wilderness Park and explore 60 miles of trails through wetlands. The city, which ranked fifth this year, also operates standard recreation facilities and provides river access for canoing and other water sports.

In [Phoenix](#), the scorching heat doesn't stop residents from enjoying the outdoors. There are six public golf courses, four skateboard parks and even a "horse lover's" park for equestrians. Several hiking, biking and riding trails pass through desert preserves. New voter-approved funding for expansion of these parks is one of the only bright spots in a bleak forecast for Phoenix's budget.

David Urbinato, a spokesman for the parks department, says the city has slashed \$24.5 million from the 2009-2010 parks budget in response to dramatically reduced construction and sales taxes. That reduction is in addition to a 12.2% cut during the prior fiscal year. Urbinato says such cuts will translate into less routine maintenance; while a broken sprinkler, for example, might have taken less than 24 hours to fix, it will now take two days.

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### Money Matters

San Francisco, despite topping the list, isn't immune to tough times either. The city's parks department had to cut \$8.8 million from its budget to adjust for declining tax revenue. Among its cost-cutting measures are plans to eliminate several management and administrative positions.

Catherine Nagel, executive director of the City Parks Alliance, a nonprofit organization that counts parks administrators among its members, says that the stimulus package did not include funding for urban parks. Nagel called the omission "short-sighted", referring to research--some of it conducted by the Trust for Public Land--demonstrating that urban parks can contribute significant economic value in the form of jobs, tourism and increased property values.

In Philadelphia, officials expect to maintain the parks department's core services despite slashing at least \$7 million from the fiscal year 2010 budget. Residents are likely to notice a difference, however.

Susan Slawson, the city's recreation commissioner, says the city will reduce seasonal staff and eliminate vacant positions. The biggest loss, she says, is the closing of 27 of the city's 73 pools.

"Our goal is to do the best we can," she says, "even though we're facing some very difficult times."

In the meantime, city dwellers might want to take advantage of the outdoors while local governments can still afford to foot the bill.

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

## 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, snowfall, precipitation, sunshine, temperature extremes and air quality.

For spending, park land and recreation, we used fiscal year 2007 data collected by the Trust for Public Land, which gathered information from city municipalities. To measure recreation opportunities, we looked at the per capita number of ball diamonds, tennis courts and pools and created a Forbes recreation index.

For snowfall, 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 2000 and 2007 when the air quality index for all pollutants rose above 100. Index values between 100 and 500 are considered unhealthy or hazardous. Forbes ranked the cities in each category, averaged the scores and assigned them total scores.