

The Higgins Street Bridge on a beautiful fall day.

MISSOULA'S MOMENT

THE CITY IS FULL OF AMAZING WILDERNESS AND A SENSE OF ADVENTURE

BY NATALIE COMPAGNO AND GREG FREITAS

The wagon trail leading from Seattle to Missoula, Mont., is well-traveled. When Missoulians crave the city slicker vibe, they pony up and head west. When Seattleites want to slow things down, they head over the pass to Zootown, as Missoula is affectionately known.

There is a kinship between Seattleites and Missoulians; we love our communities and the nature that surrounds them. The environment, local food, drink, and art, as well as sharing our vibrant culture with others are paramount. We have

fortitude, and fight to preserve our unique soul, even as we evolve and mature. For many Seattleites, Missoula is always the perfect fit.

Follow this Missoula roundup for your next vacation rodeo.

The name “Missoula” comes from the Salish name for the **Clark Fork River** — nmesuletk̓ — which runs through the city. Formed from a glacial lake, the town sits in a narrow valley where the mountains seem to cradle it with invisible hands, while the flowing water moves through its fingers. This picturesque landscape

S TRAVEL

also gives visitors an incredible natural playground. Take a leisurely walk or run the zigzag trail up to the **M** for a vista view. Autumn brings on a kaleidoscope of orange, gold, and red, showing off why Missoula is called “The Garden City.”

The **Missoula Mercantile** has been a trading post and commercial center for decades. A historic building, it has seen everything bought and sold from groceries to farm equipment, and from prom dresses to wagon wheels. It has gone through many transformations, and the newest iteration is the best place in town to get some shut eye.

The **Residence Inn Missoula Downtown** is Montana at its best, according to one local. It’s western, yet sleek and upscale, all while preserving the history of the building. Request the Mercantile Suite for that vintage feel, with a loft and impressive rounded windows overlooking the city. The indoor pool makes for a refreshing reset after an invigorating day outdoors.

Missoula’s restaurant scene is exploding with new openings while the old faves thrive as well. Ask Missoulians about the restaurant **1889** and their mouths will water as they describe beloved dishes like bone marrow brûlé, tomahawk rib eye, or butter flights with fresh bread. The steakhouse is named for the year of Montana’s statehood, and some locals call it one of the best meals in the country. Mezcal cocktails and tacos are **The Camino’s** calling card. This is a spicy hangout where people meet for dinner or to mingle. **Stave & Hoop** speakeasy serves up cocktails and provisions, while **Bar Plata** mixes trendy libations with even trendier tinned fish snacks.

For a trip to Italy without boarding a plane, **Florabella** is an elegant affair. Sip an Aperol spritz while people watching on dusty-rose color bar stools. Sweet teeth love **Brasserie Porte**

Rouge for its delectable dessert menu, so plan on ending the evening sipping champagne while biting into the tarte noire.

For a meal surrounded by history, head to **Scotty’s Table** in the **Wilma Building**. It serves the seasonable, sustainable best from western Montana’s farmers and producers. But it’s the whispers



Above: The line at Big Dipper Ice Cream is often long, but locals insist it’s well worth the wait. **Opposite page:** The Camino is known for its smoky mezcal margaritas.

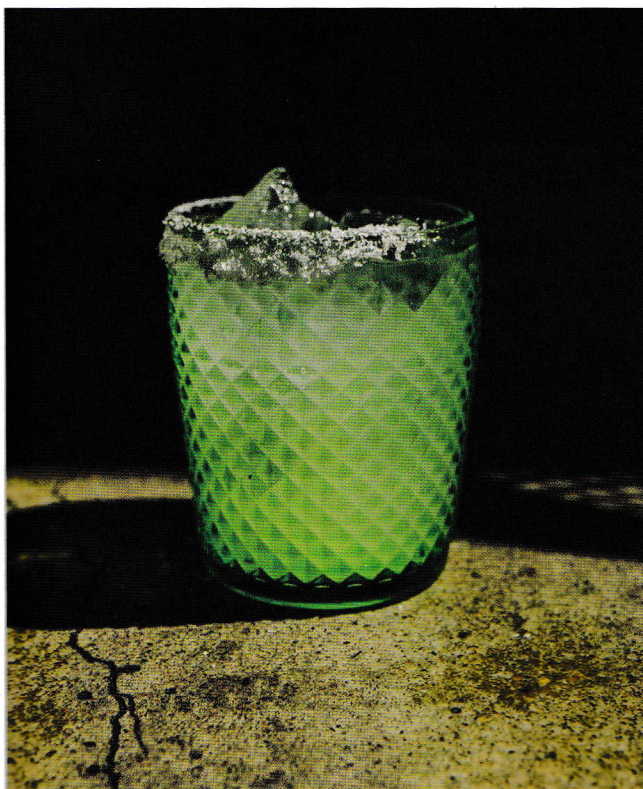
of voices from the past that make the experience memorable. The Wilma Building was commissioned by Billy Simmons in honor of his wife, Edna Wilma, a light-opera singer and performer. The **Wilma Theatre** drew the crowds. It’s an opulent Louis XIV-style palace with seating for more than a thousand people, and a vintage pipe organ.

Stories and legends of eccentricity and decadence swirl around the building. The Wilma had an Olympic-size indoor swimming pool, a “magic fountain” that sprayed perfume for attending ladies, rocking chair seating, and Ed Sharp, who sold tickets with a pigeon on his shoulder. Naturally, it’s haunted. New acts still perform at the theatre today, so if the schedule permits, dinner and a show are a must. For more Missoula lore, sign up for **Unseen Missoula** walking tours.

Hiking and mountain biking trails abound, ready for winter snowshoeing plus cross-country skiing. Try fly fishing, a mesmerizing and relaxing pastime.

For a smaller town (population 75,000), Missoula produces plenty of great beer, with reportedly the second most breweries per capita in the country. Visitors staying downtown near the river can easily visit several top breweries on foot, from **Tamarack** to **Draught Works** to **Conflux**. **Imagine Nation Brewing** also calls itself a “center for community transformation,” so why not drink craft beer while fueling social change? If the weather cooperates, hit up **River City Brews** for a chillaxing river float with local beers and snacks.

Hoping to run into someone? At one point or another, everyone goes to **Big Dipper Ice Cream**. Stand in line, no matter how long, and make friends. This ice cream has found national attention, so take some pints home. Missoula’s three Saturday morning outdoor markets are a great way to meet locals and listen in on the happenings about town. Start at the **Clark Fork Market**, then head north on Higgins Avenue to hit the **Farmers Market** and the **People’s Market**. More shopping finds are at **Cloth and Crown** for style and gifts, **Butterfly Herbs** with teas, coffee, and spices, and the quirky collector’s paradise **Rockin Rudy’s**. **Radius Gallery** displays museum-quality contemporary art and ceramics, with expert curation by owners Lisa Simon and Jason Neal.



Art lovers will appreciate the **Missoula Art Museum**, which houses contemporary Montana artists’ work with a focus on Native art. **The Montana Museum of Art and Culture** displays the state’s largest collection of publicly owned art and will proudly unveil a gorgeous new building this fall on the **University of Montana** campus.

For a truly eye-opening exhibit specific to the region, head to the **Smokeyjumper Visitor Center** with free tours and interactive education. Missoula is home to the largest smokejumper base in the country. These brave, specially trained firefighters deploy by parachute into wildfires as a first line of defense.

Immerse in days past at an old Missoula homestead, the **Moon-Randolph Homestead**, and craft some apple cider at the fall gathering on Sept. 30.

To enjoy horseback rides as the autumn leaves change, put on your best boots and flannel and drive to nearby **Dunrovin Ranch** and the **Bitterroot River** in Lolo. Ask about the **Equine Art Extravaganza** — an art contest where the horses are the canvas — and make plans to return.

Snap an action shot. Hiking and mountain biking trails abound, ready for winter snowshoeing plus cross-country skiing. **Snowbowl** and **Marshall Mountain** ski hills are so close, there’s no reason not to get in a few runs. Try fly fishing, a mesmerizing and relaxing pastime. There’s no better place to enjoy the sport than on the **Clark Fork** or **Bitterroot River** with outfitters **Grizzly Hackle**.

Larger than life character, perseverance, and an unconventional attitude are just part of what makes up a Missoulian.

Hometown paddler Brennan Guth wanted to help repurpose an irrigation diversion in the Clark Fork River into a whitewater feature for kayakers, surfers, and SUPs. After Brennan lost his life paddling in Chile, Brennan’s father raised the money to help complete the project. It is now a year-round mecca for athletes and spectators alike. To enjoy kayaking or river surfing in the area, consider hiring **Zoo Town Surfers** for a guided and thrilling journey.

In the true spirit of “If you build it, they will come,” **A Carousel for Missoula** (an amusement center) was born. Cabinet-maker Chuck Kaparich, who died in 2021, carved four carousel ponies and purchased an antique frame in thousands of pieces in the hopes that he could bring a fairy tale to life. The community rallied behind the idea, and Kaparich taught others to carve. More than 16,000 pieces of the antique frame and motor were restored, and painters wet their brushes to help brighten the ponies. This treasure is a destination.

Before leaving Missoula, have one last swill at the **Ox**, or the **Oxford**, as it’s officially known. This is a pop of color — a layered cake of imbibers, gamblers, and regulars mixed with anyone who wants a strong drink and some beef stew. Wild stories and crazy times are guaranteed. **S**

