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THE TRAVEL ISSUE

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FINDING HOME ABROAD IN NORWAY
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IN THE MOOD FOR MISSOULA

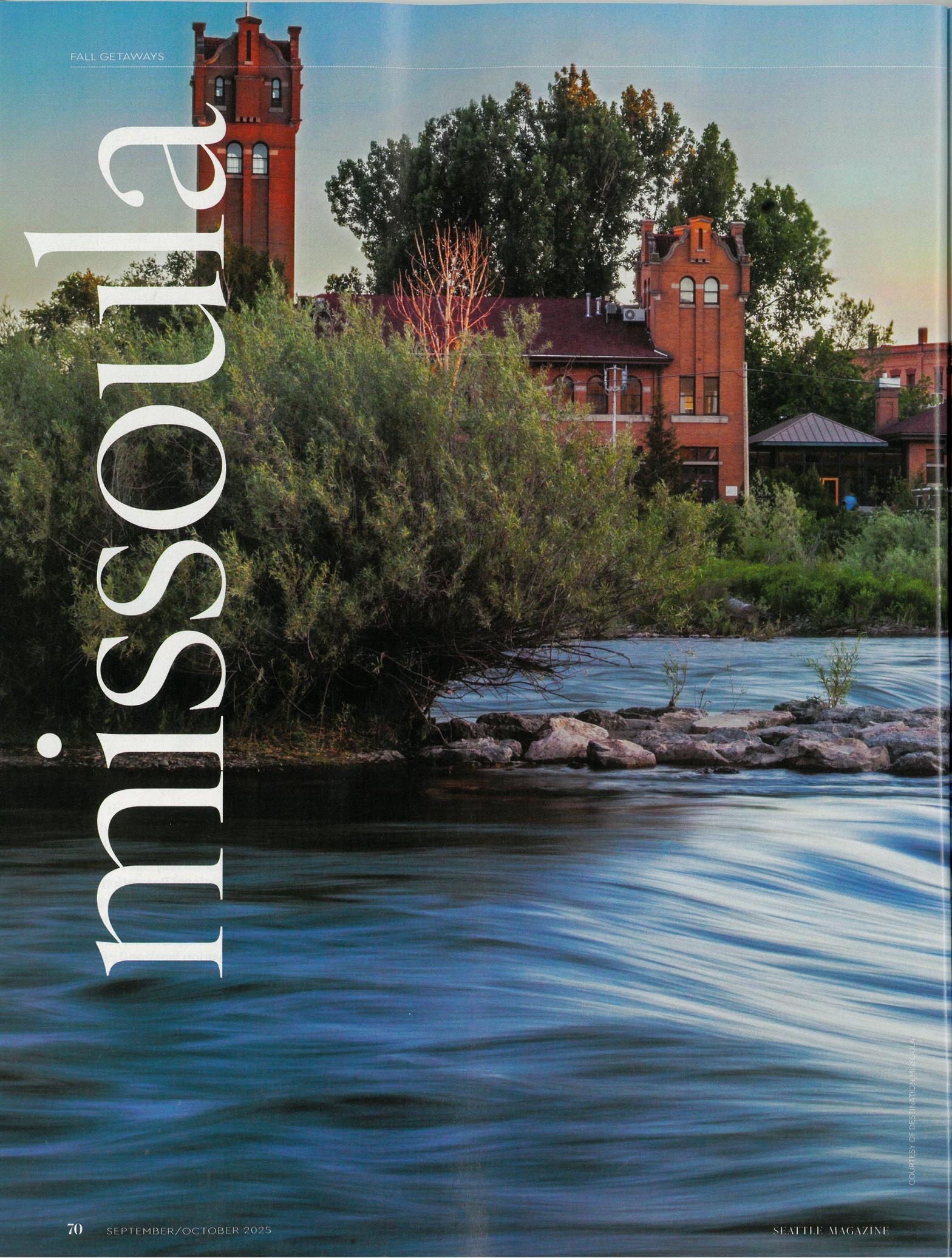
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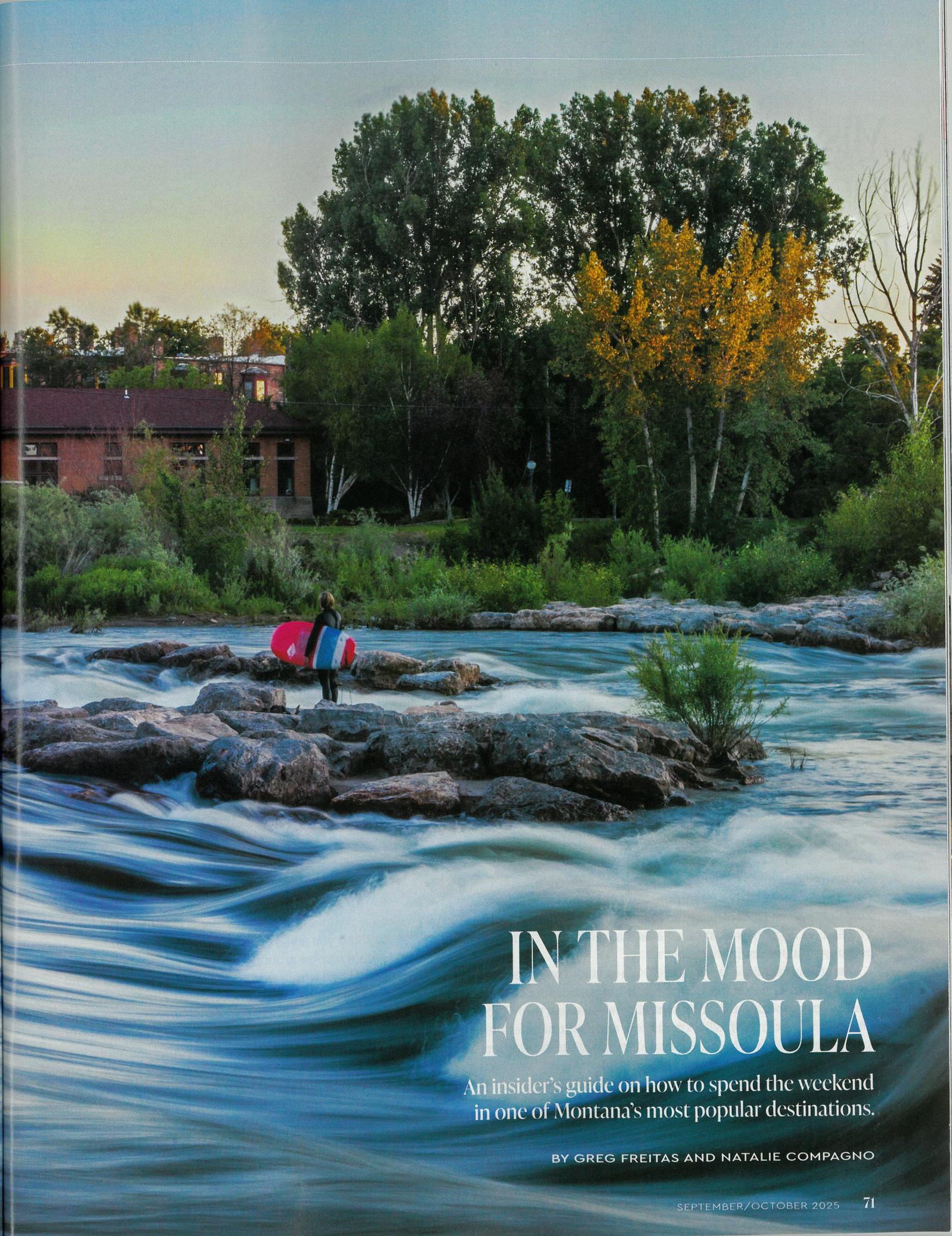
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Missoula



COURTESY OF DESTINATION MISSOULA



IN THE MOOD FOR MISSOULA

An insider's guide on how to spend the weekend
in one of Montana's most popular destinations.

BY GREG FREITAS AND NATALIE COMPAGNO

Missoula is that rare mountain town where river surfers, indie filmmakers, ranch kids, and chefs all pack into the same bar—and somehow, it works.

It's wild, weird, and wonderful in equal measure, with enough soul and scenery to make you question why anyone would ever leave.

As with most small towns, the best way to experience it is through a local's eye, so we asked someone who knows Missoula like an insider for her coveted advice. A part-time Zootown resident who studied at the University of Montana (located less than a mile from downtown), Kathryn Courtney, president and CEO of Mix Consulting, splits her days between Seattle and Missoula. Even with the half-and-half arrangement, she doesn't just visit—she operates at a local's clip.

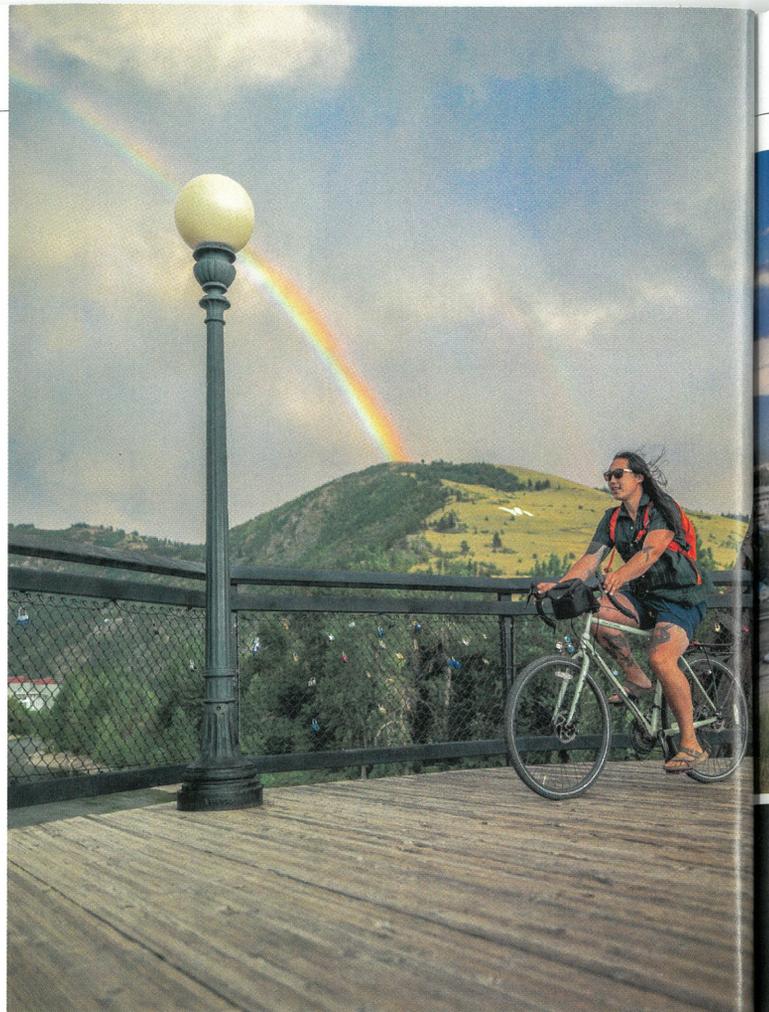
"One of my favorite places right now is Posh Chocolat café in Bonner, just outside town," Courtney says. "It's tucked inside a restored mill house, and everything is made fresh on site—soups, pastries, chocolates, even lunch. It's elegant but not pretentious, and they'll make you a proper coffee too."

When it comes to fine dining, Courtney points to Boxcar Bistro, located in Missoula's Old Sawmill District. "It leans French and is shockingly good," she says. "Curated wines, a gorgeous space, and the kind of dishes that make you question where you are."

For steak splurges—this is Montana, after all—Courtney doesn't hold back: "For a killer and very bougie steak that rivals anything Michelin-starred, go to 1889," she advises. "But if you want the real insider move, drive 20 minutes to Lolo and check out the Lolo Creek Steak House. Inside an old log cabin, it's the real deal. The Stables is the newest super-nice restaurant in town, and everybody's nuts about it."

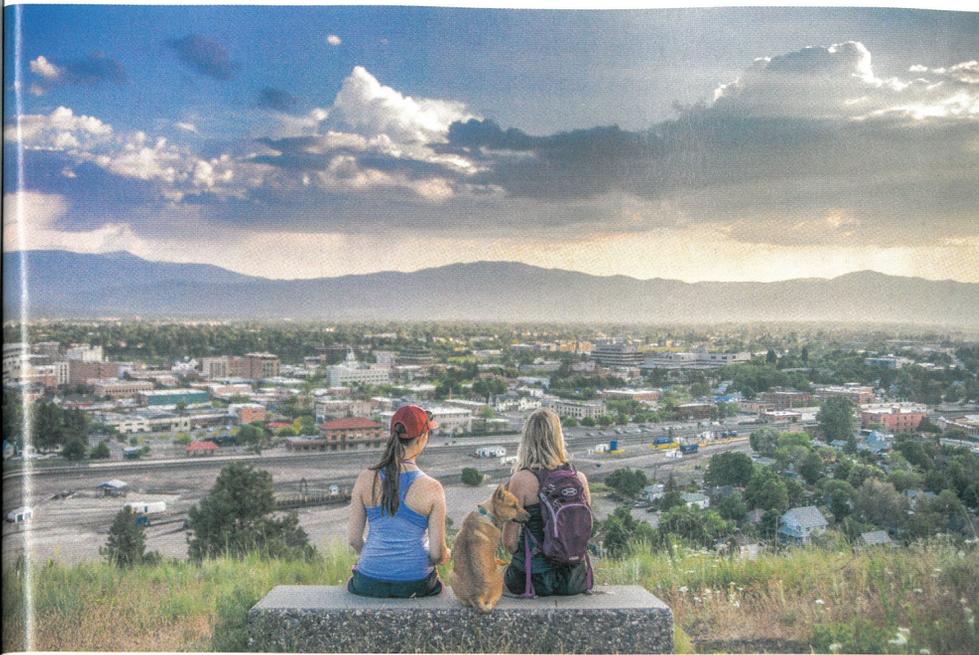
Missoula is nothing if not balanced. When you're ready to trade steak knives for neon signs, Courtney's list of post-dinner options features places with music, drinks, and down-to-earth throwback vibes: "Al's & Vic's, Charlie B's, the Oxford, and the Sunrise—those are the real-deal dive bars," she says. "And the Sunrise is where you go for dancing, no question."

If you find yourself out boot scooting until the late hours, a cup of strong coffee is a must the next morning. Courtney's caffeine solution is two-part: "Black Coffee Roasting Company is the go-to these days—it's stylish and serious about the beans. But Break Espresso is the heart of the town. You'll find half of Missoula camped out



inside, working, reading, talking. The pie is excellent, the brick interior is cozy, and you always run into someone you know."

Weekends often revolve around the four overlapping Saturday markets downtown, all within strolling distance. "You could spend hours wandering between them," Courtney says, noting that her post-market go-to is Worden's, Missoula's first grocery store. Here, you can pick up "exceptional sandwiches, imported treats, and wine," while checking off the remainder of your shopping list. Next door to Worden's is another Missoula classic. "The Old Post is timeless," Courtney says, admitting that she recently stopped by twice in one day. "We used to hang out there years ago, and honestly, it's only gotten better. Their menu is thoughtful, the drinks are handcrafted, and sometimes there's live music that doesn't ruin your conversation."



Ready to Head East? Here's Where to Stay in Missoula

THE WREN

Open since 2022, The Wren has quickly claimed “favorite” status among downtown visitors. Its rooms mix Montana minimalism with clever design touches (striped Pendleton blankets, ice buckets shaped like classic Styrofoam coolers), and the lobby doubles as a relaxed living room where locals and travelers regularly cross paths. Best of all, it’s less than five minutes to the Clark Fork River, the Saturday markets, and just about everything else you came for.

RESIDENCE INN MISSOULA DOWNTOWN

Don’t let the name fool you: this is no standard hospitality-chain stay. Built inside the beautifully restored Missoula Mercantile building, it’s where Western heritage meets modern polish. Ask for the Mercantile Suite—it’s got a lofted layout, soaring arched windows, and enough vintage character to feel like a scene from a film. Bonus: the indoor pool is a godsend after a sun-soaked hike or a long evening of cocktails.

THE GIBSON MANSION B&B

For a sleepover with storybook charm, try this 1903 Victorian nestled in a quiet neighborhood. Antique-filled rooms, a legendary scones service, and a garden that begs for a late-morning coffee make it feel like a hidden chapter from a gentler time.

LOGE MISSOULA

A newcomer on the hospitality scene, LOGE caters to those looking to spend time outside of their hotel room. Inspired by the surf, climbing, and camping culture of the 1970s, this streamlined stop sits in the heart of Missoula, with “gear walls” in every room, so no matter your activity of choice, there’s room to hang its accoutrements. Didn’t bring your own? LOGE has got you, with bikes, snowshoes, paddleboards, and more available for daily checkout.

OUTDOOR OASIS

Missoula is every nature lover’s dream, where outdoor activities—hiking, watersports, biking—abound. The city’s small but mighty food scene includes gems like 1889 Steakhouse, which serves up impressive fare, like tomahawk cuts and craft cocktails.

While everyone is familiar with hiking Mount Sentinel, a local landmark since 1908, when students from the University of Montana painted a large “M” on its western face, Courtney recommends a scenic detour to Salmon Lake, about 40 minutes from town. “The water’s crystal clear, the vibe is relaxed, and it’s small enough to feel like you’ve got it to yourself,” she says. “We even spotted Pink out there during her concert stop. You never know who’ll be floating by.”

And before heading home? “Don’t miss the Montana Antique Mall. Three or four floors of curated chaos—elegant cocktail glasses, weird vintage dolls, first-edition books. I always find something.”

COURTESY OF DESTINATION MISSOULA; LORISSA DAUENHAUER