

Ski Cities

*From Burlington to
Bellingham, we found
six towns that are near
the mountains and
offer just the right dose
of the metropolitan life.*

ILIVED IN BOULDER a few years back and loved it. But I returned this fall to find the city had soured. Perhaps from overexposure, or maybe from its proximity to an exploding metropolis, this once-great college town is now unaffordable, overcrowded and overmicrobrewed. Sad to say, it's become a cliché. ¶ So I found myself looking for a new hometown, one with real people and only a few latte shops. A place with a touch of culture and an appreciation for a cheeseburger, with a soul and a sense of history that wouldn't crumble under the pressure of same-seeking settlers.

My search for a new utopia hasn't been easy. The more perfect the backdrop, it seems, the fewer the career opportunities and affordable homes. For me, a classic ski town like Aspen or Telluride—with sky-high rents and minimum-wage jobs—isn't a realistic option.

So I went practical. Staying close to serious snow, I looked at Denver, Salt Lake and Seattle. Each is a buzzing hub of economic opportunity, with high culture, major-league sports and all the urban perks. But sitting in traffic, smog shrouding the mountains, I realized that I was still, unfortunately, in a city.

Finally, I found the in-between places: cities like Burlington, Missoula and Bellingham. These towns each have a character that's enduring and unique. Each lies within day-trip distance of a major ski resort and offers a touch of culture, affordable housing and real jobs. Even more important, these places have staying power. They aren't out to please anyone and they aren't likely to lose their soul, no matter how many newcomers may pull into town. So if you want to be near the mountains without completely leaving the urban life behind, check out these six “ski cities” ... and start packing.

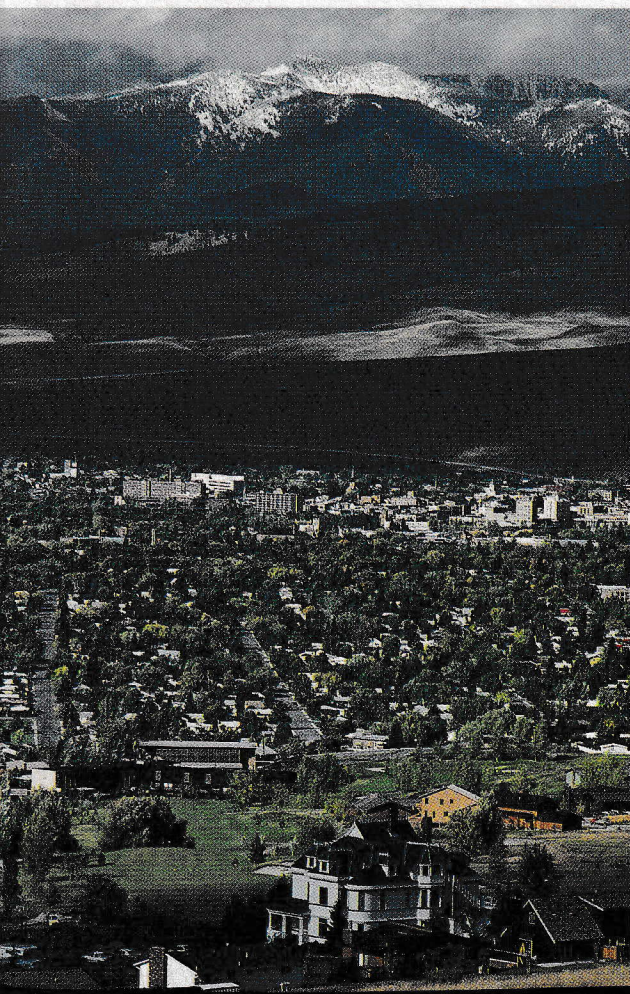
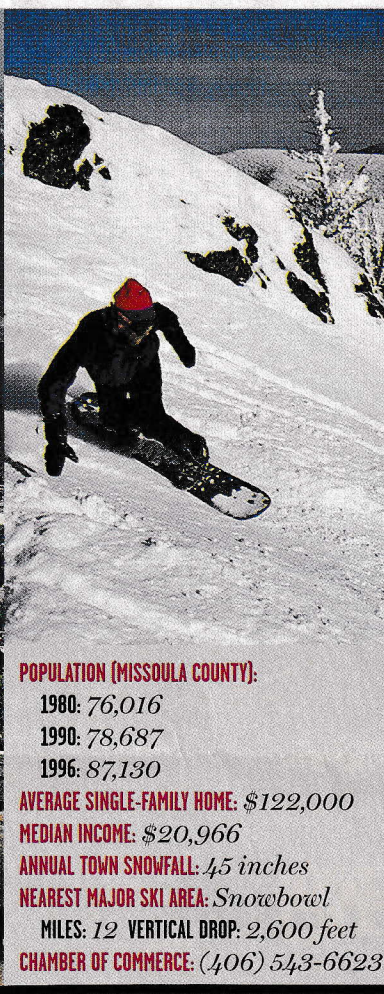
BY LOLLY MERRELL



Missoula, Montana

MOVING to the
MOUNTAINS

Pickup trucks, tied flies and boiled-wool berets



JOHN REDDY/INSTOCK, SCOTT SPIKER

POPULATION (MISSOULA COUNTY):

1980: 76,016

1990: 78,687

1996: 87,130

AVERAGE SINGLE-FAMILY HOME: \$122,000

MEDIAN INCOME: \$20,966

ANNUAL TOWN SNOWFALL: 45 inches

NEAREST MAJOR SKI AREA: Snowbowl

MILES: 12 **VERTICAL DROP:** 2,600 feet

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE: (406) 543-6623

THERE'S A QUIET animosity among non-Missoulans toward this western Montana oasis. Nothing tied to Unabomber or militia types: If anything, Missoula is antithetical to the lonesome-outcast stereotype. The city tilts to the left, and likes to think of itself as the corrective lens to Montana's recent ill-begotten connections.

Missoula is home to the University of Montana, tides of fleeced mountain bikers, navel-gazing artists and political activists of all stripes. But it's also the real Montana. Eco-yuppies and starry-eyed newcomers share the turf with loggers, miners and truckers—a working-class core that hasn't disappeared and isn't likely to.

Whatever their background, most Missoulans share the same religion for their environs. The city is planted at the mouth of Hell Gate Canyon, in a valley

between the confluence of the Clark Fork, Blackfoot and Bitterroot rivers. The horizon is framed by the 6,000-foot Sapphire Mountains to the south, and 5,158-foot Mount Sentinel rises in the southeast.

PAYLOAD: In 1883, Missoula appeared virtually overnight when the Northern Pacific Railway chugged into town. As the railroad's western hub, Missoula also became a major timber transport center. The city's logging base is still a major economic source for Missoula County. Last year, retail and trade revenues surpassed timber-related jobs as the leading employment source for the first time.

Some of Missoula's top employers include the University of Montana, the St. Patrick's and Community hospitals, the Washington Corporation (a manufacturing conglomerate) and Stone Container, a

THREE RIVERS RUN THROUGH IT: From Gore-Tex'ed riders to timber-mill managers, Missoulans of all stripes share the same religion for the Great Outdoors.

pulp mill. The U.S. Forest Service has its regional headquarters in town, along with a fire-fighting school for smokejumpers.

HOMESTEAD: Most of Missoula's new growth is sprawling west across the Clark Fork Valley, with new three-bedroom homes that start around \$150,000. The turn-of-the-century brick Victorians that line the University borough also start at \$150,000. Nearby Nine Mile and Six Mile canyons have cabins and 60s-style ranch homes from about \$90,000. Chi-chi types head for snowy Grant Creek, a neighboring burb with new log and modern homes that start around \$180,000.

The public school system—with 12 elementary schools, four middle schools and four high schools—is good, and it has strong ties to the University. A solid 60 percent of high-school grads go on to higher education. In addition, there are three parochial and two alternative schools.

BACKYARD: Missoula is a winter place eight months of the year, with temperatures that drop into single digits. Snowfall in town is relatively scant, thanks to its elevation of 3,205 feet. But the snow in the surrounding mountains is deep and constant.

Downhill skiers head to Montana Snowbowl, 12 miles from town. The Snowbowl has 30 runs and a respectable 2,600-foot vertical drop. Skiers can also catch a half-day at Marshall Mountain, a smaller hill only 7 miles out. Cross-country skiers wind through the Garnett Resource Area, a mining ghost town now maintained by the BLM, with more than 55 miles of trails.

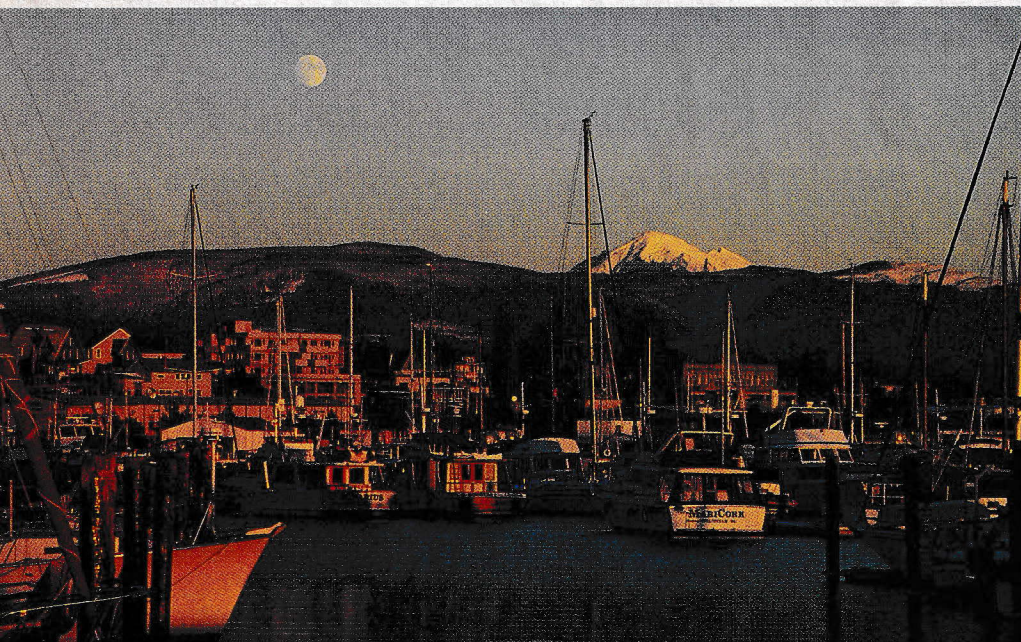
When summer slides around, usually by June, mountain bikers trek to Blue Mountain, where singletrack and logging roads criss-cross thick forest. The Rattlesnake National Wilderness Area, 3 miles north of town, is rugged mountains filled with nordic skiers in winter, plus hikers, runners and fat-tire bikers in summer.

NOT SO FAST: Missoula's no secret, but choice available housing is. Winters are long and often gray, with little snowfall in town.

Bellingham, Washington

MOVING to the
MOUNTAINS

On the coast, below the Cascades and between two cities



CLIFF LIGHT; JONATHAN DUNCAN



POPULATION: (WHATCOM COUNTY)

1980: 106,701

1990: 132,200

1996: 150,000

AVERAGE SINGLE-FAMILY HOME: \$135,000

MEDIAN INCOME: \$31,412

ANNUAL TOWN SNOWFALL: 9 inches

NEAREST MAJOR SKI AREA: Mount Baker

MILES: 62 VERTICAL DROP: 1,500 feet

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE: (360) 734-1330

IT'S 90 MILES NORTH of Seattle and less than 60 miles south of Vancouver, but Bellingham feels like a small town. This port city is easygoing and polite, with a mix of retirees seeking temperate but cooler-than-the-desert weather and wanderlust athletes looking for both water and altitude. A lot of Western Washington University students stick around after graduation, and a consistent stream of visitors happen to drop in and stay.

Bellingham is a classic coastal town, with rambling wooden piers, fishermen, oyster farms, great seafood restaurants and a spectacular view across Puget Sound to the San Juan Islands. But it's also a mountain town, with 10,778-foot Mount Baker floating genie-like above the city.

PAYLOAD: While Bellingham has seen an increase in tourism lately, the top employ-

ers are Western Washington University, Georgia Pacific (a paper and chemical manufacturer), ARCO (an oil refinery), Intalco Aluminum and St. Joseph Hospital. Two other schools—Bellingham Technical College and Whatcom Community College—add to the academic workforce. A final economic note for would-be residents: Washington is one of the few states in the country that doesn't have a personal income tax.

HOMESTEAD: The tony part of town is the Fairhaven district, made up of brick-and-stone buildings built at the turn of the century. Many of them now house high-end, funky shops and restaurants. A two-bedroom house in this neighborhood starts at \$90,000, while turn-of-the-century San Francisco-style Victorians that overlook Fairhaven on South Hill start at \$150,000.

BAKER IN THE SKY: Bellingham is a fishing town on salty Puget Sound, but it's only 62 miles to the epic terrain on 10,750-foot Mount Baker in the Cascades.

Clean new neighborhoods are dotting the woods east of town, where three-bedroom houses start at \$120,000. About 35 miles east, toward Mount Baker, cabins and smaller cottages start at \$75,000.

The school district has a 20.5-to-one student-teacher ratio. There are 12 public elementary, four middle and two high schools, 11 private schools, two parochial schools and one alternative high school. A third high school is under construction.

BACKYARD: Bellingham has mild winters. Temperatures hover in the 50s, and snowfall along the coast averages only nine inches a year. Alpine types drive 62 miles east to Mount Baker, with a 1,500-foot vertical drop, almost 600 average inches of annual snowfall and drop-dead views of the Cascades from the summit. Legendary among the snowboard set for its early acceptance of the sport, Baker's terrain is epic and tough, with expansive hike-to bowls that rise far above the lifts.

Whistler-Blackcomb is a three-hour drive north, within striking distance for weekend jaunts or a marathon day trip. Free-heel types usually head 90 minutes north to the Hollyburn nordic area, with 40 kilometers of groomed trails. When snow falls along the coast, the local nordic club grooms some trails near town.

In the summer, sailing on the Sound is world-class, wind-surfing is decent and the sea-kayaking mystical as you dodge seals. A challenging bike tour winds down the well-known Chuckanut Drive, which hangs over sea cliffs and twists through a low coastal range. The Mount Baker National Recreational Area is a summer outdoor Disneyland: Bike trails, hiking and backcountry camping draw adventurers from around the Northwest. North Cascades National Park is just beyond.

NOT SO FAST: Did we mention 37 inches of rain a year? Buy your Gore-Tex in bulk at the Seattle REI. You'll need it. ▲

LOLLY MERRELL is a SNOW COUNTRY contributing editor.

Burlington, Vermont

Dreadlocks, Birkenstocks and former urbanites

ON THE BANKS OF Lake Champlain in northern Vermont, with the Winooski River twisting along terraced slopes through the center of town, Burlington is a place where weary city-dwellers come to slow things down. But ask a local to describe Burlington, and the response is "urban." Perhaps it's the entrepreneurial spirit (Ben & Jerry's was born here) or the economic influence from New York and Boston that gives Burlington a metro feel. Then again, in Vermont, any town with more than 10,000 residents would seem like a big city.

Burlington is an upbeat combination of country-seeking city folk and city-seeking country folk. It's the epicenter of Vermont, a hopping college town and the base for some of the best outdoor recreation in New England. Stowe, Sugarbush and Mad River Glen are less than 45 minutes away, the Green Mountains draw hikers and mountain bikers from all over the East, and the lake attracts wind-surfers and paddlers to its clear water. Burlington also attracts roving bands of tie-dyed Phish-heads, die-hard fans of the cult band that was founded in town and is still based there.

While tourists are a powerful economic force, they're nothing new: The first rail line connecting Boston and Burlington opened in 1865. Burlington is used to fighting forces that threaten to change its character, whether it's a proposed Wal-Mart or Home Depot. Burlington considers itself a paradise, and it works to stay that way.

PAYLOAD: IBM is the largest employer in Burlington, with the University of Vermont and its Fletcher Allen Hospital following close behind. Since IBM opened a microchip processing plant here in 1957, a litter of small high-tech firms have been steadily feeding the economy—including the health-care technology giant IDX Corporation, which is now the county's fourth-largest employer. Tourism is another major economic influence.

UVM isn't the only academic game in town: Burlington is home to five other smaller colleges, including St. Michael's and Champlain College. All together, the six colleges provide nearly 6,000 jobs.

HOMESTEAD: New housing is stretching out to nearby 'burbs like Charlotte and South



PHOTOS BY PAUL O. ROISVERT

POPULATION (CHITTENDEN COUNTY):

1980: 115,534

1990: 131,761

1996: 137,000

AVERAGE SINGLE-FAMILY HOME: \$122,000

MEDIAN INCOME: \$27,000

ANNUAL TOWN SNOWFALL: 80 inches

NEAREST MAJOR SKI AREA: Stowe

MILES: 40 **VERTICAL DROP:** 2,360 feet

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE: (802) 363-3489



Burlington, where three-bedroom homes start at \$150,000. Other newcomers are settling in Shelburne, home of Shelburne Farms, an estate designed by Frederick Law Olmstead that's open for tours. To find that oh-so-Vermont farmhouse, head 30 minutes east to Jericho or Underhill, where \$200,000 will also get you a few acres and a barn. Downtown Victorians near the university start at \$150,000.

The public schools are good, with an average 21-to-1 student-teacher ratio. UVM has a strong relationship with the public school system, offering things like liberal-arts programs and special concerts for kids. Burlington also has a number of private and parochial schools.

BACKYARD: The skier's dilemma in winter: Smugglers' Notch, Stowe, Bolton Valley, Sugarbush or Mad River Glen? Telemark,

THE EPICENTER OF VERMONT: A hopping college town and outdoor-sports center; Burlington lies between long Lake Champlain and the Green Mountains.

cross-country, snowboard, GS or moguls? All of this indecision lies within an hour's drive of the city.

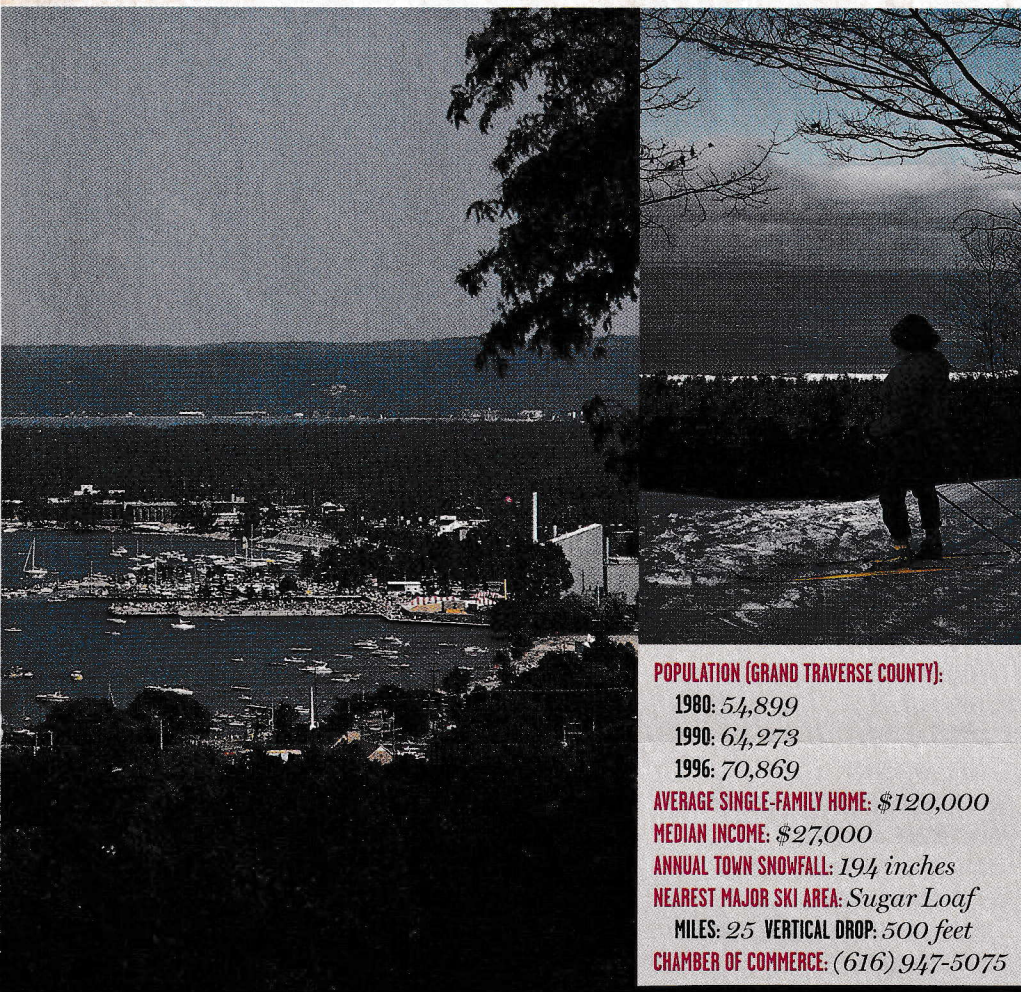
In the summer, locals take to the water to sail, swim or kayak, or hike into the Green Mountains. Mountain bikers wheel down Dragon Back, an old logging road that runs 30 miles east of town, or drive to the Moss Glen trail, a narrow singletrack that runs through steep wooded hills. An 8-mile lakefront bike path skirts the shore of Lake Champlain and connects to an additional 15 miles of trail.

NOT SO FAST: Sun worshippers beware: Vermont averages only 58 sunny days a year.

Traverse City, Michigan

MOVING to the
MOUNTAINS

Where the whitefish is fresh and so is the singletrack



POPULATION (GRAND TRAVERSE COUNTY):

1980: 54,899

1990: 64,273

1996: 70,869

AVERAGE SINGLE-FAMILY HOME: \$120,000

MEDIAN INCOME: \$27,000

ANNUAL TOWN SNOWFALL: 194 inches

NEAREST MAJOR SKI AREA: Sugar Loaf

MILES: 25 VERTICAL DROP: 500 feet

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE: (616) 947-5075

ASK FOR DIRECTIONS to this small lakeside city and the navigator is likely to raise the back of his left hand. "This is Michigan," he'll say. "And there's Traverse City," pointing to the dip between his pinkie and ring finger. At the southern end of Lake Michigan's Grand Traverse Bay, this tourist town has lured vacationing Chicago and Detroit residents for decades. Quaint summer cottages speckle the Lake Michigan coastline, and the rolling countryside is dotted with cherry orchards, vineyards and inland lakes.

Traverse City is booming with a recent wave of metropolitan transplants. Locals, both new and old, recently passed a referendum to restrict development on the Old Mission Peninsula, which juts north into the Caribbean-hued bay. While the population doubles in the summer, full-timers share a secret the summer seasonals don't

know: It gets even better in winter, when a sunny day at Sugar Loaf or Boyne Mountain practically shuts down the town.

Locals pick up and leave for a long weekend in summer, when the Cherry Festival draws masses of tourists and quadruples the holding capacity of the streets and parks. Traversians have their own bash in winter—the Frozen Cherry Festival, when the temps are lower but parking is a snap.

PAYLOAD: Fed by Chicago and Detroit dollars, the tourism industry is a major source of jobs and revenue. But manufacturing remains the leading economic sector. Thanks to the influence of the Motor City, some five hours downstate, two automotive plants—United Technologies and Tower Automotive—are among Traverse City's top five employers. The Munson Medical Center has more than 3,100

THE GRAND TRAVERSE LIFE: *Traverse City sits at the southern end of a Lake Michigan bay, within easy day-trip distance of a string of ski areas.*

employees. Teachers are also in demand, with Traverse City Public Schools the second-largest employer and Northwestern Michigan College coming in fifth.

HOMESTEAD: In town, a two-bedroom, wood-frame Victorian ranges from \$150,000 to \$300,000. The more affordable Victorians are in Slab City, nicknamed for the first laborers' homes built on the land. Top-of-the-line Victorians are sprinkled throughout the tiny historic district. And the Old Mission Peninsula is dotted with newer, upscale neighborhoods. As in most waterfront towns, the real-estate rule is "the closer to the water, the higher your mortgage." Tack on an additional \$150,000 for anything lakeside.

The city has 18 elementary schools, and last year the high school graduated 700 seniors. The student ranks are swelling, so a second high school is being built. It should open in the fall of 1997. If the city continues to boom, a third high school may be in the works as well. The prestigious Interlochen School, a preparatory arts and music boarding school, is south of town. There are also seven parochial schools and one private school.

BACKYARD: Welcome to Midwestern skiing at its lake-effect best. In winter, the nearby Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore turns into a nordic mecca, with 27 miles of wandering trails. Snowboarders and skiers head to Sugar Loaf Mountain, where they can keep an eye on the Manitou Islands from the top of the resort. Boyne Mountain, Boyne Highlands, Schuss Mountain, Crystal Mountain and Nub's Nob are also within day-trip striking distance.

On any summer day, a flurry of sailors, windsurfers and kayakers heads to the Bay or the Lake Michigan shoreline. Fat-tire heads can tackle the world-class NORBA course at Schuss Mountain, with 7 miles of sand, steeps and singletrack.

NOT SO FAST: The wind chill rivals Chicago's in winter, and hordes of T-shirt shoppers descend in summer.

Portland, Maine

Where lobsterman meets Boston lawyer

MORE THAN 100 years ago, a fire destroyed most of the 17th-century architecture in this scenic ocean-front town. Portland was rebuilt from the ground up after that disastrous 1866 conflagration—with fireproof bricks and cobblestone streets.

Situated on the southern coast of Maine, surrounded by Casco Bay and the Calendar Islands, Portland has recently undergone a second renaissance. Drove of young professionals and Boston refugees have replaced the ranks of locals who've departed for warmer climes. These energetic newcomers are drawn by Portland's history, small-town charm and \$14.3 million downtown redevelopment. The "Old Port" district now attracts locals and tourists alike to its shops, bars, restaurants and galleries. The town's two-hour proximity to Boston—and the ski resorts of Sunday River and Shawnee Peak—is another bonus for would-be urban immigrants.

PAYLOAD: Portland has been the economic capital of the state for centuries. While retail and wholesale trade accounts for a good piece of the labor force, the largest employer is the Maine Medical Center—the biggest referral medical center north of Boston. L.L. Bean is based here, ranking as the third-largest employer in the county, while UNUM Life Insurance and National Semiconductor also fall in the top five. F.D. Warren Company (a paper mill) and Hanaford Brothers (a grocery chain) also have large labor forces.

HOMESTEAD: The Western Prom (short for promenade) offers an eclectic array of turn-of-the-century, three-bedroom homes that start around \$150,000. If you're looking for an even older (and apparently fireproof) home, head to Stroudwater Village, where a circa-1740 sea captain's house starts at about \$200,000. New single-family homes in a subdivision outside of town (and closer to the mountains) start at \$140,000. For that perfect post-and-beam farmhouse with acreage, expect to shell out at least \$230,000.

With 19 public schools (including 12 elementary schools), plus the Portland School of Art, Westbrook College and the University of Southern Maine, Portland has a solid school reputation. Four of the



J. STEVENSON / SARA GRAY

POPULATION (CUMBERLAND COUNTY):

1980: 215,789

1990: 243,135

1996: 225,477

AVERAGE SINGLE-FAMILY HOME: \$106,172

MEDIAN INCOME: \$26,576

ANNUAL TOWN SNOWFALL: 74 inches

NEAREST MAJOR SKI AREA: Sunday River

MILES: 75 VERTICAL DROP: 2,340 feet

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE: (207) 772-4994



city's public schools have won "National School of Excellence" awards, which honor schools for outstanding educational achievement. The artsy Waynfleet school is also in town. It serves grades pre-kindergarten through high school and stages frequent student concerts.

BACKYARD: New England downhillers head to Sunday River, a two-hour drive on mostly two-lane roads. It takes about two-and-a-half hours to reach Maine's other big mountain, Sugarloaf USA. Both areas offer great terrain and solid vertical drops (Sunday River is 2,300 feet; Sugarloaf is 2,820). Shawnee Peak, a smaller mountain, is an hour from the city and a prime night-skiing spot.

Cross-country skiers drive 10 minutes to the town of Westbrook and the Smiling Hill Farm, a 500-acre working dairy farm

DOWN EAST DOWNTOWN: Portland spent \$14.3 million to overhaul the downtown, drawing locals and tourists to its funky restaurants, bars and shops.

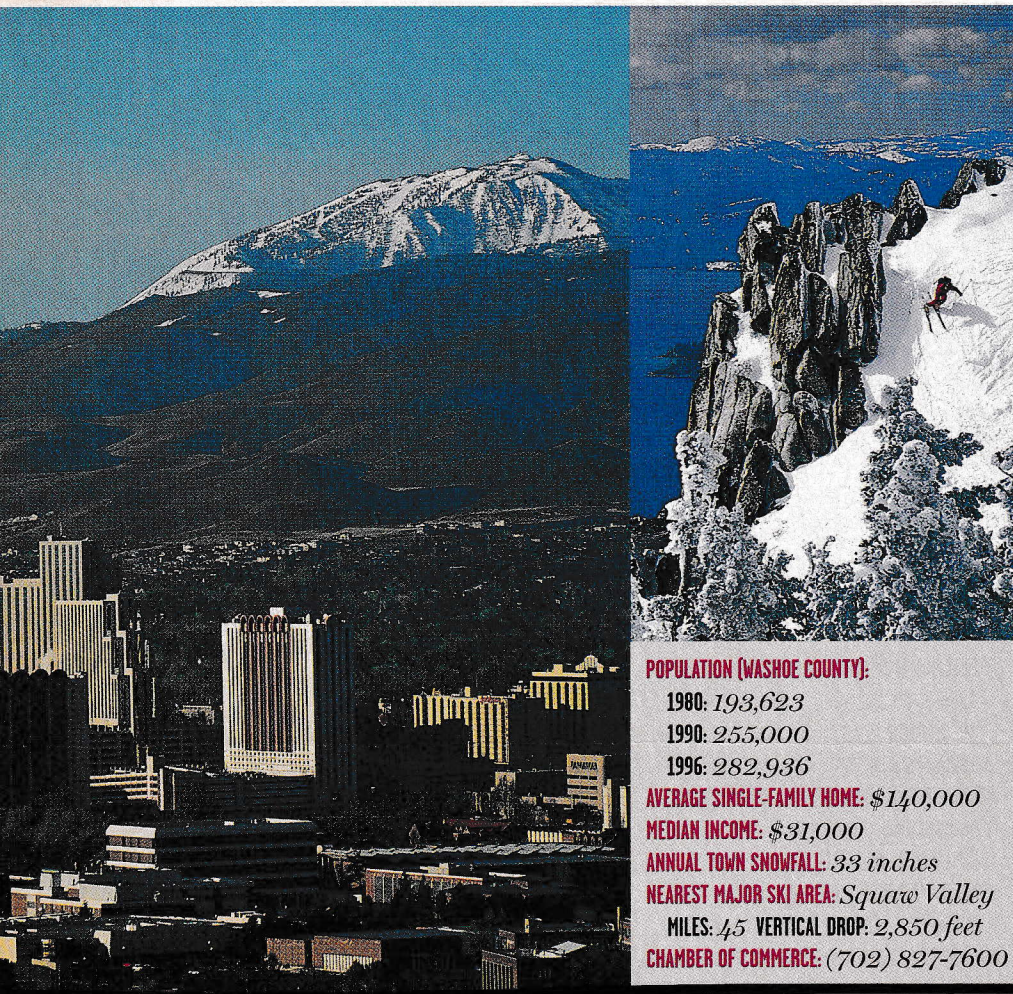
that has 40 kilometers of groomed trails and a restaurant. In summer, sea kayakers dot the bay and the coast around Peaks Island. Mountain bikers park their cars at the Pride's Corner Bowling Alley in Westbrook, then take off on an 8-mile loop through singletrack and forest. For serious daylong rides, New Hampshire's White Mountains are 90 minutes to the west. The city's extensive outer-borough park system is great for hiking and biking and for those who like to get outdoors fast.

NOT SO FAST: Spring is long, with a mud season to rival Vermont's. And don't forget Maine's state bird: the black fly.

Reno, Nevada

Looking past the candyland casinos

MOVING to the
MOUNTAINS



POPULATION (WASHOE COUNTY):

1980: 193,623

1990: 255,000

1996: 282,936

AVERAGE SINGLE-FAMILY HOME: \$140,000

MEDIAN INCOME: \$31,000

ANNUAL TOWN SNOWFALL: 33 inches

NEAREST MAJOR SKI AREA: Squaw Valley

MILES: 45 **VERTICAL DROP:** 2,850 feet

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE: (702) 827-7600

THERE'S SOMETHING unsettling and seductive about Reno's neon-lit gambling halls. For most tourists, it's the only reason they're in town. But a new wave of Californians (the result of Colorado's overflow, some locals joke) has reinvigorated the city's other top attraction—outdoor recreation. The Sierra rise above the city, and two dozen ski resorts lie within an hour's drive, including Squaw Valley USA, Heavenly and other Tahoe headliners. Paved trails swirl through downtown and along the Truckee River, which runs through the heart of the city.

Reno is a weird combination of saltwater-taffy tourists, retirees driving golf carts, University of Nevada students and white-collar transplants from San Francisco and L.A. So what you see is what you get: Organic food co-ops beneath winking casino signs. Diehard bowlers streaming

toward the 80-lane National Bowling Stadium. Tuxedoed ticket-holders strolling toward the Reno Philharmonic.

For all the new-paint feel downtown, Reno has historical authenticity. Credit that to its pioneer history or the fourth-generation Italian and Basque families who give the town its ethnic edge. Situated in a valley on a lush patch of land called Truckee Meadows, Reno's surprisingly green landscape and proximity to Lake Tahoe and the Sierra make it a place that longtime locals rarely leave and many newcomers have discovered.

PAYLOAD: Although gaming and tourism added more than \$4 billion to the city coffers in 1995, non-tourism forces account for 60 percent of Reno's economy. The State of Nevada is the top employer, followed by the school district and the Feder-

BRIGHT LIGHTS, SKI CITY: Tourists know Reno for its neon-lit gambling halls. But locals love the town for its proximity to Lake Tahoe and the rugged Sierra.

al government. The University of Nevada, with 12,000 students, is the fifth-largest employer. On the casino circuit, the top three employers are Harrah's Club, Sparks Nugget and Circus Circus. For financial types, Wells Fargo, Bank of America, U.S. Bank and American Federal Savings all have more than 350 employees each. Professional gamblers, this is your spot.

HOMESTEAD: On the outskirts of the city in North Valley, where the high desert valley meets the green Truckee Meadows, a new three-bedroom home starts at about \$140,000. A pioneer-era brick Victorian in the Old Southwest neighborhood can be had for a minimum of \$150,000. Deluxe log homes in the mountain town of Galena, a half-hour commute from the city, start at about \$300,000.

A perk for families: The Department of Education named five of the city's public schools as among the best in the country. And the district-wide SAT scores (1022 combined average last year) are consistently above the national average (910). Plus, a note for off-the-beaten-path academics: The University of Nevada has the nation's only program in Basque studies.

BACKYARD: Runners, bikers and stroller-pushers jostle for space on the Truckee River path, a 12-mile trail that slices through the valley. Bikers pedal and burn to the top of a steep hill called Geiger Grade. Hikers head into the Sierra to the nearby town of Galena, where trails spider out into the Ponderosa range.

In winter, skiers and snowboarders can drive 22 miles to the local hill, Mount Rose, with a 1,440-foot vertical drop. It's a 58-mile trek to Heavenly, or 45 miles to Squaw. In less than an hour's drive, free-wheelers can get to Spooner Lake, with 21 meadow and backcountry trails totaling 101 kilometers. Diamond Peak has 16 trails and 35 kilometers of groomed track.

NOT SO FAST: Tourist traffic and jaywalking casino-goers can make the downtown streets a dodging game.