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FOLLOW OUR SIMPLE PLAN

THE FISHING GUIDE WHO GOT AWAY
BY IAN FRAZIER

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Welcome to the Good Life

THE GOAL WAS SIMPLE: FIND AMERICA'S BEST PLACE TO BE HEALTHY. WE WANTED A TOWN WITH AMPLE TRAILHEADS, NEARBY ADVENTURE, GREAT FARMERS' MARKETS, AND, HOPEFULLY, A COMPETITIVE GEAR-SHOP SCENE. TO PICK IT WE TURNED TO YOU. IN OUR THIRD-ANNUAL CROWDSOURCED CONTEST, READERS CAST MORE THAN 21,000 VOTES ONLINE AND RAVED ABOUT THESE 18 TOWNS. ALL ARE AMAZING PLACES, BUT ONE STOOD ABOVE THE REST: PARK CITY, UTAH.



Mountain High

THERE'S NO BETTER BLEND OF SMALL-TOWN FRIENDLINESS, ABSURDLY EASY ACCESS, AND FIVE-STAR CULTURE THAN PARK CITY—IF YOU CAN AFFORD IT

by Kyle Dickman

Park City, Utah

POPULATION: 7,873
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME: \$61,383
MEDIAN HOME PRICE: \$765,600
UNEMPLOYMENT (COUNTYWIDE): 5.3 PERCENT

"KNOW HOW I CAN tell that's a local?" asks Dana Williams, the 58-year-old mayor of Park City, Utah, nodding toward a fit thirty-something guy in a flat-brimmed baseball hat. "The bandaged wrist."

We're sitting on couches at the open-air Silver Star Café, a mining-themed restaurant that serves spectacular halibut. A 2013 Porsche 911 with a pair of titanium mountain bikes strapped to the roof sits in the parking lot. Every few minutes, little knots of bikers pedal past. This being a small town, Williams, who looks a bit like Jack Nicholson, can barely complete a thought without getting a hug from a constituent.

But he does manage this: "You guys should have put us in the fight a long time ago." Williams is referring to the drubbing Park City gave the other active-towns finalists, from Bozeman to San Diego, in this year's Best Town Ever contest (see "Picking the Winner," below). The mayor is accustomed to winning big. He was elected to his third term in 2009 with 78 percent of the vote. But he won't be running for reelection in November.

"I can't afford it anymore," Williams says. He supplements his \$1,700 monthly salary by working as a barista at a local coffee shop and playing gigs with his rock group, Motherlode Canyon. His position empowers him to perform weddings, so if you hire his band to play yours, he'll officiate for free, which he has done more than 300 times in the past decade. In other words, the mayor is doing what many locals are: everything he can to stay in the West's most booming adventure locale.

Park City feels like a Colorado ski town dropped into Utah's 12,000-foot Wasatch Range, with one significant difference. Unlike Telluride or Aspen, it has a major city, Salt Lake, and an international airport 30 minutes away. Local love for Park City can feel a little over the top—it got two-thirds as many votes in our contest (5,179) as it has residents. To see if that affection was justified, I parachuted in for a 72-hour, Chamber

of Commerce-led recon tour. What I found was a town that breeds the active lifestyle.

In winter, Parkites can access three world-class ski areas from town: Deer Valley, Park City, and the Canyons. Then there's climbing, hiking, and camping in 500,000 acres of wilderness in the nearby Uinta Mountains, 370-plus miles of trails, a blue-ribbon trout stream (the Provo River), and an Olympic training center built for the 2002 Salt Lake Games. More than 100 Olympians still live here. There are also lax(er) liquor laws than elsewhere in the Beehive State—and Utah's first distillery since Prohibition, High West.

I went to a mountain-bike camp where city employees taught eight-year-olds to ride a pump track. In a nearby soccer field, 70 women—many pregnant, most already moms—were charging through a CrossFit workout. The high school even has an Adventure PE class, where students get credit for leaving campus to mountain-bike, trail-run, or ski or snowboard with friends.

But living in utopia is expensive—60 percent higher than the national average. Less than a third of the town's population has their primary residence within city limits. Those who can't swing a million-plus for a house either hunt for deals—small homes can be found for as little as, er, \$350,000—or head 15 miles downvalley for something in the \$200,000 price range. All of this gives Park City its reputation as a ritzy toy town, but it's still in Utah, one of the most rural and conservative states in the nation.

As the mayor puts it, "Utah kids are raised through the barrel of a .22." In Park City, that redneck influence generates mind-boggling combinations of rough-and-tumble culture and highbrow approach to adventure. The executive chef at the five-star Stein Eriksen Lodge carries a knife on century-length road rides (for "general safety," he says)—and the sommelier once shot a five-point buck wearing his double-breasted work suit.

THE REAL TRICK to being a Park City local is finding a way to stay. When Robert Redford started the Sundance Film Festival in 1981, it brought tourists, hotels, and world-class restaurants (12 and counting). Every January, 50,000 moviemakers, celebrities, and film buffs descend on Sundance. Tourism now brings in more than \$50 million a year. "It makes the town tick," Williams says.

PICKING THE WINNER

To find the best place to live well, we started with the American College of Sports Medicine's annual list of the country's 50 healthiest cities, then added a few small and midsize active towns that the metro-centric pool overlooked. We called local runners, cyclists, climbers, and surfers to help narrow the finalists to ten places where it's easy to eat healthy, find work, and quickly access great trails, beaches, and mountains. Then we put them up for a three-week vote on Facebook. Greenville, South Carolina (page 46), made an impressive showing—the city of 60,000 had the most votes with 7,154—but for per capita excitement, no place was as passionate as Park City, which received two-thirds as many votes (5,179) as it has residents. We sent in two editors to scout it out, and they confirmed our suspicion: this is the place you want to live now.

Clockwise from top left: High West Distillery; Davanza's Pizza; Silver Star Restaurant; Park City from above; whiskey; downtown ride; Davanza decor; Lost Prospector Trail; High West Burger; refueling; the High West dining room; Washington Schoolhouse Inn

Park City's greatest challenge seems to be courting the wealthy without ousting the middle class. So far it has struck a balance. Part of that is because locals can commute to high-paying finance and real estate jobs in Salt Lake, and there's a small but vibrant outdoor industry in town, with Backcountry.com, Rossignol, and Ramp skis calling Park City home. Not surprisingly, it's tourism that provides 60 percent of the living-wage-paying jobs, with medical care not far behind. "Everybody here either is or pretends to be a pro athlete," says Stacy McCooey, 31, a physical therapist at one of the town's six clinics. "That means great job stability for me."

The single most important reason Park City has kept a middle class may be Utah's ingenious tax code. Second-home owners pay twice what year-round residents do. With a median home price of \$765,600, that goes a long way toward giving the city money for environmental and social initiatives. There's a gravity-fed water pipe that generates power for 120 local homes, solar panels on City Hall, and a free-anywhere-in-town bus system that's safe enough for kids to ride alone.

IF ALL THIS MAKES Park City sound like a liberal enclave in the red state of Utah, that's because it is. I spend Sunday afternoon talking to residents at Park Silly, the weekly farmers' market. Vendors hawk scented candles, elk jerky, and goggle defogger to a crowd that is uniformly white and absurdly fit. While Mayor Williams is on the market's stage, getting lost in a harmonica riff during a cover of J.J. Cale's "When This War Is Over," I meet Andy Beerman, a businessman, a former NOLS instructor, and one of Park City's next mayoral candidates. He's concerned that I haven't seen enough of the town's trails. I tell him I have only 45 minutes before my next appointment. That's plenty, he says.

"There are two ways to be cool here," Beerman says as we grab bikes at his house. "You're either a brilliant athlete or you're filthy rich." Then he stands on his pedals and drops me on a singletrack climb that leaves from his doorstep.



2013
BEST TOWN EVER
Winner

