

# Portland knows **PLAY**

The Rose City nurtures recreation **By Deston Nokes**





DESTON NOKES

**E**scaping cares, computers and Blackberry buzzes, Internet executive Rich Bader glides out his driveway on his bicycle and spins along rolling wine-country roads just seven miles west of Portland. A committed cycling enthusiast, Bader satisfies his athletic appetite by riding winding, asphalt ribbons, past blurring forest, vineyards and open spaces close to home.

“In Portland, I like to use my bicycle to get out and see what’s going on,” says Bader, who co-founded EasyStreet Online Services, an Internet services company, in 1995 and is the company’s president and CEO. “I like to ride the wine country because there’s such a variety of terrain and so little traffic; it reminds me of riding in the hills of Italy.”

The ability to enjoy nature so near an urban setting is what distinguishes Portland from many other cities. Not only does the city enjoy a rich bounty of mountains, rivers, forests and valleys, but Portland also invests in a culture that beckons people to come out and play in the city interior, says Nancy Harger, supervisor of outdoor recreation for Portland Parks & Recreation.

“Within the city boundaries, you can explore wilderness, enjoy a walk among flowers, dip an oar in the water or just bask in solitude,” says Harger. “It’s important, with all of the stresses facing us today.”

She and her husband moved to Portland from Minnesota almost five years ago, seeking “big-town opportunities in a small-town structure.” Almost every weekend, they take their kayaks out on the Willamette River, which flows through Portland, or on another nearby waterway, such as the feistier Sandy River 14 miles east of Portland.

### **An outdoors escape for every taste**

At its heart, Portland is an outdoors city, with large festivals, weekly art-gallery walks, sidewalk dining and strolls through world-class gardens. Plus, the proximity and variety of Portland’s recreational offerings are stunning. After a one-hour drive, you can be climbing Mount Hood, or skit-



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**Above:** The International Rose Test Garden is one of many Portland parks.

**Opposite:** Kayakers paddle along the Willamette River on a guided tour organized by Portland Parks & Recreation.

tering across the Columbia River on a windsurfing board. Within city limits, you can hike into dense forest, paddle in a kayak under Portland’s famous bridges or pedal the Springwater Corridor, which winds through a wildlife refuge and intersects numerous parks.

The city also has plans to design and build more cutting-edge, environmentally friendly skateboard parks. Across all ages and interests, recreation is integral to the Rose City.

The community enthusiasm for outdoor fun is contagious. Coffee-shop talk often centers on plans for an upcoming athletic getaway or event. There always seems to be a reason to lace up those running shoes, from the strenuous Portland Marathon to the 197-mile Nike Hood to Coast Relay, to a variety of fun runs held throughout the year.

### **A history of recreation**

Emphasizing outdoor recreation has long been a Portland virtue. In 1903 the city took a strategic approach to its park system, hiring Massachusetts-based architect John Charles Olmsted to prepare a report on the best way to develop a park system in Portland. Olmsted already had been

hired by the city to design the fairgrounds for the 1905 Lewis & Clark Centennial and American Pacific Exposition & Oriental Fair. After spending a month touring the area, Olmsted proposed a comprehensive system of parks and green spaces connected by parkways and boulevards.

The Olmsted Report also proposed a formal square for Union Station, a number of waterfront squares and many of the parks that eventually would provide rich outdoor experiences such as Forest Park, Sellwood Park, Mt. Tabor Park, Rocky Butte Natural Area, and Ross and Swan islands. Olmsted suggested connecting parks around the city, with a planning concept that became known as the 40-Mile Loop.

It was a visionary proposal, considering that the area was largely meadows and forested hillsides. City leaders had the foresight to recognize the importance of parks in sustaining a livable community. They hired Emanuel Tillman Mische from Madison, Wisconsin, a talented landscape architect who had worked for Olmsted, to help implement the 1903 plan. According to a history of the city's parks, Mische is considered one of the most influential leaders in the history of Portland Parks & Recreation because he helped bring the original plan to fruition, and because of his abilities as a landscape architect.

Over the ensuing century, trail planners and advocates have updated the plan to meet the needs of the growing metropolitan area. The name 40-Mile Loop has stuck, even as the planned loop trail now measures more than 140 miles. It connects more than 30 parks and dozens of communities with a variety of walking, cycling and even horseback-riding trails.

When the city acquired the 20-mile Springwater Corridor in 1990, it closed a major gap in the loop. Originally developed for rail travel, the path has a smooth, even grade, which is ideal for cycling and running. It provides a parkways link to many south-east Portland communities and scenic areas, including Johnson Creek, wetlands, buttes, agricultural fields and pastures, and residential neighborhoods. Some gaps remain along the 40-Mile Loop, but plans are under way for linking more areas, using natural parkways to make Portland “the walking city of the West.”

## Ready-made outings

Portland Parks & Recreation actively promotes fun diversions throughout the city. It organizes outings for activities including hiking, biking, canoeing, horseback riding and snowboarding.

“We organize activities for every season, age, skill level and interest,” says Harger, whose department puts out a quarterly catalog of activities. “We get people who go with us every week, who join groups, and it’s just a great way to create camaraderie.”

Under its umbrella, the department offers more than 5,000 classes and activities ranging from fitness to music to language. Another benefit is the city’s comprehensive mass-transit system,



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**Bicyclists travel along the Vera Katz Eastbank Esplanade near Hawthorne Bridge in Portland.**

which is the key to making recreation accessible and convenient. Most city recreation areas can be reached by the MAX Light Rail or by TriMet buses. Portland’s Parks & Recreation department will also shuttle participants to programs in outlying areas.

Portland’s park system is one reason the city repeatedly is ranked among America’s best places to live. The parks department manages 10,000 acres of land, including gardens, parks and five golf courses. The city even plans to add 1,870 acres, in order to maintain a ratio of 20 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents.

## Diving in

For newcomers, one way to quickly gain an appreciation for Portland’s recreational beauty is to walk along the Governor Tom McCall Waterfront Park—a flat, 1.5-mile stretch of lawn that hugs the west bank of the Willamette River. It’s home to many nationally renowned festivals, including a Cinco de Mayo event in which about 300,000 people celebrate along the waterfront park during a three-day multicultural collage of music and dance.

Next, walk across the Steel Bridge and take the pathway along the Vera Katz Eastbank Esplanade. This 1,200-foot floating walkway is the longest one of its kind in the United States. Walkers can return to the west side using the Hawthorne Bridge. This loop allows the best glimpse of the city’s riverfront skyline, as well as breathtaking views of Mount Hood to the east and the still-active volcano, Mount St. Helens, to the north.

To get even closer to the Willamette River, take a paddle around Ross Island with Portland Kayak Company. The tour, arranged by Portland Parks & Recreation, is a pleasant float under Portland’s soaring Marquam Bridge, then under the old, concrete Ross Island Bridge and through a nature preserve.

“Most of the kayakers we get range in age from 35 to 55 years old,” says Peter Chaillé, a kayak tour leader *CONTINUED ON PAGE 179*

## SPECTATOR SPORTS

After a satisfyingly exerting day, kick back and cheer your favored team at one of Portland's many sporting events.

**BASKETBALL:** Portland Trail Blazers; October through April; Rose Garden; [www.nba.com/blazers](http://www.nba.com/blazers); 503-797-9600.

**HOCKEY:** Portland Winter Hawks; September through mid-March; Rose Garden or Memorial Coliseum; [www.winterhawks.com](http://www.winterhawks.com); 503-238-6366.

**LACROSSE:** Portland LumberJax; mid-January through April; Rose Garden; [www.portlandjax.com](http://www.portlandjax.com); 503-797-9739.

**BASEBALL:** Portland Beavers Triple-A minor league baseball team; April through August; PGE Park; [www.portlandbeavers.com](http://www.portlandbeavers.com); 503-553-5555.

**SOCCER:** Portland Timbers; April through September; PGE Park; [www.portlandtimbers.com](http://www.portlandtimbers.com); 503-553-5555.

FROM PAGE 175 who also works as a microbiologist for Mars Candies. "During the trip, people see all types of wildlife, from beavers to bald eagles. Anyone can do it; they don't need to have any experience."

Paddlers soon leave the skyline behind and enter into a zone where cell phones are forgotten and all senses are engaged. Deer come to the shore to drink, and great blue herons regally perch on fallen logs, looking like feathered pterodactyls. For so little cost (\$45), and without traveling any great distance, it's easy to be surrounded by nature in the middle of the city.

For me, the most fascinating aspect of the city is Forest Park, which is one of the largest urban forest reserves in the nation. The park's 5,100 acres encompass hills overlooking the Willamette River and offer hikers another opportunity to become immersed in nature close to the urban center. The park has about 70 miles of recreational trails, some of which traverse patches of preserved old-growth forest.

Olmsted had initially recommended acquiring the wooded hills west of the Willamette River to develop a park with a wild, woodland character. The park started

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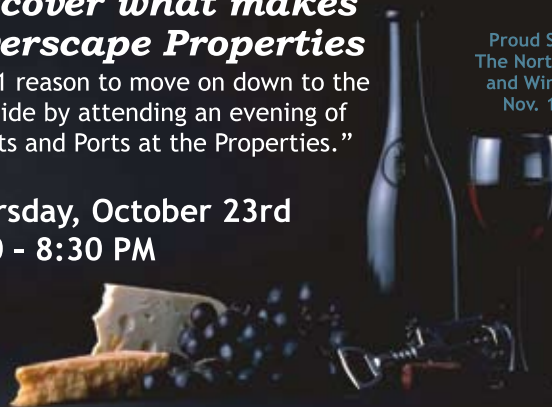


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with a 52-acre donation by Frederick Van Voorhies Holman, and, because of landslides common in Portland's West Hills, the city easily acquired other neighboring parcels. The land was dedicated as Forest Park on September 23, 1948.

### Youthful exuberance

One of the more compelling Portland recreation stories is the growth of the city's skateboarding parks. It all started under the Burnside Bridge in the summer of 1990. Some enterprising youths (which is code for "without permission") became tired of begging for a park and took matters into their own hands. Choosing an abandoned area under the bridge, they poured bags of cement and built a skate park from scratch. Piece by piece, they added ramps and bowls. Now it's the great granddaddy of the skate-park movement and is well-known in skater circles throughout the world—it's even featured on a Tony Hawk video game.

"Oregon is heralded globally for having the best concrete parks," says Sam Beebe, founder of SkateOregon and a leader in expanding skate parks in the Pacific Northwest. "The parks were remarkable—groundbreaking design and quality construction coalesced in 2000 with big, gorgeous walls and challenging features."

Bowls, pyramids, banks and rails adorn Oregon's modern-day, concrete amusement parks, diverting skateboarders from area sidewalks and transit malls.

Now skaters enjoy the support that once eluded them. Portland is regarded as the first city in the world to have a master plan for skateboard-park development. The city council's 2005 plan recommends 19 skate spots. One of the newest parks is even designed to manage storm water.

Some of those who built Burnside now have careers building skate parks with full community approval: Kent Dahlgren is a board member of the Tony Hawk Foundation, which supports building skate parks in low-income communities, and Mark "Red" Scott started Dreamland Skate-parks. He's the lead designer, while Sage Bolyard is a construction supervisor for the international company.

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## A top U.S. bicycling city

In June, *Bicycling* magazine named Portland among the top five best cycling cities in the country. Also this year, the League of American Bicyclists tapped Portland as the first major city in America to be designated as a Platinum-level Bicycle Friendly Community. Smaller Davis, California, is the only other city to achieve platinum.

Since the early 1990s, Portland's network of paths and bike lanes has grown from 60 to 260 miles. Portland has far more bicycle commuters than possibly any other U.S. city, with 4.2 percent of commute trips made by bicycle, according to a 2006 U.S. Census Bureau survey. The national average for cities with more than 65,000 people is about 0.5 percent. Even Portland State University's new president, Wim Wiewel, joined the waves of downtown bike commuters when he reported for his first day on the job in late August.

City infrastructure accommodates the culture. Bikes are common sights on light-rail cars; there are extensive trails winding in and out of the city; and downtown streets have designated lanes for bicycles. The city also recently approved and installed 14 bike boxes, which give bikes priority at red lights.

Portland is imbued with many natural landmarks—from the rivers and wetlands to the urban forests and towering mountains in the distance. Leaders past and present have deliberately preserved special places for Portlanders to play.

"That's one of the greatest things about this city," says Internet executive Bader. "Almost every type of recreation is right here. People can hike, run, kayak, climb, ski and ride. For people who like variety, Portland is perfect." ▲

*Deston Nokes lives in Portland.*

### GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines (800-ALASKAAIR; [alaskaair.com](http://alaskaair.com)) and Horizon Air

(800-547-9308; [horizonair.com](http://horizonair.com)) serve Portland daily. For reservations and flight information, call or visit the Web.