

mountain sports + living

**diamonds
in the fluff** our 10
favorite
ski towns
from right
to left coast



**Mark Udall on protecting the high country
Rush hour on Teton Pass
The Gear Swami tests skis, snowboards,
puffy coats, and more.**



Red Lodge, Montana

Because a bear tooth is better than no teeth at all.

Population: 2,449 Median income: \$25,229

Overview: Cut into a classic city grid across 2.6 square miles near the 943,377-acre Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, Red Lodge offers easy access to one of the most rugged and wild areas in the Lower 48—and more dining options per capita than any other town in Montana. A stroll down the wide main street reveals Carharts and fleece moving amidst Subarus and mud-splattered pickups. Here, locals and tourists mingle at coffee shops, candy stores, and eateries like the Café Regis, an old grocery turned modern breakfast and lunch nook. Other notable culinary ventures include the Bear Creek Saloon & Steakhouse, Carbon County Steak House, and the famed Pollard Hotel. After the ski day, saddle up at Sam's Tap Room for some local Red Lodge Ale, then wander down to Natalie's Front Bar, connected to the Red Lodge Pizza Co. They put all the leftovers from the pizza bar out at 10 p.m. for free pickings.

Because of the influence of nearby Billings—the largest city in Montana just 70 miles to the north—as well as its status as a summer resort community that sees a surge of nearby Yellowstone visitors, this little town will impress even seasoned travelers. "In many regards, Red Lodge acts like a town much bigger than it really is," says Jim Smedsrud, a dedicated skier and broker/owner of Coal Creek Realty.

The skiing: You generally won't find Red Lodge Mountain Resort topping the rankings for hard-core ski hills. But with a 2,400-foot vertical drop across 1,600 acres in the Beartooth Mountain foothills, just 10 minutes from town, it holds its own. Skiing began in January, 1960 under the name Grizzly Mountain, an enterprise fueled by the sweat of a local ski club. The ski area looks to throw 50th anniversary celebration season. And it recently celebrated an infusion of much-needed cash. JMA Ventures, a San Francisco real estate investment firm, bought the resort in October. While some old-timers may begrudge California ownership, most locals are delighted in the investments to patch aging chairlifts, increase snowmaking operations and plans for a residential development.

On the hill, most locals venture to Cole Creek, the area's expert backside. "There are tight chutes, good trees to ski, and secret stashes a week after it snows," says Paul Otsu, a 27-year old self-employed graphic designer. "You get your fair share of tourists — but go up on a weekday and you'll know everyone riding the chairlift. It's pretty much our mountain."

Real estate: While the number of residential buyers is down 20 percent and dollar volume is down about 30 percent, first-time home purchases are still for properties priced \$250,000 and under. And in Red Lodge, entry level ski bums with dreams of owning can find hope. You can still get a little cabin condo in the \$120,000 to \$130,000 range. "When we look at the trends, 2009 has been straight upward since January," says Jim Moore, a real estate with RE/MAX Premier Properties who has lived here since 1976. "Sales normally start falling off toward the end of the summer and we're still up. Plus wise, once you've suffered through the sticker shock of some other resort markets, there are still some really nice places available. I've never heard anyone say that Montana has been overrun — there's still a lot of room." —**Brian Schott**

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