

THINK SMALL, LIVE BIG

KEY



MEDIAN HOME PRICE



COST OF LIVING COMPARED TO REST OF U.S.



SUNNY DAYS PER YEAR

All stats according to bestplaces.net



Downtown Durango – all 10 blocks of it – with Smelter Mountain rising from the edge of town

PHOTOGRAPH BY AMANDA FRIEDMAN. TYPE: JON VALLK

DO THE CALI COAST RIGHT

SAN LUIS OBISPO, CA

🏠 \$478,960
\$ 64% HIGHER
☀️ 287 DAYS

San Luis Obispo is a city very clear about what it is not — Los Angeles or San Francisco, although it lies exactly halfway between the two — and what it is: a place favored by sublime geography, whose endurance is assured by smart city planning. The old Spanish mission town is cradled among hills just far enough inland to be out of the Central Coast fog belt, but close enough to the ocean for a prebreakfast surf session. It's not too big or too small (population 45,000), too hot or too cold (85 degrees is a hot day; 65 degrees is chilly), too busy or too sleepy. Its only extreme might be beauty: tree-lined streets leading to the 1794 mission, a pedestrian-only heart of town, oak-studded hills. Just outside city limits are an emerging wine region and the kind of rolling country lanes that roadies dream about.

SLO, as it's known to locals, got some major ink last year in a book called *Thrive* by Dan Buettner. Citing "stratospheric levels of emotional well-being" in a Gallup-Healthways poll, he profiled the town as one of the happiest in the U.S. That's by design, not happenstance. Ordinances keep development from creeping up the city's signature hillsides. SLO banned fast-food drive-throughs years ago, and it was the first city in the country to nix indoor smoking in public places. (It recently adopted an outdoor ban that is among the nation's toughest: no smoking on sidewalks, in parks, or in the downtown Mission Plaza.) Mom-and-pop and Starbucks live together in peace, and no one dares to suggest cleaning up Bubble Gum Alley, where a million or so wads of gum decorate a pedestrian walkway.

A big part of the cool vibe comes from state university Cal Poly, which is also one of the biggest employers in the region. Newer job opportunities include solar and high-tech companies, and telecommuting is a viable option. It's also near a major agricultural area. No one moves to San Luis Obispo to get rich, but the strawberries at the farmers market are awesome.

MODEL CITIZEN

ERIK JUSTESEN *Landscape architect*



Cal Poly grad Erik Justesen has his dream job heading up projects that have a direct effect on his own quality of life. As CEO of RRM Design Group, which focuses on urban- and green-building projects, he designed the new bike trail linking the downtown waterfront to Morro Rock harbor beach. "I parlayed my passion for cycling into a unit of our company that specializes in parks and trails," he says. "We take a lot of pride in making these things happen. And then we get to ride them. That's an amazing feeling of satisfaction."

PROTECT A PARK

LOUISVILLE, KY

Louisville recently declared itself a "City of Parks" and embarked on an initiative to preserve open space (including a new 4,000-acre parkland corridor). Locals are enjoying a renaissance downtown in the old Whiskey Row, where former distilleries and warehouses are now restaurants and lofts. And Louisville still has its distinct neighborhoods, like Bardstown, rich with Victorians and eclectic eateries, and magnolia-draped Old Louisville, with its many pedestrian-only streets.



LIVE IN THE PAST

PHILIPSBURG, MT

Tucked in the Rocky Mountains between Missoula and Butte, with a ski area down the road, superb trout fishing right in town, and a complete absence of chain stores, Philipsburg is an off-the-grid paradise. Merchants in the 3.5-block historic downtown, reminiscent of its old mining days, shelled out a quarter of a million bucks and a lot of sweat equity to put up historic streetlights, and they stage fundraisers for flags and flowers to hang from the lampposts. Philipsburg also has a soda fountain that serves phosphates and sarsaparilla, four saloons, the oldest operating opera house in the state, and, of course, a fly shop.

GROW THE RIGHT WAY

GREENVILLE, SC

Booming Greenville has a lot to beat its chest about. The North American home of BMW and Michelin, it boasts a revitalized, pedestrian-friendly old downtown with a cool throwback ballpark, all linked by free trolley service; a zealous cycling community; and a group called Upstate Forever that keeps a watchdog's eye on open space and clean waterways. But the most telling recent development is the NEXT Innovation Center, where tech start-ups, entrepreneurs, and even angel investors rent and share space, coffee, and brainpower. The creative vibe here is so strong that walls are covered with writable surfaces so eureka's can get scribbled down anywhere, anytime.

GO GREEN

FLAGSTAFF, AZ

It's fitting that Flagstaff's version of an incubator for start-ups mainly seeds green businesses and has a youthful flair. The eco-minded college town of 60,000 sits at 7,000 feet beneath the San Francisco Peaks and is surrounded by the world's largest forest of ponderosa pines. Plus it's the home of Southwest Windpower, the world's largest maker of small-scale wind turbines.



An evening session at Pismo State Beach, just a 15-minute drive from SLO

FROM TOP: LYNN DODD/APRON, WOODS WHEATCROFT