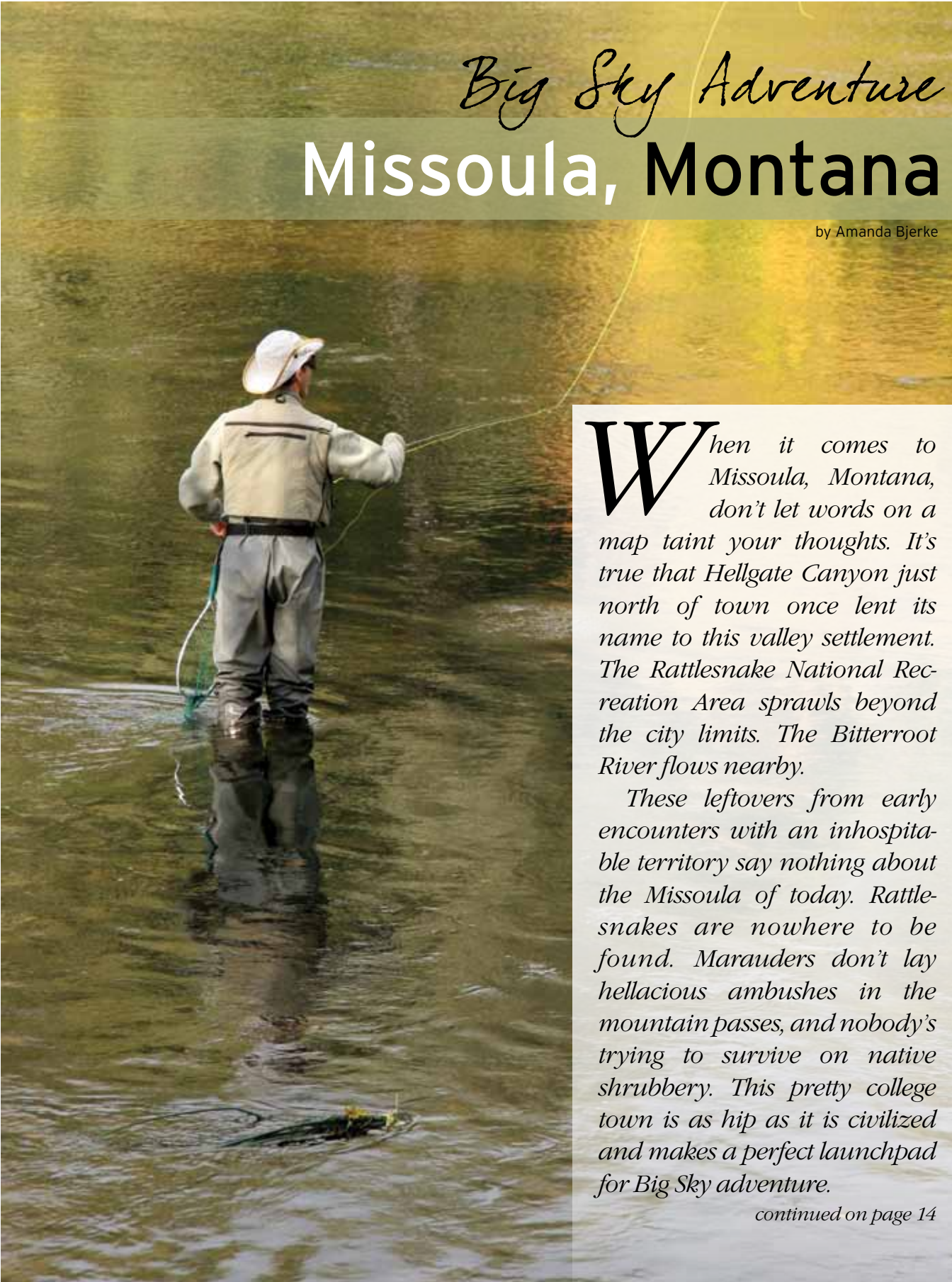


Big Sky Adventure Missoula, Montana

by Amanda Bjerke



When it comes to Missoula, Montana, don't let words on a map taint your thoughts. It's true that Hellgate Canyon just north of town once lent its name to this valley settlement. The Rattlesnake National Recreation Area sprawls beyond the city limits. The Bitterroot River flows nearby.

These leftovers from early encounters with an inhospitable territory say nothing about the Missoula of today. Rattlesnakes are nowhere to be found. Marauders don't lay hellacious ambushes in the mountain passes, and nobody's trying to survive on native shrubbery. This pretty college town is as hip as it is civilized and makes a perfect launchpad for Big Sky adventure.

continued on page 14

Big Sky Adventure



This is the place to make like a mountain man without sacrificing creature comfort. Missoula sits smack dab in the middle of some of the continent's most impressive countryside, yet it possesses an urbane attitude. The downtown is jammed chock-a-block with historic Victorian buildings now housing restaurants, galleries and lots of drinking establishments. University of Montana culture spills off campus, so there's plenty of live music, art exhibits and literary readings. The Children's Theater consistently wins awards, and the riverfront park is a great gathering place offering weekly free concerts all summer long.

Here are more straight-up facts on easy and economical things to do in the town formerly known as Hell Gate.

1. TAKE A HIKE. Ability doesn't matter in Missoula. There's a hike for everybody. The Lolo National Forest, with its 1,800 miles of trails, surrounds town and merges with the nearby Rattlesnake Recreation area to the north. The Selway-Bitterroot wilderness area, east of Missoula, offers another 1.3 million acres of pristine outdoor fun.

The Kim Williams Nature Trail is a wide, flat path that follows the river through town and is ideal for kids and those in less-than-top form. For a deceptively difficult trek, head for the letter "M" emblazoned on Mount Sentinel. It's only a mile long but includes more than a dozen switchbacks and rises 620 feet in elevation. The views of Missoula, the campus, and the vast territory beyond make the climb worthwhile.

2. GO FISHING. Missoula's located in the convergence of five valleys and offers tons of excellent fishing. The Clark Fork runs right through downtown and attracts urban anglers casting for rainbows and the occasional cutthroat. Six miles from town the Clark Fork gets much bigger as it joins the Blackfoot, immortalized in *A River Runs Through It*, Norman McLean's consummate "fly-fishing as a metaphor for life" book. (The author's boyhood home still stands in Missoula.) The Bitterroot also converges with the Clark Fork just outside of town. It tends to serve up big-fighting brown trout while

Rock Creek, 22 miles east of town in the Lolo National Forest, is a blue-ribbon stream favored by locals.

3. RIDE THE MERRY-GO-ROUND. Local volunteers built and maintain a beautiful carousel with hand-carved horses at Dragon's Hollow in the riverfront park. It costs just 50 cents for kids, a buck-fifty for grown ups and a dollar if an adult shares a seat with a youngster, and it's sure to bring a smile.

4. MAKE A DATE WITH HISTORY. Hellgate came by its name honestly. For centuries Blackfoot warriors ambushed the Salish people native to the Missoula area as they traveled through the narrow pass on their way to hunting grounds. The crevice was littered with human bones for centuries, long before Lewis and Clark appeared on the scene.

Lewis and Clark left a big mark on Missoula. In fact, while much of their original trail has become a blur of highways, dams, railroad tracks and other trappings of civilization, Traveler's Rest State Park, just 11 miles from downtown Missoula, is the nation's most authentic and easy-to-access link to the historic expedition. This is where the explorers camped before tackling the daunting Lolo Trail in the autumn of 1805. They rested here again on their way back.

For more about the area's fascinating history, visit the museum at Historical Fort Missoula. Founded in 1877, it was once home to the Buffalo Soldiers. Admission is just \$3 for adults, \$2 for seniors and \$1 for students.

To get a taste of Native American life attend the Powwow Celebration, held in Arlee, just 25 miles north of Missoula. Now in its 112th year, the event draws participants from throughout the country. It's held June 30 through July 4 this year.

5. EXPLORE BIG SKY COUNTRY. Montana's ultimate landmark experiences—Glacier and Yellowstone national parks—are at opposite ends of the state. But each is an easy weekend jaunt from Missoula. Glacier is three hours to the north by car. Yellowstone is about the same distance to the southeast. ■