

Escape to Montana

Trail Running is a way of life—and death—in Bozeman

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In July of 1808, Bozeman's first trail runner of European descent was put to the ultimate test. While trapping beaver with John Potts on the Jefferson River, John Colter was surrounded by 500 warriors of the Blackfeet tribe. When both men were asked to come ashore, Potts gestured, "Over my dead body!" The warriors obliged, quickly dispatching him with a slew of arrows. Colter smartly left his dead companion and went ashore where the Blackfeet stripped him nude and decided that a race to the death would be his torture.

The chief led Colter 400 yards from the main party, wished him well and sent him running. Colter ran 6 miles barefoot and naked from hundreds of warriors in eager pursuit. With bloody feet, Colter made it back to the Jefferson River, where he hid under a pile of driftwood until the Blackfeet ran past. He then ran east to the Madison River, across the Gallatin Valley, over the pass leading to Yellowstone and, as legend has it, on to a fort some 200 miles away.

Today, running on the mountainous trails surrounding the small town of Bozeman, Montana, does not have the dire consequences it did nearly two centuries ago. Seemingly in the spirit of Colter, though, Bozemanites do have a wild and passionate spirit for running the many spectacular trails located within a short drive from town.

Bozeman sits at 4,800 feet above sea level in the southeast corner of the Gallatin Valley, where a 360-degree glance will reveal four different mountain ranges with peaks topping out at over 11,000 feet. Hundreds of miles of trails lie within these ranges and contain arguably some of the finest trail running routes in North America.

Bozemanites also boast more than 12 miles of trails accessible out their front doors. The Linear trail system and Pete's Hill are great for quick 30 to 90 minute runs. And Bozeman hosts six organized trail runs - from a small 5k fun run to a rugged 20-mile ridge run.

Outside of the six race courses, there are many classics that any visiting trail runner will end up yahooping about. The Grassy Mountain Trail, 10 miles north of Bozeman off Highway 86, is a 13.5-mile must-do. Seven miles into this run, you'll reach a rolling single-track ridge in the Bangtail Mountains with mind-blowing views to the west of the sharp and steep Bridger Range and to the east of the wide Shields Valley and remote Crazy Mountains. A 2-mile descent through dense and colorful

vegetation below a canopy of pine leads back to Highway 86 and then a quick three miles to your car.

Another local favorite is the Sypes Canyon to Cottonwood Canyon trail. The venue for the Jim Bridger Trail Run, this 9-mile loop starts in Sypes Canyon, traverses across a high trail on the western slopes of the Bridger Range, then drops down North Cottonwood Canyon. It's great for a morning fix or afternoon kicks.

South of town, the terrain gets a bit wilder. The rugged Gallatin Range is within a 30-minute drive from Bozeman. The range, which includes the Hyalite and Spanish peaks, is part of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, meaning protected land and more wildlife.

With glaciated valleys containing rocks ranging from 50 million to 330 million years old and small trout-laden reservoirs and lakes, Hyalite Canyon is a mystical playground. At the south end of Hyalite Reservoir, the east and west forks of Hyalite Creek converge. Up either of these valleys lie wonderfully challenging single-track trails, passing waterfalls, meadows, thick trees, steep headwalls and alpine cirques. The trail runs in Hyalite can be as long as 15 miles (out-and-back) from either of the east or west fork trailheads. However, if you are willing to shuttle a car, the wilderness opens up for miles upon miles of national forest and wilderness lands south of this drainage.

Longer, loop trail runs are found in the Spanish Peaks Wilderness Area. From the Spanish Peaks trailhead just off Highway 191 in the Gallatin Valley, four hefty 20 to 30-mile loops are waiting to be tackled. This is the land of the bear, so it is best to be loud, and let your presence be known, as many black, brown and ever-feared grizzly bears roam freely. However, the trails, lakes, peaks and wildlife within this range are some of the best that Montana has to offer.

Montana is known as the "Last Best Place," which holds very true for trail runners. Running a trail outside of Bozeman on any weekday is like being John Colter during the turn of the 19th century – few people, big peaks, gorgeous meadows and flowing streams with abundant wildlife. While the area is known more for skiing, fishing, hiking and climbing, locals are passionate about trail running. But don't worry – they won't make you run barefoot and naked, unless of course you want to.

Getting There: Bozeman is a small but growing college town located in the south-central portion of Montana. Gallatin Field Airport has regional connections to several major cities on Horizon, Delta and Northwest. If you're driving, Bozeman is about 11 hours east of Seattle on Interstate 90 and eight hours northeast of Salt Lake City via 1-15 and 1-90. Greyhound bus service is also available to and from Bozeman. **Accommodations:** Bozeman has a wide range of places to stay, ranging from the inexpensive Youth Hostel (406-586-4659) to moderately priced chains like Best Western (406-587-3158) and Holiday Inn (406-587-4561). There are also several fabulous bed and breakfasts in the area, including Lindley House B&B (406-

587-8403). Campsites are abundant in Gallatin National Forest (406-587-6701). but you need to get a free permit. **Hot Springs:** Like many mountain towns, Bozeman has a plethora of hot springs to soak in after a long day on the trails. Bozeman Hot Springs (406-586-6492), Chico Hot Springs (406-333-4933) and Potosi Hot Springs (406-685-3594) are the commercial operations that also offer deluxe lodging. There are some wild hot springs in the area that you might find if you befriend some of the locals. **Weather:** High temperatures in Bozeman are usually between the upper 70s and mid-80s during the summer months, but it still usually cools off into the upper 40s at night. There isn't much humidity to worry about and June, the wettest of the summer months, is the only month that averages more than two inches of rain. The Bozeman area is still a great place to run through the fall, but expect chilly temperatures. In the winter, the area is a skiing and snowshoeing paradise. **Eats & Drinks:** Bozeman offers a wide variety of casual dining options, including MacKenzie River Pizza Co. (232 E. Main). O'Brien's Restaurant (312 E. Main). Sweet Pea Cafe (19 S. Willson). La Parilla (1535 W. Babcock) and Spanish Peaks Brewery (14 N. Church Avenue). Some of the favorite pubs include the Zebra Cocktail Lounge (321 E. Main). Montana Ale Works (Wallace and Main). the Robin Lounge (105 W. Main) and the "Bar-muda Triangle" of the Molly Brown, the Scoop and Hof Brau (near Eighth and Main). **Trail Races:** Jim Bridger Trail Run, 13 miles, June 23, (406-5820283); the Ridge Run, 20 miles, August 11, (406-582-0283); John Colter Run, 7 miles, September 8,(406-587-4415); Lewis & Clark Marathon, 26.2 miles, 13.1 miles, September 30, (406-763-5329). **Shops:** The town doesn't have a running specialty store, but it has several outdoor sports shops to serve your trail running needs, including Barrel Mountaineering (406-582-1335). Schnees Boots & Shoes (406-587-0981) and Universal Athletic (406-587-1220).