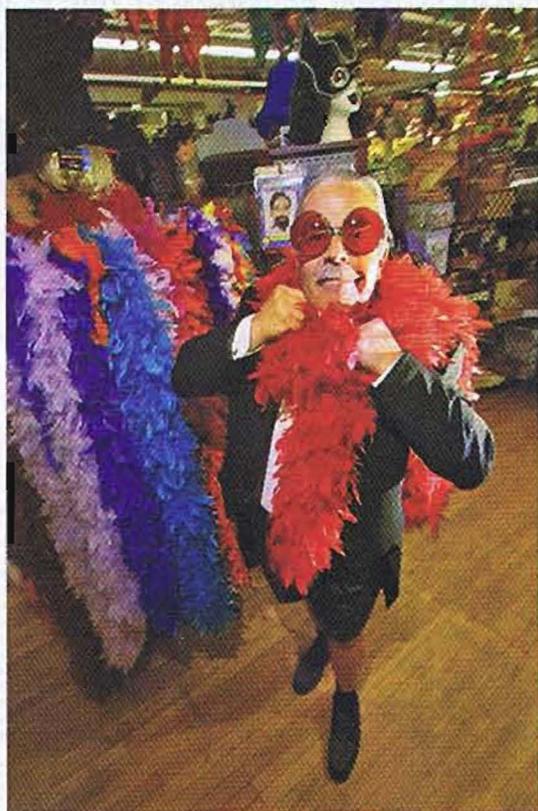


BELOW, Bruce Micklus has turned Rockin' Rudy's into a Missoula must-see. RIGHT, Charlie B's patrons make the bar a great place to be.

Missoula



A city's creative spirit bubbles beneath its Old West surface.
By Jeremy Saum

Inverted



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHAD HARDER

I HADN'T COUNTED ON spending my first night in Missoula at a performance-art showcase called *Monkey-Riding Buddhas*. Staged by a group known as the Open Field Artists, the show included sketch comedy, the tango, and plenty of audience participation. At one point, along with the 100 or so other attendees, I raised my arms and shouted "Tell me the truth" in Spanish. Later, I dropped a pinto bean into a hat. Neither activity had been on my to-do list. But as I walked back to my hotel after the show, it dawned on me: I had just experienced the Missoula Inversion.

Local people talk about the inversion as a meteorological occurrence. In the winter, thick

fog rises in the valley of the Clark Fork River, which runs through the heart of Missoula, and remains trapped for days beneath Mounts Jumbo and Sentinel, the peaks that preside over the city. I had cursed the inversion for closing the airport and delaying my arrival. But after one night in this community of 62,000 people, I realized that the Missoula Inversion was more profound than a change in the weather. It's a phenomenon that turns expectations upside down. A city that could easily recline in a comfy chair of Old West nostalgia instead refuses to sit still, exuding creative energy in places both likely—the Missoula Art Museum—and surprising—the



The ultimate expression of this art ethic of, by, and for the people is, of all things, a community carousel.

Jeannette Rankin Peace Center.

Missoula rose on the spot where C.P. Higgins and Francis Worden founded the Hell Gate Village trading post in 1860, and the Old West still defines much of the city's look. Higgins Avenue, downtown's main thoroughfare, begins at the 1901 Northern Pacific railroad depot and on its way across the river passes brick buildings like the 1902 Atlantic Hotel, designed by Missoula architect A.J. Gibson. That building now houses the Circle Square Secondhand store, where I found old wrenches, a purple-sequined flapper dress, and two framed portraits of Boy George. At Worden's Market, opened by city founder Worden in 1883, you can scoop peanuts from a barrel. But Missoula does not live in its past.

After the Open Field Artists' wake-up call, I should have known better, but when I walked into the Missoula Art Museum, I still thought I'd find pictures of cowboys, like the murals by Edgar Paxson in Missoula's Gibson-designed county courthouse. Instead, more modern voices join the conversation about Montana's art and history.

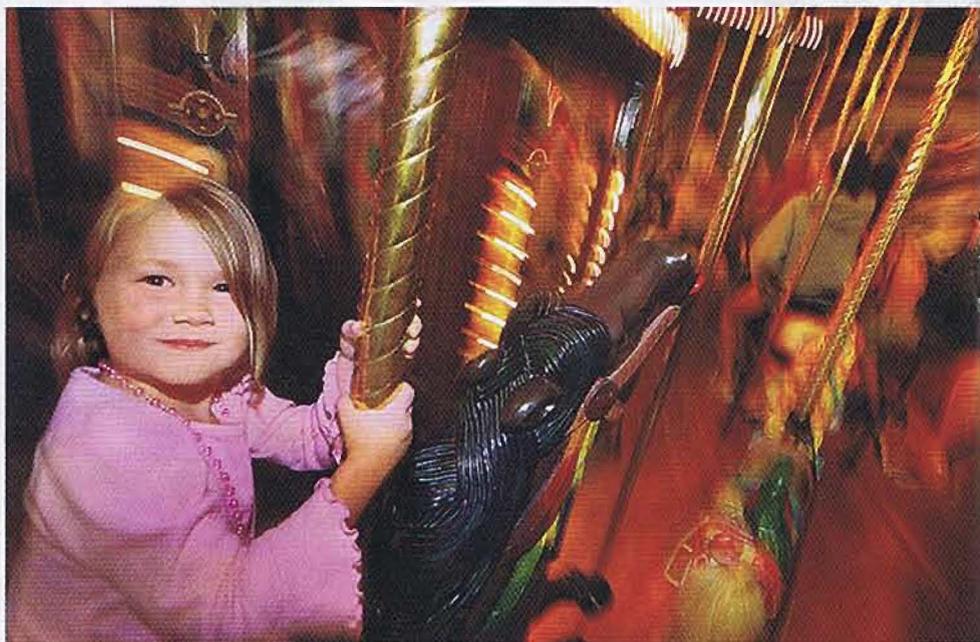
For example, the south gallery on the second floor is devoted to the museum's eclectic collection of contemporary American Indian art. The exhibits rotate (through February 9, you can see abstract paintings by local artist George Gogas), but it's safe to say you won't see many Charles Russell landscapes on the walls. "Russell is a hero in this state," says curator Stephen Gluckert. "But in many ways, [his style of] western romanticism is harmful to us. Our culture is not one thing, not one voice."

I encountered this same democratic and creative spirit repeatedly during my visit. Dining in the wine bar at the Red Bird, a restaurant recommended by near-

ly every Missoulan I talked to, I learned that Jadyn Fisher, the pastry chef who made my lavender crème brûlée, had also created the graceful ironwork on the deep red walls. Later, at the Break Espresso, I sipped a mug of Evening in Missoula tea—a blend created by the late Bruce Lee, founder of Butterfly Herbs, another inviting coffee shop just down Higgins. Next door at Charlie B's bar,

Kaparich, it was built in the early 1990s by a posse of volunteers—most with little or no experience—whom Kaparich inspired. "Most of them were people who at some point had been told that they didn't have any creative talent," says artist Larry Pirnie, who designed Paint, an intoxicatedly vibrant pony with purple hooves, orange legs, and a blue head.

From the carousel, a short walk along

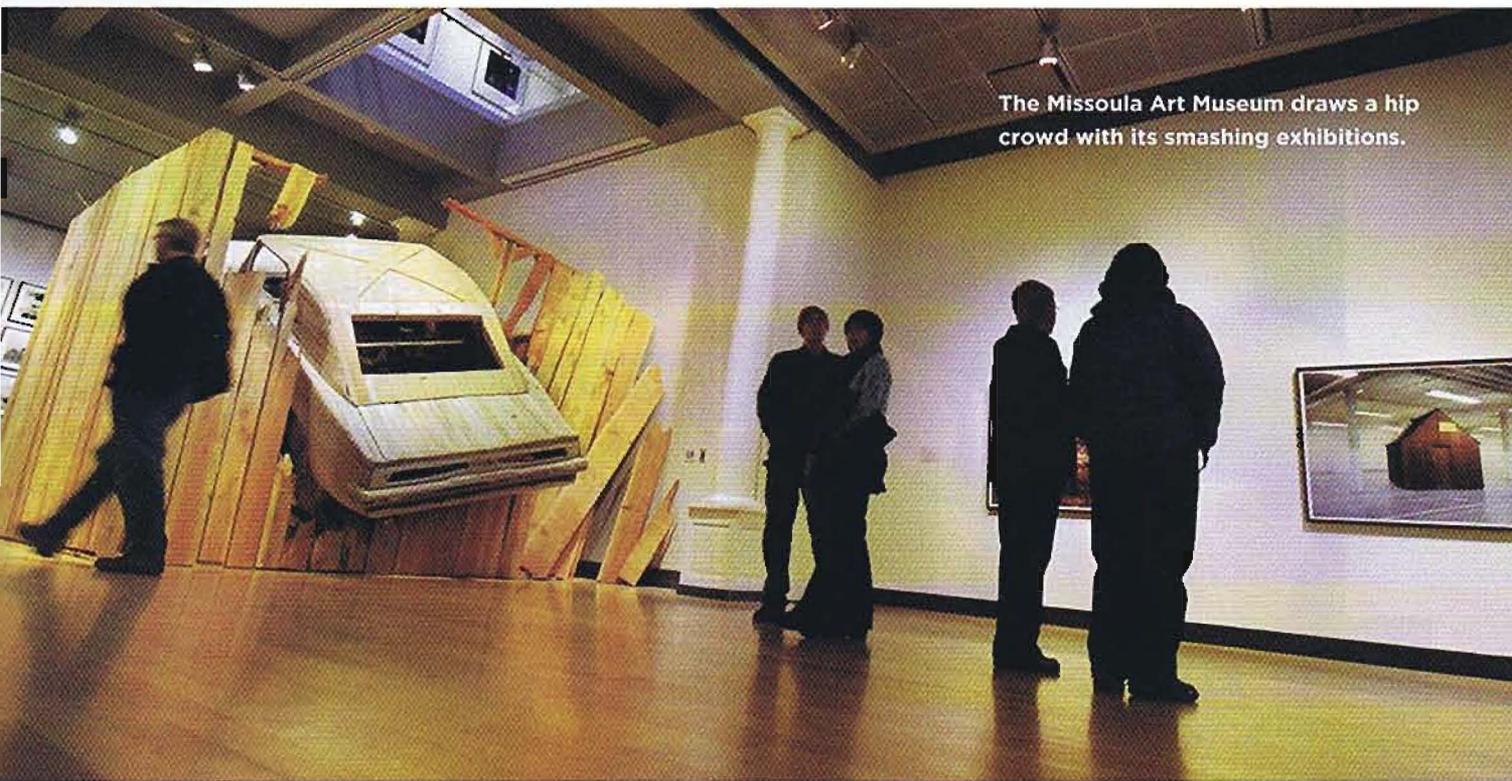


Missoula's beloved carousel delights riders with 38 hand-painted ponies.

the walls are hung with black-and-white portraits of regular patrons by photographer Lee Nye. I sat next to a musician named Larry who spends his summers in the Mount Union tower outside of town, where he practices the banjo and the saxophone while spotting forest fires.

The ultimate expression of this art ethic of, by, and for the people is the city's most beloved tourist attraction: A Carousel for Missoula, which carries kids and adults on some 220,000 rides a year. The dream of local resident Chuck

the river and over the Higgins Avenue Bridge takes you to the Hip Strip. The University of Montana lies a few blocks to the east, and a college-town funkiness pervades some of the shops. Everyone gets croissants at purple-doored Bernice's Bakery and \$1 copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the Jeannette Rankin Peace Center. Rankin was a Missoula native and staunch pacifist who in 1916 became the first woman elected to Congress, four years before women won the right to vote.



The Missoula Art Museum draws a hip crowd with its smashing exhibitions.

You can get pretty much anything else nearby at Rockin' Rudy's. Bruce Micklus opened the shop in 1982 as a place to rent records, most of them from his personal collection. It has since undergone what Micklus calls "a sort of cancerous growth" to become a sprawling emporium housing a comprehensive music department, a large selection of greeting cards, and gifts of all kinds, including pig-shaped

flashlights, a pop-up book of Graceland, and T-shirts promoting CITIZENS FOR A POODLE-FREE MONTANA.

I continued letting Missoula's charm beguile me, but the scenery just beyond the city limits could be ignored only so long. So I drove 15 minutes north, past new subdivisions, to the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area. I walked along the quiet, snow-packed trail and

dipped my finger into the cold, clear water of Rattlesnake Creek as it flowed over purple, red, and orange stones. A doe crossed my path and then flashed her fluffy white rear as she sprang up the slope to my right. She watched me pass, and I found myself wishing the fog would come back to close the airport and keep me here awhile longer. Even my feelings about the inversion had inverted. ●

If You're Going . . .

Pick up the AAA *Idaho, Montana & Wyoming TourBook* and *Idaho-Montana* map. Contact the **Missoula Convention and Visitors Bureau**, (800) 526-3465, www.missoulacvb.org. Area code is 406.

TO DO AND SEE

A Carousel for Missoula 101 Carousel Dr., in Caras Park, 549-8382, www.carrousel.com. **Jeannette Rankin Peace Center** 519 S. Higgins Ave., 543-3955, www.jrpc.org. **Missoula Art Museum** 335 N. Pattee St., 728-0447, www.missoulaartmuseum.org. **Missoula Children's Theatre** 200 N. Adams St., 728-1911, www.mctinc.org. **Missoula County Courthouse** 200 W. Broadway. **Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation** 5705 Grant Creek Rd., 523-4545, www.rmef.org. **Roxy Theater** 718 S. Higgins Ave., 728-9380, www.wildlifefilms.org. **Wilma Theatre** 131 S. Higgins Ave., 728-2521, www.thewilma.com.

EATS

Bernice's Bakery 190 S. Third St. W., 728-1358, www.bernicestbakerymt.com. **Break Espresso** 432 N. Higgins Ave., 728-7300. **515** 515 S. Higgins Ave., 327-1515, www.515restaurant.com. **Red Bird** 111 N. Higgins Ave., Ste. 100, 549-2906, www.redbirdrestaurant.com. **Scotty's Table** 529 S. Higgins Ave., 549-2790.

SLEEPS

You'll find major midlevel chain hotels downtown. For variety, try: **Blossom's Bed and Breakfast** From \$100. Enjoy an organic breakfast in a restored 1910 Craftsman house. 1114 Poplar St., 721-4690, www.blossomsbnb.com. **Goldsmith's Bed and Breakfast Inn** From \$89. A 1911 house on the riverfront across from the university. 809 E. Front St., 728-1585, www.goldsmithsinn.com.