

Welcome to DogTown USA™ 2008

Colorado Springs, Colo., takes dog-friendliness to new heights.

Maureen Kochan

The runners-up

Huntington Beach, Calif.

Wagging rights: Strong sense of community among dog lovers; dog beach.

Courtesy Huntington Beach

Conference and Visitors Bureau When Corey Brixen wanted to share his love for dogs and the beach, he bought a 10-seater van on eBay and launched the Doggie Bus, a shuttle for landlocked dogs and their owners bound for Huntington Beach's popular Dog Beach.

"This is my donation to the community," says Brixen of the bus, which is wrapped in a giant picture of his dog, Jack Russell Terrier Jonny, frolicking at the beach. "I don't charge for the trips because I don't want it to become a business, and I don't want it to feel like a job. It's just for fun!" Brixen recently installed a flat-screen TV in the bus for guests to watch Dog Whisperer during the 40-minute ride.

For Orange County dog lovers like Brixen, Huntington Beach is their mecca, and it's easy to see why. This city boasts one of the finest dog beaches in the country and plenty of dog-friendly places off the sand.

In downtown Huntington Beach, it's harder to find a restaurant that doesn't allow dogs than one that does. At the Park Bench Café near the dog park in the city's 350-acre Central Park, dogs are served from a special "Canine Cuisine" menu that offers items such as Bow Wow Wow chicken and Rover Easy eggs. On a busy weekend morning, dogs can easily outnumber kids, and dog-loving strangers become fast friends.

So what is it about dogs that makes this corner of sprawling Southern California act and feel like a small town? "There is just something about dog people that seems to create an instant bond," Brixen says.

Briarcliff Manor, N.Y.

Wagging rights: Low-cost preventive care; small-town atmosphere meets big-city amenities.

Courtesy SPCA of Westchester If you own a dog, you know that veterinary healthcare costs are soaring. But dog owners who live in this bucolic village 30 miles north of Manhattan have a distinct advantage: the low-cost Simpson Clinic, operated by the SPCA of Westchester.

Residents can take advantage of reduced-cost spay and neuter procedures, and weekly Wellness Days that provide other services such as vaccinations, physical exams, flea and tick control, heartworm testing, microchipping, nail trimming, and ear cleaning. "Our parking lot is full on Wellness Days," says Lisa Bonanno, a development associate for the SPCA of Westchester.

The Simpson Clinic serves all area residents regardless of income or address. "We don't want to deny anyone the proper care their animals need," Bonanno says. As a result, an estimated 90 percent of Briarcliff Manor dogs receive preventive care.

And while only 8,000 people call Briarcliff Manor home, residents enjoy several dog-friendly restaurants and dog events befitting a town several times as large, thanks to the innovative shelter. Popular events include the Wags & Whiskers Walk-a-thon and Pet Fair, and an annual Howl-o-ween bash where dogs compete for best costume. "We want the community to get outside with their pets and have fun," Bonanno says.

Coeur d'Alene, Idaho

Wagging rights: Dog-friendly inside and out.

Courtesy City of Coeur d'Alene During Lewis and Clark's famous expedition, the pair struggled over the Rocky Mountains into what is now Idaho. "I have been wet and as cold in every part as I ever was in my life," William Clark complained. And while modern-day Idaho still embraces, even celebrates, that ruggedness, things are decidedly more comfy today — especially for dogs.

At Capone's Pub and Grill in Coeur d'Alene ("core-da-lane," or simply CDA to locals), which rests next to an expansive lake 2,128 feet above sea level, dogs have been welcome for all 16 years the pub's been in business. "If the dogs — and their owners — behave, they can stay," quips owner Teresa Capone.

You'll also find dogs on Coeur d'Alene's popular 24-mile Centennial Trail, which starts at Lake Coeur d'Alene and winds through the town and Idahoan countryside on its way toward Washington state. Once winter gives way to spring, usually around May, that's where you'll find locals walking their dogs. One stretch is also home to A.J.'s Tails and Trails Annual Walk, a 5K dog walk that raises money for the Kootenai Humane Society, which had one of the lowest owner surrender rates in our survey.

Long Beach, Calif.

Wagging rights: Pro-dog populace; innovative dog-centric events.

Courtesy Justin Rudd For the second year in a row, Long Beach makes our list of the best cities for dogs. And while this city of just under 500,000 people boasts a dog-friendly beach and tony Second Street, a shopping area that's truly dog-friendly, it's Long Beach's innovative events for dogs and dog lovers that set this town apart.

At the Haute Dog Easter Parade, 400 or so costumed dogs march down the city's streets, some in flower-bedecked wagons and carts (think pooch-sized Rose Parade). Other attention-grabbing events include the Bulldog Beauty Contest, which attracts several hundred English and French Bulldogs on Valentine's Day weekend and crowns the "Bull of the Ball." But Long Beach isn't all fun and games: Serious-minded programs include Operation Santa Paws, where residents collect toys and treats for shelter dogs at Christmas.

The man behind all these events is Justin Rudd, a longtime community activist and founder of Haute Dogs, a nonprofit organization that raises money and attention for homeless pets. So what inspired the Alabama-born Rudd to help transform Long Beach into a dog lover's urban Disneyland? "My Bulldog, Rosie. I wanted to start a movement ... that allows dogs to be a very special and deliberate part of our day-to-day life," he says. "I like to celebrate the connections we have with our dogs."

Maureen Kochan is a freelance writer and editor who lives in Southern California.

- Read about recent DogTown USA winners -