

Welcome to DogTown USA® 2007

San Diego: Where it's good to be a dog.

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As the late Roger Caras, host of the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, once said, "Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole." And the places we live are only made whole with the inclusion of our canine companions. How a town or city honors its residents' dogs is a clear illustration of how important they are to that community.

For DOG FANCY'S third annual DogTown USA contest, we analyzed, studied, and picked apart big cities and small towns alike in search of the dog-friendliest place in the United States. What we found were nine cities with superb environments, great natural resources, innovative activities, supreme veterinary care, and model shelter rates. But it was their above-all-else love of dogs that sealed the deal. Without their adored canine companions, these cities would not be complete.

This year, we chose San Diego as DogTown USA 2007. Not only does it adore and revere its canine treasures, but it boasts outstanding community activities, an amazing climate, and top-notch animal services. Discover why San Diego is a great place to be a dog, and how eight other stellar, dog-loving cities measure up.

San Diego, Calif.
Dogs: 305,000
People: 1.3 million

From an unbeatable climate to stunning coastlines, and cutting-edge animal shelters to enviable community support, San Diego ran away with the top honors this year.

"As a community, San Diego has a commitment to its dogs. And they love them," says Simran Noon, director of public relations and marketing for the San Diego Humane Society and SPCA. "That's what the human-animal bond is all about."

Mike Arms, president of the Helen Woodward Animal Center in Rancho Santa Fe just outside of San Diego, agrees: "San Diego ... may be the most dog-friendly community in the world. Most San Diego families understand that dogs are pack animals, and that the dog considers us to be their pack. It's the best of both worlds [here], for dogs, and for dog lovers."

The community stands behind its four-legged friends. Annually, nearly \$25 million is donated to the six local animal shelters in the area. "To me, that says, 'Wow! This city is a great place to be a dog,'" Noon says. "When it comes down to putting your money where your mouth is, San Diego is it."

This coastal city near the Mexico border, which boasts some of the highest priced real estate in the nation, is home to 60-plus dog-friendly hotels, more than 50 dog-friendly restaurants, and numerous dog trainers and behaviorists.

Balboa Park, with everything from museums to hiking trails to off-leash areas, is a popular place for dog owners, and the Dog Days of Summer event at PETCO Park provides San Diego Padres fans and their pooches some old-fashioned baseball fun.

"The best thing for us to do with our [two Golden Retrievers] is to take them to one of the many off-leash dog beaches in the area," says Susan Subkow, organizer of the 350-member San Diego Golden Retriever Meetup Group. "The many community events are always very fun, and we've had a fantastic time participating with our group in several community parades. The gaggle of Golden Retrievers is always a big hit with the crowd."

The city's mayor is also proud of the dog-friendly atmosphere. "Being able to get outside and take your dog to the beach or park — that is what San Diego is all about," says Mayor Jerry Sanders. "[Dogs] enhance the quality of life."

This is a fact known well by Canine Companions for Independence, an assistance-dog organization that provides dogs to people with disabilities. It's located right outside San Diego, in Oceanside, Calif. "San Diego is the perfect place for pooches and the people who love them," says Karyl Carmignani, southwest public relations coordinator for CCI. "There are miles of beaches, mountain trails, and dog parks for our furry friends to get their leash-free minutes. The 'canine culture' in San Diego is definitely something to wag about!"

The community rallies behind dogs in need, too. Many of the city's fire and rescue teams have dog-sized resuscitation masks for pet use during rescues. And that attention to caring reaches homeless dogs, too. Hornblower Cruises & Events' annual Pet Rescue Day on the Bay provides a free owner-and-dog bay cruise with the donation of towels and blankets to the Helen Woodward Animal Center.

The San Diego Humane Society's Walk for the Animals is the largest animal-focused fundraising walk of its kind in Southern California, with 3,000 people raising \$300,000 for vital community programs and services at the humane society. And the humane society's annual Fur Ball in August is a huge hit, allowing people and their dogs some black-tie fun with cocktails, dinner, dancing, and auctions. Last year, it raised \$350,000 for the humane society's programs and services, and sold out three months prior to the event.

San Diego is also the home of the AniMeals program which provides free pet food for homebound elderly and disabled owners. Started in 1984 by the Helen Woodward Animal Center, there are now more than 35 groups in the United States operating programs patterned after San Diego's AniMeals.

San Diego's combined animal shelter rates are enviable, with more than 80 percent of all impounded dogs adopted, rescued, or reunited with owners. At the humane society, adoption rates are a staggering 90.5 percent. "Most of the animal shelters and rescue groups here understand that we must work together for the good of the animals," Arms says.

And for pets who do end up at the San Diego Humane Society, the accommodations sure beat a concrete kennel. The shelter's kennel areas were recently revamped into attractive living quarters with the help of the San Diego Chapter of the American Society of Interior Designers. And a nicer-looking shelter is a good thing for its animals: "Our adoption rate has tripled after this was done," Noon says.

"The community [is] dedicated to the dog as our best friend," Noon says. "They really are part of our families."