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TOM CURREN &
SON PAT IN SANTA
BARBARA

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WELCOME HOME

Falling in love with a place is like falling in love with a person. Sometimes you just know. For our Best Hometowns 2016, *Sunset* editors searched the West from the Arizona desert to the Washington coast to find towns, cities, and neighborhoods that are easy to love. All five winners boast a strong sense of community—the gift of making you feel like you belong. Come do some window shopping. You may find your new hometown.



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BEST SUSTAINABLE
COMMUNITY

SANTA BARBARA

WITH ITS BEACHES and mountains backdrop, Santa Barbara is so lovely that it feels almost absolved of environmental ills. Ironic, given a 1969 oil spill here galvanized the national environmental movement, gave birth to Earth Day, and jump-started a citizens' movement that now shows what a green-minded community can do.

"It was the worst oil spill the United States had seen, and it turned Santa Barbara into a flash point of activism," says Kathi King of the Santa Barbara-based Community Environmental Council. "There were so many passionate people here willing to take up the cause and run with it."

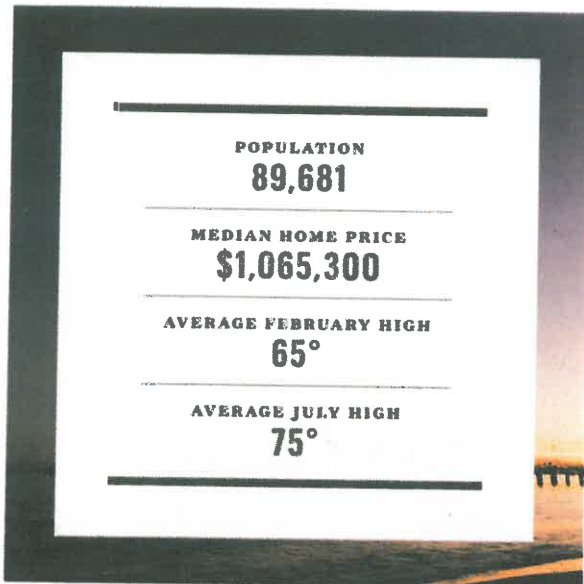
They are still running full bore. Take water. In the midst of a historic drought, California required communities to reduce water usage by 12 percent. The city of Santa Barbara asked residents to go one better, calling for a 25 percent citywide reduction in water use. Residents responded by, on average, reducing their water use by 36 percent, making Santa Barbara one of the top five water conservers in the state. Stroll the town and you'll see lawns of native bentgrass, and herb gardens fed by water diverted from the clothes washer.

"We're very pleasantly surprised by the response, but we're not shocked," says Madeline Ward, the city's water conservation coordinator. "Conservation really is a way of life here in Santa Barbara. The area's beauty is something that people value highly."

Santa Barbara may be home to 90,000, but it is still very much a small town. Moneyed families know more about one another than they'd like; old hippies know one another back to times they can't remember. Together, they link arms to preserve their town's beauty. And, courtesy of the University of California, Santa

Santa Barbara scenes, from the city's legendary La Super-Rica Taqueria (top, far left) to its surfer-friendly beaches, iconic mission, and serene harbor.





Barbara, and the adjunct Bren School of Environmental Science & Management, new activists keep pouring in, taking jobs with the city (Ward is a UCSB graduate) and spearheading local environmental groups. Think renewable human energy.

Water isn't the only front on which Santa Barbara's sustainability shines. Virtually no stone is left unturned. The city (and county) outlawed plastic bags. Battling plastic bottles, the CEC set up water stations in schools so kids can refill the water containers they have. The stations have counters so the kids can see the results. So far, they've been used almost 2 million times. Residents are encouraged to eat local (less carbon footprint) and get out of fossil fuel-burning cars. The city hosts three green car shows a year. Veins of ever-expanding bike lanes crisscross town.

Renewable energy is a big focus, tapping resources readily at hand. Santa Barbara is currently studying the feasibility of "community choice energy," with the future aim of producing its own energy—in part via renewable sources like solar energy—and controlling its dispersal too, via a nonprofit overseen by a board of local residents. Offering discounts on solar-panel installation, the CEC has seen solar panels installed on some 450 local rooftops. There is no dearth of sunshine. Ocean at its doorstep, the city is reopening its desalination plant to help deal with the drought.

These efforts are local, but the aim is global.

"These are things that other communities can see and say, 'Oh, we want to do that too,' and they don't have to reinvent the wheel," says King. "And, in the end, we're all in this together." —K.M.

Clockwise from top left: Cabrillo Bike Path; Tom Curren with son Pat; Santa Barbara Train Station; a local garden.

RUNNERS-UP

Arcata, CA

How green is this university town on California's North Coast? Arcata owns the nation's first community forest—2,500 acres certified by the Forest Stewardship Council—established to demonstrate sustainable forestry practices. Its wastewater is a community asset: An effluent treatment system creates a haven of marshes, grassy uplands, and mudflats that are home to a stunning variety of flora and fauna. And Humboldt State University has some of the top environmental science and engineering programs in the nation. **POPULATION: 17,700. MEDIAN HOME PRICE: \$298,000.**

Billings, MT

It's known as an oil and gas center, but Billings has a surprising green streak too. It's established miles of bike paths, and its Trash Into Trees program has used recycling proceeds to plant more than 2,000 trees around town. More recently its new public library joined the ranks of notable LEED Platinum-certified Billings buildings. **POPULATION: 109,000. MEDIAN HOME PRICE: \$269,700.**

Las Cruces, NM

Cities like Davis, California, or Boulder, Colorado, may be more famous as bike-friendly cities, but Las Cruces is gaining on them. It's creating a network of bike lanes and routes that just earned it recognition from The League of American Bicyclists. Good biking and world-famous green chiles—not a bad combination. **POPULATION: 101,300. MEDIAN HOME PRICE: \$218,500.**



SURFER'S DELIGHT

Yes, Tom Curren won three surfing world championships, and as a singer-songwriter he has three critically acclaimed albums. But there's also an indefinable something more. Like his hometown, Curren possesses style and soul. A few words on Santa Barbara from one of its favorite sons. —K.M.

How long have you lived in Santa Barbara? My parents moved our family here when I was 6 months old. I left for a time when I was about 18 or 19, but it's my family's home now.

What makes the city unique? The region has so much to offer. Obviously we have the ocean, but we have the mountains as well. It's just a really pretty place. Even after all the time I've spent here, I can't say I've grown accustomed to it.

Why does it have such a strong environmental ethic? I think the 1969 oil spill has a lot to do with it. It started then. There's really not much room for physical growth here, so we have to be careful about the growth we allow.

For you as a musician, does Santa Barbara provide inspiration?

Absolutely. It's really nice to be in a natural setting when you're working on music. I suppose you can make music in a less natural setting, but it's a good place for me to be.

Where's your favorite place to hear live music? The Santa Barbara Bowl. It's an incredible venue.

Your favorite Santa Barbara surf spots? Wintertime, you've got Rincon, and in springtime you can go to Hendry's. But

honestly, most of the rest of the year there's not a lot of surf here. There's good surf just to the south and north, though.

Best place for a beginner to learn to surf? Leadbetter Beach.

You've surfed the world's best waves. How does this area compare? This is a great place for surf. It's ideal because of all the different facing beaches along the coast that can support different swell and wind directions and different types of waves. If you're willing to drive a little, you can get a lot of waves around here.

All that surfing requires caloric restocking.

What's your favorite Mexican restaurant? [Laughs] Burger Express. They serve great Mexican food. And burgers.

Well, then, this may be a repeat. Your favorite burger place? [Laughs again] The best burgers are at Cal Taco. Really.

What's your favorite beach to go to with your family? A tough one, but Rincon.

Where's the best place to get a taste of the real Santa Barbara? The harbor. We're a seaside community and the harbor has always remained kind of the same.

