



Outdoor Retailer Needs to Go To Portland

Why the biannual outdoor tradeshow needs to tap into the weird greatness that is Portland, Oregon

May 24, 2017 By John Clary Davies [f](#) [t](#) [@](#)

Last week, the *Denver Post* reported that Outdoor Retailer had a few finalists for its new location. The frontrunners are Denver, Las Vegas, and Portland.

Earlier this year, the massive outdoor tradeshow announced it would leave the conservative wet blanket that is Utah after pressure from Patagonia and Black Diamond, among other brands, who said they would no longer attend the show if it remained in Utah due to the state's earnest efforts to sell off the very public lands that are the only thing that make visiting the state worthwhile. Nobody's coming for the 3.2.

According to the *Denver Post*, Outdoor Retailer brings some 20,000 visitors and \$45 million in economic impact, though I'm not sure if that figure includes the not insignificant amount of gin and tonics consumed throughout the week by the POWDER staff. Regardless, the move matters to cities, many of which, especially Denver—that old overachiever—are lobbying hard to host the show. But its location is even more essential for OR, whose relevancy (much like my own opinion) is increasingly called into question.

Gear and marketing in the industry has long been focused on the vainglorious mission of getting as rad as possible, when young people have been more focused on the vainglorious mission of being as interesting as possible. The outdoor industry, after seeing the massive success of brands like Poler, is finally starting to recognize that more people are interested in car camping with their friends than summiting a '14er.

The outdoor industry has an image problem. I'm going to come right out and say it: It's old. For many years, it has struggled to engage young people, which represent a massive amount of current and future purchasing power, as well as cultural influence. Gear and marketing in the industry has long been focused on the vainglorious mission of getting as rad as possible, when young people have been more focused on the vainglorious mission of being as interesting as possible. The outdoor industry, after seeing the massive success of brands like Poler, is finally starting to recognize that more people are interested in car camping with their friends than summiting a '14er. Not many people, especially younger ones, really need, or want, an \$800 NeoGnarnia jacket. So now even legacy brands are embracing more lifestyle products and marketing toward them. When every outdoor marketing department has at least one Sprinter, #VanLife is officially a cliché.

Denver would of course be the obvious choice, especially after last week's news that Outdoor Retailer is purchasing Snowsports Industries America, whose Snow Show will be hosted in Denver until 2030 and had a non-compete clause that would have prevented OR from having its January winter show in the same city. Also significant is Governor John Hickenlooper's strong record in support of the outdoor recreation industry as well as public lands (which, if Utah hadn't proven otherwise, would have seemed like a no-brainer for most states).

Denver is also a terribly overrated city that's as cliché as the Texans that move there to "be near the outdoors." The city is too spread out, has no significant public transportation, and the access to the mountains is genuinely atrocious. Denver (or Boulder, for that matter—sorry, Eldora) as a decent place to be a skier is a lie. Pearl Street is a cornucopia of corporate mediocrity. And the altitude and elitist—I did a tri for lunch—culture are super annoying.

Meanwhile, Portland has long been the symbolic center for young people embracing quality of life. OR's gotta tap into that! Portland is currently the most desirable place to live in the country. In 2016, housing prices grew faster there than anywhere else. That's understandable. Portland, though it may be a caricature of its own hipness, really is pretty great. Led by progressive politicians like Governor Kate Brown and Senator Ron Wyden, not to mention a very civically engaged and aware community, it's a free-thinking haven regularly recognized for being one of the top "green" cities in the country, due to its walkability, public transportation, world-renowned bike lanes, free-range hipsters, and vegan strip clubs.

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Portland's access to the outdoors is also so superior that it's actually faster to drive to Vail from Portland than it is from Denver. One can also go from downtown Portland to a hiking or mountain biking trail in 20 minutes and from the city center to a ski slope or a beach within an hour.

The outdoor industry is nothing if not an indulgent lot. So it really comes down to one question: Where would you rather party? The biggest reason OR should choose Portland is a simple one: It's way more fun. I can't imagine another city the outdoor world would enjoy flocking for a biannual tradeshow. It has one of the most vibrant music scenes in the country, the most breweries of any city on the planet, and the *Washington Post* recently named it the fourth best food city. It has 600 food carts!

Ultimately, the parent company of Outdoor Retailer, the publicly traded Emerald Expositions, will probably consider short-term profits ahead of beard to food cart to tree ratios, but I still think Portland is a place that represents an evolution for the outdoor industry, as opposed to yet another trip to Denver. Having the show on the West Coast, in a progressive and vibrant city like Portland, would inject a much-needed new energy into Outdoor Retailer.

Plus, it's the whitest place in the country, so the outdoor industry will fit right in.

John Clary Davies is the editor of POWDER. He lived in Portland from 2008 to 2012. He is a sucker for all of Portland's indulgences.

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 **Orange Box**

Absolutely nailed it, the only people looking forward to Denver are Midwesterners or Easterners who've never been further west. Maybe this would finally put a nail in the coffin of the khaki shorts, plaid short-sleeve shirt guy who is wearing shoes intended to sprint up the middle of a river....for the