

# Why Flagstaff is such a running mecca

BY RACHEL SMITH

Special to the Daily Sun

Nestled at 7,000 feet in northern Arizona, our mountain town has earned a reputation as one of the best places in the world to run. I, and many others, would argue that what makes Flagstaff so special isn't just the thin air, but the combination of environment, community and opportunity that it offers runners of every level.

The high elevation is undeniably one of Flagstaff's biggest draws. Training at altitude forces a person to have certain physiological adaptations, including building greater aerobic capacity. Many of the world's top distance runners spend weeks or months here to reap the benefits of altitude training.

Flagstaff's climate makes it equally appealing for runners. Unlike the sweltering heat found in much of the American Southwest, summers in the mountains are typically mild, with cool nights and early mornings. (Although this summer we are certainly missing the monsoons!). Even when the summer days feel too hot or dry,

it never lasts long, as we are one of the only places in the Southwest to experience four distinct seasons.

Each season has its beauty and its challenges for runners. Even when winter brings snow, many roads and trails remain open, offering a mix of clear routes and soft, snowy surfaces. Plus there are nearby dirt roads within a 30-minute drive from town, at slightly lower elevation, that don't typically get the same snowfall. And when a runner isn't loving the current Flagstaff condition, it's easy to immerse yourself in a completely different terrain, with a relatively short drive to Sedona's vast red rock trail system or find a run at (or in!) the Grand Canyon.

Another major attraction for Flagstaff runners (and outdoor enthusiasts) is the landscape itself is endlessly inviting. Flagstaff is covered with a network of trails, from countless miles of dirt roads and forested paths to volcanic cinder surfaces and rocky alpine climbs. The renowned Flagstaff Urban Trail System, or FUTS, even connects

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neighborhoods across town with smooth runnable routes. Add in gorgeous views of the San Francisco Peaks, golden meadows, and miles of pine forest, and just about any run practically feels like moving through a postcard.

I would argue even

more appealing than the altitude, environmental conditions, or scenic landscape is the community. Flagstaff has become a hub for running enthusiasts of all types — from recreational runners to elite training groups, Olympians, ultrarunners and Northern Arizona University's accomplished cross country and track

and field programs — there is an undeniable running culture here that celebrates and supports the sport at all levels. Our cherished local running store, Run Flagstaff, along with local races and group runs keep the town buzzing with energy and opportunities year-round.

Ultimately, Flagstaff

offers more than just high-altitude training. It blends natural beauty, diverse terrain, a fairly favorable year-round climate and a vibrant running community into one of the most complete running destinations on earth. Whether you're chasing a personal best or simply enjoying a jog through the pines, Flag-

staff is a place where every run can feel extraordinary.

**Rachel Smith** moved to Flagstaff 10 years ago as a professional runner seeking to pursue her Olympic dreams. Training in Flagstaff helped her Olympic dream come true, and along the way she fell in love with the mountain town she feels so fortunate to call home. Many miles

and milestones since her move to Flagstaff a decade ago, Rachel is a mom to two young girls, continues to run professionally, and loves exploring new trails and connecting with the amazing Flagstaff running community.

Smith is the coordinating editor for the High Country Running column. You can email her at [rach-schneid18@gmail.com](mailto:rach-schneid18@gmail.com) to contribute to this column.

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