

15 of America's best small towns and cities

By Joe Yogerst, CNN

Published 8:59 AM EDT, Fri July 21, 2023



America's best small towns and cities

Walter Bibikow/Digital Vision/Getty Images

1 of 15

Gloucester, Massachusetts: Every visit to this bustling seaport on Cape Ann should include fresh-off-the-boat seafood and a promenade along the Western Harbor.



Editor's Note: Sign up for [Unlocking the World](#), CNN Travel's weekly newsletter. Get the latest news in aviation, food and drink, where to stay and other travel developments.

(CNN) — The vast majority of Americans may live in big cities (more than 70%, according to the 2020 census), but there's an enduring affection for small towns and cities.

A lot of that nostalgia is stoked by popular culture. From fictional cinematic stars like Amity Island ("Jaws") and Bedford Falls ("It's a Wonderful Life") to TV towns like Hawkins ("Stranger Things") and Twin Peaks, small-town life looms large on the small and silver screens.

American literature is spangled with small towns from Alabama ("To Kill a Mockingbird") to the state of Washington ("Twilight").

Many well-known Americans are proud of their small-town roots. Taylor Swift spent part of her childhood in the Borough of Wyomissing, Pennsylvania (pop. 11,000). Stephen King spent his formative

years in Durham, Maine (pop. 4,100). Brad Pitt is from Shawnee, Oklahoma (pop. 31,000). Model Chrissy Teigen was born in Delta, Utah (pop. 3,600), and baseball great Jackie Robinson in Cairo, Georgia (pop. 10,000).

The United States boasts tens of thousands of towns and cities with fewer than 50,000 people. So there's no lack of choice when it comes to visiting America's diminutive destinations. But how do you choose which are the best?

Here are some ideas:

Gloucester, Massachusetts

Founded shortly after the first Pilgrims stepped onto Plymouth Rock, this bustling seaport on Cape Ann is famed in modern times as the home base for the "Wicked Tuna" fleet and setting of many films including "The Perfect Storm."

Every visit to Gloucester should include fresh-off-the-boat seafood, a stop to explore the Rocky Neck art colony and a promenade along the Western Harbor all the way out to Stage Fort Park. Between whale watching and schooner tours, there are plenty of ways to get out on the water.

Population: 30,000

Where to stay: Beauport Hotel or Harborview Inn

RELATED ARTICLE 25 of the USA's most underrated destinations

Saranac Lake, New York





benedek/E+/Getty Images

Fall is a beautiful time to visit Saranac Lake in New York.

Broadway and Main Street are awash in bars, restaurants and intriguing one-off shops. Outer enthusiasts can earn patches completing the village-sponsored paddling challenge on five lakes or hiking challenge on six summits. Come winter there's cross-country skiing, ice fishing or downhill glides on Mt Pisgah.

Population: 5,000

Where to stay: [Hotel Saranac](#) or [The Point](#)

New Bern, North Carolina

The name betrays the fact that [New Bern](#) was settled in 1710 by Swiss immigrants. But nowadays there's nothing faintly alpine about this hip little Carolina coastal city known for its cool bars and gourmet culinary scene.

Living history tours of [Tryon Palace](#) spin tales about North Carolina's colonial capital while the soda fountain at the intersection of Pollack and Middle streets is where [Pepsi-Cola was born](#) in 1898 (and originally called Brad's Drink).



Ready to get inspired and travel smarter?

there's nothing faintly alpine about this hip little Carolina coastal city known for its cool bars and gourmet culinary scene.

Living history tours of [Tryon Palace](#) spin tales about North Carolina's colonial capital while the soda fountain at the intersection of Pollack and Middle streets is where [Pepsi-Cola was born](#) in 1898 (and originally called Brad's Drink).



Ready to get inspired and travel smarter?

Get our travel newsletter for expert advice and adventure inspiration

UNLOCKING
THE **WORLD**

Sign Me Up

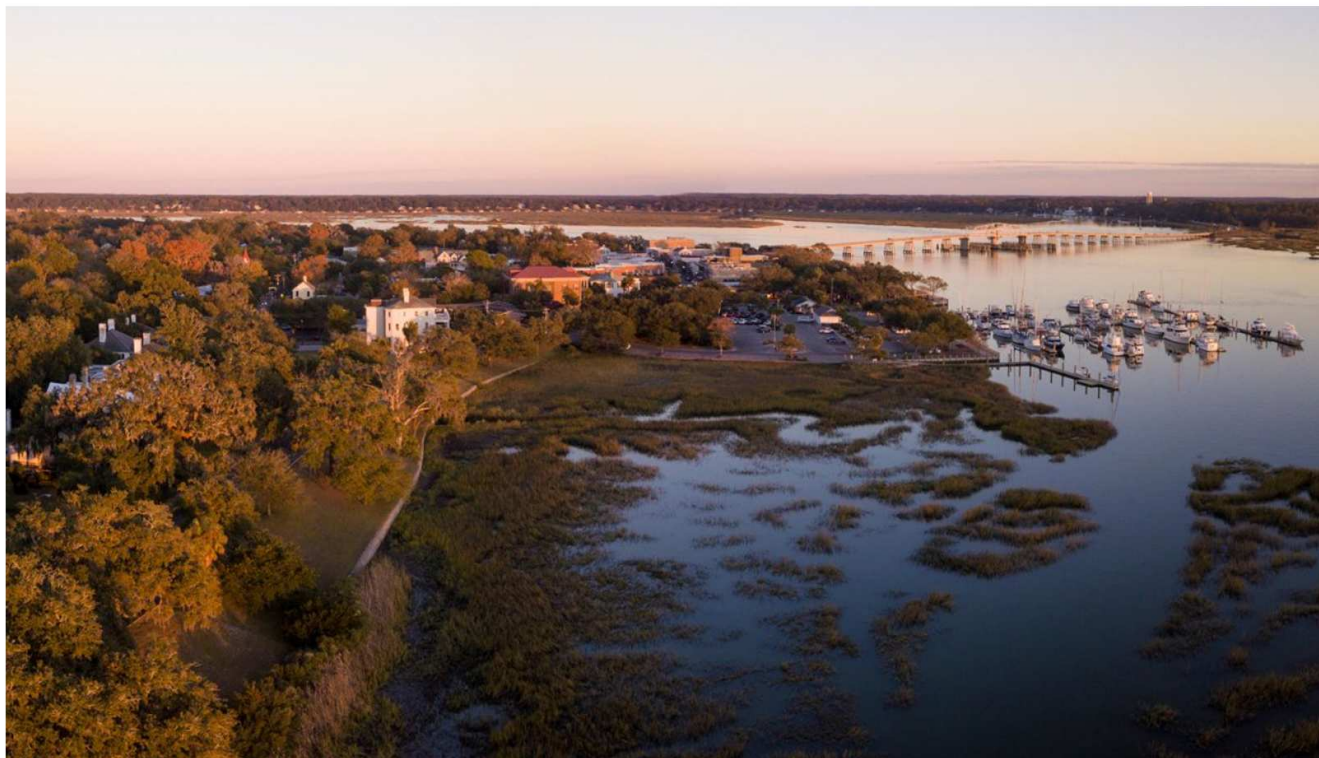
By subscribing, you agree to our [privacy policy](#).

Nearby [Croatan National Forest](#) offers great hiking trails or you can escape to the shore at Atlantic Beach or Emerald Isle.

Population: 31,000

Where to stay: [Hanna House](#) or [Courtyard by Marriott](#)

Beaufort, South Carolina



John Wollwerth/Alamy Stock Photo

Waterfront views and historic mansions are part of Beaufort's draw.

Founded in 1711, this charming town is the second-oldest in South Carolina, after Charleston. Stately mansions built before the Civil War surround the commercial hub along Bay Street. A pleasant park along the waters of the Beaufort River is just beyond the street lined with restaurants and shops. Shade and sustenance – with waterfront views – are available on the porches and patios at [Plums](#), [Saltus River Grill](#) and [Lowcountry Cider Co. & Superior Coffee](#).

Exhibits and artifacts inside the [old Arsenal](#) show how Beaufort was in Yankee hands for most of the Civil War, while the [Reconstruction Era National Historical Park](#) (one of the newest units of the US National Park System) spins tales of the post-war American South.

[Beaufort](#) is bullish on festivals including an oyster festival in January, Original Gullah Festival over Memorial Day weekend, and shrimp festival in September.

A string of barrier islands is just across the bridge. St. Helena is rich in the culture of the Gullah Geechee people, descendants of formerly enslaved West and Central Africans. Farther on, the state's most popular park, Hunting Island State Park, boasts thousands of acres of maritime forest and marsh fronted by five miles of unspoiled beach.

Population: 13,700

Where to stay: [Anchorage 1770](#) or [City Loft Hotel](#)

Metropolis, Illinois

This Metropolis established in 1839 may have been founded almost exactly a century before the first Superman comic book was published, but that didn't prevent the Ohio River town from cashing in on the Man of Steel's worldwide fame.

A colossal statue of Superman towers above the town square near a Super Museum that pays homage to Clark Kent and his almost indestructible alter ego, and a park graced with a statue of Lois Lane.

Metropolis also boasts *real* American history: Fort Massac. A stout riverside bastion that played a role in the American Revolution, French & Indian War and Lewis & Clark Expedition.

Population: 5,900

Where to stay: Riverview Mansion or Fort Massac Campground

Mackinac Island Village, Michigan



Wiltser/E+/Getty Images

Picturesque Mackinac Island Village is crowded with visitors come summertime.

Located in the narrow straits between lakes Michigan and Huron, this insular community has been occupied for hundreds of years by the indigenous Odawa people, French missionaries and fur traders, the British army and finally Americans after the War of 1812.

Nowadays it's one of Michigan's premier summer vacation destinations, with 18th-century Fort

Mackinac looming high above a car-free waterfront village filled with historic buildings that now house restaurants, shops and boutique hotels.

Population: About 600

Where to stay: Grand Hotel or Mission Point Resort

Eureka Springs, Arkansas

People have been traveling to this Ozark town since Victorian times to soak in its healing waters, breathe its invigorating mountain air, and dive into its artsy vibe.

Alternative lifestyles have long been welcome in a city that hosts three Diversity Weekends and a rollicking Mardi Gras festival each year. The countryside surrounding Eureka Springs offers plenty of scope for hiking, biking, boating and whitewater sports, and The Aud hosts top-shelf music acts.

Population: 2,100

Where to stay: 1886 Crescent Hotel & Spa or Basin Park Hotel

Marfa, Texas



halbergman/iStockphoto/Getty Images

A meeting of hip and Wild West in West Texas.

The hippest little town in Texas is renowned for its avant-garde art and a youthful population that stokes an intriguing local bar and restaurant scene.

Despite that bizarre Prada installation on the outskirts of town, the hinterland in far West Texas still carries a Wild West vibe (as portrayed in movies like “Giant” and “No Country For Old Men” that were

filmed on location in and around Marfa).

And there's that extraterrestrial thing: What exactly are the famed Marfa Lights? Nobody knows for sure.

Population: 1,800

Where to stay: [Hotel Paisano](#) or the [Hotel Saint George](#)

Taos, New Mexico

This northern New Mexico city has two major claims to fame.

One of the architectural wonders of ancient America and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Taos Pueblo was established more than 700 years ago and is one of the oldest continuously inhabited spots in the entire western hemisphere.

The town's stunning location between the high desert and snowcapped peaks lured numerous celebrated [artists](#) and [writers](#) to live in and around [Taos](#) in the early 20th century.

With several outstanding museums and galleries, Taos remains an art hub. But it also offers summer rafting on the Rio Grande and hiking in the Sangre de Cristo mountains, and winter sports at Taos Ski Valley.

Population: 6,500

Where to stay: [Hacienda del Sol](#) or [Hotel Luna Mystica](#) vintage travel trailers

RELATED ARTICLE [Why this Colorado valley is the West's next must-visit destination](#)

Whitefish, Montana





Craig Moore/Cavan Images/Getty Images

Outdoor activities are a draw in this Montana town year-round.

The gateway to Glacier National Park started life as Stumptown, a whistlestop on the Great Northern Railway surrounded by clearcut forest used to lay the tracks.

More than a century later, the trees are back and [Whitefish](#) has evolved into a year-round recreational hub that ranges from winter snowboarding and skiing at [Whitefish Mountain Resort](#) to summertime water sports, mountain biking and hiking on more than 700 miles of local trails.

Downtown Whitefish is flush with top-notch restaurants, microbreweries and craft distilleries, as well as live music, yoga sessions and groovy one-off shops.

Population: 8,900

Where to stay: [Firebrand Hotel](#) or [Garden Wall Inn](#)

RELATED ARTICLE [The least-visited national parks in the United States in 2022](#)

Moab, Utah

Set along the Colorado River and just a short drive from Arches and Canyonlands national parks, Dead Horse Point and the La Sal Mountains, this desert town in southeast Utah is ground zero for outdoor adventure sports.

So many ways to get your adrenaline rush: whitewater rafting and tubing, biking and hiking, four-wheeling, quad biking or motorcycling on gnarly desert tracks, and spectacular tower rock climbing and red-rock rappelling and canyoneering.

After dark, check out the free summer concerts or movies in [Swanny City Park](#) or consider the heavens — the [Moab area](#) boasts three certified International Dark Sky Parks.

Population: 5,300

Where to stay: [Moab KOA](#), [Under Canvas Moab](#) or [Sorrel River Ranch](#)

RELATED ARTICLE [Incredible US national park campgrounds you can't drive to](#)

Friday Harbor, Washington



kschulze/iStockphoto/Getty Images

The San Juan Islands' largest town wakes up.

The largest town in the sublime San Juan Islands does double duty as a charming seaside vacation town and a world-class marine mammal research and conservation center.

Getting there on the ferry from Seattle is an adventure all on its own while the town and its island surrounds offers plenty of other adventures, from wild foxes and migrating whales to vestiges of the Pig War of 1859 between the US and Britain, and flavorsome stops like the Westcott Bay Shellfish Company and tiny San Juan Island Distillery.

Population: 2,500

Where to stay: Saltwater Farm or Bird Rock Hotel

Julian, California

California's gold fever spread south after the Civil War to Julian in the coastal mountains near San Diego. The gleaming yellow metal petered out long ago, but a boomtown vibe endures along a Main Street flanked by historic structures.

The town is renowned for its apple pies and quick escapes into nature on the nearby Pacific Crest

Trail, Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, Mount Laguna and the California Wolf Center.

Population: 1,700

Where to stay: Julian Gold Rush Hotel or Quiet Mind Mountain Retreat

Volcano, Hawaii

Tucked into the lush rainforest on the windward side of the Big Island of Hawaii, Volcano Village is both the gateway to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park and a cool destination in its own right.

Emphasis on both types of cool. Perched at 4,000 feet, the temperature is a lot cooler than beachside Hawaii. And it really does rain a lot in the rainforest. So pack something to keep the raindrops at bay.

Rub shoulders with local artists and artisans, scientists and national park rangers at cool joints like the Thai Thai Bistro & Bar or the Lava Rock Café.

Population: 760

Where to stay: Volcano Village Lodge or the Volcano House

McCarthy, Alaska

A genuine last frontier, this remote Alaskan burg is completely surrounded by the vast Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. The copper miners of bygone times are long gone, as are most of the vices that once lured them to McCarthy.

Nowadays, it's a hangout for bush pilots, wildlife photographers, adventure guides and a trickle of tourists who brave the rough and tumble McCarthy Road to get there.

The town is a jumping off point for visits to the nearby Kennecott Mines National Historic Landmark as well as hiking, rafting, fishing, mountaineering and scenic flights in Wrangell-St. Elias (the largest US national park).

Population: 107

Where to stay: Ma Johnson's Historical Hotel or Kennicott Glacier Lodge