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TRAVEL

THE BEST SMALL TOWN TO VISIT IN ALL 50 STATES

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The paradox of big-city travel is that you never really get a break. You ditch work in New York, LA, or Chicago to go visit your buddies in New York, LA, or Chicago; come Sunday night, you're exhausted, and why did blowing \$250 a day on cocktails and sushi and cabs seem like the smart move?

Say this for small American towns: They know how to *slowwww downwwwn*. They're ideal for young kids and retirees, two groups who favor the chiller things in life: short walks, sunny parks, uncrowded beaches, unhurried conversations. Small-townners also dig on taffy, chicken-fried steak, old-timey train stations, historical markers, quirky festivals, driving barefoot, free parking everywhere, \$7 pitchers of Bud heavy, nodding hello to strangers, and other things that never really go out of style.

We searched for small towns with populations under 60k where you can get a glimpse of the good life after the rat race, eat well, see actual stars at night, and still find plenty of activities to keep boredom at bay. Would you want to live there? Probably not -- if everyone did, there'd be a whole city there by now. But do you want to step out of your life for a couple of long, languid days? Yeah, you definitely could stand to visit one of these gems.



TRAVERSE CITY, MICHIGAN | SHRIRAM PAT

Michigan: Traverse City

Population: 15,042

Throw a Petoskey Stone in upper Michigan and you're bound to hit a great town. For those of us who grew up visiting the shores (inland and Great) of Michigan's lakes, the best small town is the one you know best. Still, it's hard to argue against the splendor of Traverse City, which for good reason swells with tourists on its beaches and picturesque Downtown all summer. Those sandy beaches and the Cherry Festival and Film Fest obscure its status as one of America's best small-town beer destinations, and the region's vineyards are sneakily pushing out world-class pinots and cutting-edge ice wine - A.K.

Minnesota: Stillwater

Population: 18,800

Lodged in the beautiful St. Croix Valley, Stillwater is known for its gorgeous waterfront, solid hikes, and scenic spots for a summer picnic. But there's a lot more than bluffs and hockey going down. Lift Bridge Brewery -- named after Stillwater's iconic lift bridge -- is an underappreciated jewel in a state where Surly, Bauhaus, and Bent Paddle hoard the craft brew love. In the summer, Nelson's Ice Cream and the quaintly named **Lumberjack Days** food and music festival make the trip worthwhile. In the winter, it's the massive Ice Castles nestled along the riverbank. Even **Smalley's Caribbean**, with its repellant pirate theme, is a must-try. The eye-patch palace has surprisingly good jerk chicken and curried goat. To boot (har!), almost every restaurant downtown touts a patio with a view. -- *Dustin Nelson, News writer*

Mississippi: Ocean Springs

Population: 17,530

Sitting anywhere along Government St in Ocean Springs, you can hear live music -- rock, country, bluegrass, even hip-hop

coming from a bar only a few feet away. The small stretch of watering holes along this coastal city's main drag is a little slice of Austin or Nashville plopped on the Bayou, making a weekend bar crawl here as entertaining as anywhere. Your days are for paddleboarding and kayaking along the Gulf Islands National Seashore, and a short boat ride out to the barrier islands finds you on the kind of turquoise, white sand beaches you never knew existed in Mississippi. -- M.M.



BOONVILLE, MISSOURI | MAREKULIASZ/SHUTTERSTOCK

Missouri: Boonville

Population: 8,320

You can't walk down a Boonville street without tripping over the raw Americana -- more than 400 registered historic site smack in the middle of Missouri. You even got slipped a dose of history reading the name, taken from founders and sons of Daniel Boone. Tour the Native American burial grounds and stay across the Missouri River at the Rivercene Mansion bed and breakfast, conceived as an opulent retreat for a rich riverboat captain. The outlaw Jesse James left his boot prints here, and you're welcome to follow those as you make your way around Civil War landmarks. Want something a bit more recent but just as red, white, and blue? Pop by Warm Springs Ranch, a nearby breeding farm for the Budweiser Clydesdales. -- Peter Rugg, *Thrillist* contributor

Montana: Bozeman

Population: 39,860

Huge by Montana standards, this is basically Manhattan compared to other great towns like Livingston and Whitefish. That's not to be flip: It's a cultural hub that includes a college, a gorgeous old movie theater in its oh-so-Western Downtown, great beer, a vibrant bluegrass scene, and some of the best stargazing to be had in any American town. If that sky's not big enough, well, drive 5 miles in any direction and you're deep in the wilderness. This is, after all, the gateway to brambly back country, the perfect place to enjoy modern conveniences, then vanish into the wild. -- A.K.