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The 20 Best Small Towns to Visit in 2016

In honor of the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service, our top picks this year are all towns close to America's natural splendors



(Ken Brown/iStock)

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smithsonian.com
April 18, 2016

The famed Great American Road Trip would be incomplete without visiting a few national parks along the way. From [Yosemite's](#) awe-inspiring waterfalls to the wooded respites of the [Great Smoky Mountains](#) to the narrow crevasses of [Zion](#), the lands under the purview of the National Park Service are unparalleled in their beauty.

Outside of these parks, home to stunning vistas and breathtaking wonders, are “gateway” towns: small communities that cater to the annual crowds with charming hotels, greasy spoons, local culture and innovative museums that tell fascinating stories. In honor of the [100th anniversary of the National Parks Service](#), a nationwide celebration of America's greatest natural resource, we have focused this fifth annual edition of our 20 Best Small Towns to Visit around the National Parks.

Each of these communities offer their own distinct and diverse histories, cultures, food and art—as well as happening to be close to the entrances to some of the United States' most prized heritage locations.

To narrow down the numbers, we once again enlisted the help of the geographic information company Esri to sort the nation's small towns (those with a population under 20,000) that were in driving range to a national park or a designated National Park Service location. This year's list traverses all the way from a secluded Alaskan hamlet in the shadow of glaciers to a sunny harbor in the U.S. Virgin Island of St. John. Enjoy, and safe travels!

(See our [Best Small Towns lists from 2015, 2014, 2013, and 2012](#))

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Ocean Springs, Mississippi



(Richard T. Nowitz/Corbis)

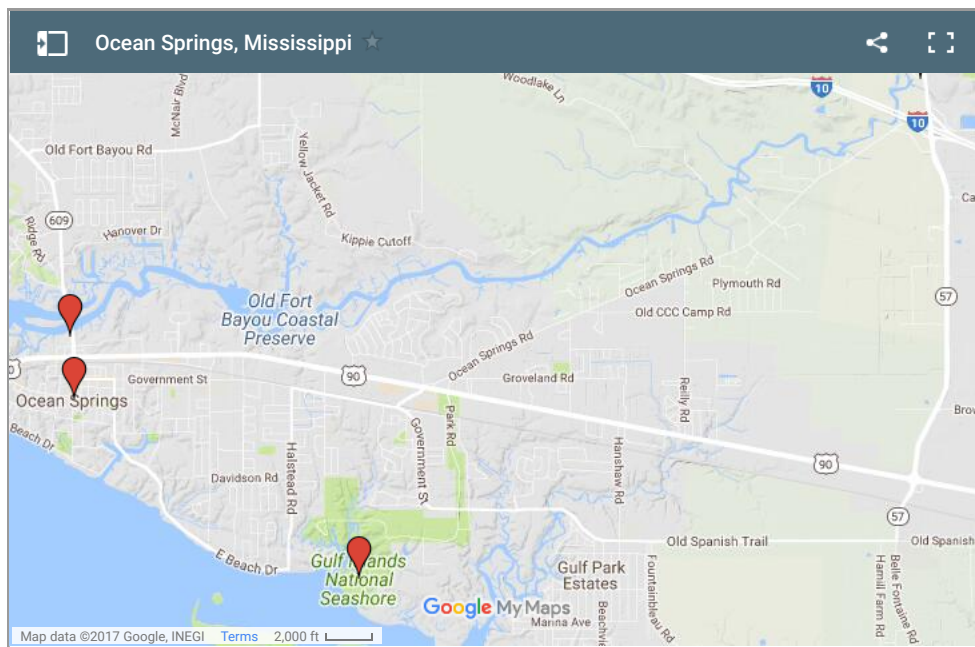
Ocean Springs has long cultivated a reputation for being a “gem on the gulf,” but its residents’ courage and resilience made the news after the town was caught in Hurricane Katrina’s devastating path in 2005. One Ocean Springs hotel manager helped [saved 300 people](#) in the flood, pulling them out of the water, and then feeding and housing them in the [Gulf Hills Hotel](#) until help finally arrived.

Today, Ocean Springs has rebuilt from the disaster, and tourists have flocked back to the city, which has the [Gulf Islands National Seashore](#) practically in its backyard. The art scene in Ocean Springs rivals its outdoor sports scene, which is saying something as the bayou and the bay nearby offers idyllic boating, fishing and birding. Get to know Ocean Springs artists at the annual [Peter Anderson Arts and Crafts Festival](#), which attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors to the area each November.

In 2013, Oceans Springs won the “[Great American Main Street Award](#)” for its character, charm and culinary scene. Stacks of restaurants line the streets of the historic city, serving up fresh seafood, such as crab cakes and jumbo shrimp. While options range from classic to contemporary fare, [Aunt Jenny’s Catfish Restaurant](#) consistently pleases (and was once frequented by Elvis). But for pulled pork (and live blues), there’s no better place than [The Shed](#), which slow cooks its barbeque in pecan wood-burning smokers.

Today the town, which was first discovered in 1699 by French explorer Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville, continues to embrace its French roots, playing host to [the first of the large Mardi Gras parades](#) to go through Mississippi in January.

Road Trip Destinations:



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