

The Coolest Small Towns In America

In Budget Travel's fifth-annual celebration of hometown escapes across the USA, we're spotlighting 10 places that somehow pack in more personality than cities triple their size. How? It all comes down to the people.

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Who picked these places?

You did! We received a record-breaking 439,411 votes in our online poll. The winners:

1. **Ely**, Minn. 118,899 votes
2. **Cloverdale**, Calif. 74,399 votes
3. **Brevard**, N.C. 71,178 votes
4. **Saugatuck**, Mich. 47,419 votes
5. **Kennett Square**, Pa. 44,089 votes
6. **Bandon**, Ore. 9,866 votes
7. **Cuero**, Tex. 9,831 votes
8. **Nyack**, N.Y. 9,666 votes
9. **Medicine Park**, Okla. 8,414 votes
10. **Egg Harbor**, Wis. 7,517 votes

[Backstory]

On January 22, a month before we launched our poll to find the Coolest Small Town in America, a black bear named Lily gave birth on live webcam, at Ely's **North American Bear Center** (NABC, bear.org). Days later, Lily and her cub, Hope, became *the* number one search term on Google, and Lily gained 104,886 fans on her Facebook page (yes, even bears have profiles), where links to our ballot were posted prominently. "Lily's fans worked hard to get her hometown recognized," says NABC biologist Lynn Rogers. That, they did: Ely took nearly a quarter of all the votes cast in our contest.

Ely, Minnesota pop. 3,470

The best backyard in the country

It says a lot about a town when there are more wildlife centers (two) than Wal-Marts (zero), and more canoe and fishing outfitters (27) than, well, anything else. In Ely, you're never more than a step away from the wilderness. The tiny grid of pine log cabins and pubs five hours north of Minneapolis sits within the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, a million-acre maze of indigo lakes and boreal forest. Each year thousands arrive to canoe, fish, camp—or simply sit back and soak in the North Woods. At the **Boathouse Brewpub & Restaurant**, where trophy walleyes are mounted on the walls, locals swap stories over hearty oatmeal stouts (47 E. Sheridan St., boathousebrewpub.com, pints from \$4). Nearby, visiting families recap their recent adventures around the stone fireplace at **A Stay Inn Ely**, a five-room lodge run by Joan and Don Bean (112 W. Sheridan St., astayinnely.com, from \$60). More often than not, they've just returned from a fly-fishing overnight or weeklong canoe excursion with Don's **Jasper Creek Guide Service** (14295 Canadian Border Rd., jaspercreek.com, canoe trips from \$150 a day). Some are tempted to stay even longer. Jim Brandenburg travels the world as a *National Geographic* photographer but always comes home to Ely: "Where else can you sit out on your porch, listen to a pack of wild wolves howling, and then head down to the pub and share the story?"

Brevard, North Carolina pop. 6,716

Blue Ridge views and Appalachian pride

If the notion of town-wide square dances with an old-time caller sounds appealing, then Brevard is your kind of place. Set in the Blue Ridge Mountains 45 minutes south of Asheville, the redbrick town is an outpost of authentic Appalachia. Every Tuesday night in summer, locals block off Main Street, a bluegrass band strikes up, and everyone lets loose. Longtime Atlanta resident Ginger Lipscomb, 64, is one of many who were drawn by Brevard's history. She first came in 2005 to visit friends. "Then I started annoying them because I wanted to come every weekend." Lipscomb now runs **Stones Jewelry Store** out of a century-old storefront (28 E. Main St., 828/884-8988). Across town, patrons head to 68-year-old **Rocky's Soda Shop** for chocolate malts (50 S. Broad St., ddbullwinkels.com, malts from \$4) or to the 1934 **Co-Ed Cinema**, complete with a gleaming marquee and ornate ticket booth, for first-run films (79 W. Main St., coedcinema.com). At day's end, there's no better spot to relax in the cool mountain air than the porch of 149-year-old **Red House Inn**, just one more historic—and homey—side of Brevard (266 W. Probart St., brevardbedandbreakfast.com, from \$85).

Saugatuck, Michigan pop. 954

A lake town where time stands still

One weekend in Saugatuck was all it took for Philippe Quentel. After two days of taking in arts and crafts homes, picket fences, and upper Midwest charm, he made the 140-mile drive back to Chicago, sold his art gallery—then one of the city's largest—and opened **Affordably French**, right in the heart of Saugatuck (421 Water St., 312/404-4592). To residents of this sleepy Lake Michigan town, Quentel's story is nothing new. Then again, little in Saugatuck is. Spared the big-box modernization seen by many of its neighbors, it retains a charm from another era. On Butler Street, 70-year-old **Saugatuck Drug Store** is the source for everything from Kleenex to kites (201 Butler St., 269/857-2300). Chain restaurants are nonexistent. And to get to Saugatuck's white-sand Oval Beach, visitors cross the Kalamazoo on an 1838 hand-cranked chain ferry. "In old black-and-white pictures, Saugatuck looks just as it does now," says Lindsay Tringali, 31, owner of **Bella Vita Spa and Suites**, a clean-lined, six-room inn downtown (119 Butler St., bellavitaspa.biz, from \$109). "Beyond some fresh paint and paved roads, it never changes."

Bandon, Oregon pop. 3,295

A farm-to-table hub on Oregon's rugged coast

Bandon is the rare small town that qualifies as a full-blown foodie destination, thanks to a long growing season and chefs who get their hands dirty. Take Jeremy Buck, who relocated here from Florence, Italy, and opened **Alloro Wine Bar & Restaurant** near the aging canneries lining Old Town harbor (375 2nd St., allorowinebar.com, pastas from \$10). Buck's signature dish is ravioli filled with chanterelles he forages himself. Diners are equally devoted; locals know to come by 7:30 a.m. for the quiches at **2 Loons Cafe** (120 2nd St. SE, 541/347-3750, entrées from \$4). Even the drugstore has a food focus: The wine selection at **Tiffany's** includes a 2004 Ca' del Baio Barbaresco Pora, only five cases of which were ever sold in the U.S. (44 Michigan Ave. NE, tiffanywineshop.com). As for where to stay? The **Bandon Inn**, where the morning's cranberry bread is, natch, all local (355 Hwy. 101, bandoninn.com, from \$74).

Cloverdale, California pop. 8,454

Wine country without the fuss

Some 90 miles north of San Francisco, Cloverdale is ground zero for Sonoma County's highly regarded zinfandels—but that doesn't mean locals flaunt it. The area's 156 wineries are mostly family-owned and low-key, like the **Pendleton Estate**, where owners Michall and Jeannine Pendleton give private 45-minute behind-the-scenes tours and tastings (35100 Hwy. 128, pendletonwines.com). Downtown Cloverdale is a neat collection of rambling Victorians and feed stores turned art galleries, all anchored by the green-and-white 1923 **Pick's Drive-In**, the go-to spot for burgers and floats (117 S. Cloverdale Blvd., 707/894-2962, burgers from \$3.50). Every Friday in summer, the town plaza, a cobblestoned stretch shaded by magnolias, transforms into a freewheeling block party. "Everyone picks up dinner at the farmers market and gets wine from one of the vineyards' stands," says Mary Stuart, 59, owner of **Vintage Towers B&B**, a seven-room inn overlooking a wisteria-filled garden (302 N. Main St., vintagetowers.com, from \$129). "The band starts playing boogie-woogie, and it turns into one big party."

Cuero, Texas pop. 6,571

Old West meets modern art

Set amid the rolling hills an hour and a half south of Austin, Cuero is where Texans come to reconnect with their roots. On Main Street, 19th-century storefronts, yucca plants, and BBQ joints make an impression that's one part *Wild Bunch* and one part *Friday Night Lights*. At **Bahnhof Cafe**, lawyers rub elbows with ranch hands over pickle chips and chicken-fried steak (213 W. Main St., bahnhofcafe.com, entrées from \$7), while across town, visitors at the three-room **Broadway House B&B** dip into a claw-foot tub or relax on a four-poster bed in front of a fireplace (205 E. Broadway St., broadwayhousebandb.com, from \$75). Despite its focus on history, the town is far from one-note. "I was shocked to find so much art and music in this tiny place," says Austin expat Kerry Rhotenberry, 52. In 2006, Rhotenberry opened **Courtyard Gallery** in a converted 1896 Post Office building, and she now fills her walls solely with the work of artists from within a 100-mile radius (210 N. Esplanade St., courtyardgalleryofcuero.com).

Nyack, New York pop. 6,737

Creativity around every corner

Like many Hudson River Valley towns, Nyack has no shortage of antiques shops. The ones within the sprawling **Franklin Antique Center** alone contain everything from the historic (turquoise-handled art deco cutlery) to the high-end (Limoges) to pure kitsch (142 Main St., 845/353-0071). But what sets Nyack, 25 miles north of New York City, apart is that here the treasure hunting extends well beyond what's for sale. Artful touches appear all over. Case in point: Manhattan transplant Diego Astudillo's floral arrangements at **Winter Wednesday Flowers** are arrayed like minimalist sculptures in a light-filled gallery space (152 Main St., winterwednesdayflowers.com). Across the way, Marseille native **Didier Dumas** brings similar attention to the tarts at his eponymous patisserie (163 Main St., didierdumas.com, tarts from \$4). And at last call, nighthawks seek out the martinis at **The Hudson House**, a restored 73-year-old jailhouse whose cells now house a wine cave (134 Main St., hudsonhousenyack.com, martinis \$11). The trend is fully realized at **RiverView B&B**, an 1835 Dutch Colonial across town adorned with a mix of antiques and modern-art prints (riverviewbnb.com, from \$150). Nyack's favorite son, Edward Hopper, would be proud.

Egg Harbor, Wisconsin pop. 1,194

A quiet shoreline takes center stage

Surrounded by more than 300 miles of hidden coves and pocket beaches on Lake Michigan, Egg Harbor has for years been a refuge for residents of Milwaukee and Chicago, about five hours south. In the summer, families make the winding drive up through Door County—a rural peninsula dotted with silos and orchard stands that divides Lake Michigan and Green Bay—to swim and build sand castles along Egg Harbor's beaches. "Our access to the water is incredible," says Sandy Chlubna, 52, a former Michigander who moved here with her husband and opened the six-room **Feathered Star B&B** (6202 Hwy. 42, featheredstar.com, from \$120). "It's so easy to just throw a boat on top of your car and launch it from one of the ramps." If you don't bring your own, **Bay Shore Outdoor Store** rents canoes, kayaks, and sailboats by the day (2457 S. Bay Shore Dr., kayakdoorcounty.com, one-day rentals from \$50). The waterfront **Shipwrecked Restaurant** is the place to be at sunset for a bottle of Door County's cherry soda (shipwreckedmicrobrew.com, soda \$3.50). But it's not *all* about the water. A 100-year-old landlocked converted barn, home to the **Birch Creek Music Performance Center**, serves as the town's cultural hub; after-hours, everyone gathers to hear big-band concerts on summer nights (3821 County E, birchcreek.org, tickets from \$29).

Medicine Park, Oklahoma pop. 385

An unexpected high point on the Oklahoma plains

Say "Oklahoma" and mountains don't exactly leap to mind. Yet mountains—namely the broken granite domes of the Wichitas—are precisely why Medicine Park exists. Built as a planned resort for overheated Okies, the town is a patchwork of manicured lawns, arched footbridges, and red cobblestoned lanes on the banks of Medicine Creek. "This area looks a lot more like Colorado wilderness than what you'd expect to find in Oklahoma," says Pegi Brown, 62, a longtime San Francisco resident who moved to Medicine Park with her husband, Clark. They now run the four-room **Stardust Inn B&B** (154 Granite Ridge, stardustinn.com, from \$150), where "you can walk along the river past waterfalls, oaks, and pines, or hike into the Wichitas, right

out your door." Each Memorial Day weekend, visitors and residents alike come out for the **Red Dirt Ball**, which showcases red dirt music, an indigenous mix of folk, blue-grass, and honky-tonk; the mayor himself invites acts like the Red Dirt Rangers and the Bobby Dale Band to play free open-air concerts for all to enjoy (medicinepark.com/RedDirtBall.php).

Kennett Square, Pennsylvania pop. 5,273

Where everyone roots for the home team

At just about 8 a.m. each day, Kennett Square Mayor Matt Fetick heads to **Sinclair's Sunrise Café & Tea Room** for a plate of eggs scrambled with ham, asparagus, and Asiago cheese (127 E. State St., sunrisecafe-tearoom.com, scramblers from \$7). In this prototypical American town 38 miles west of Philadelphia, tradition is taken seriously. In **Burton's Barber Shop**, family-owned since 1892, Phillies memorabilia shares space with mementos from the Blue Demons, the Kennett High team (105 W. State St., 610/444-9964). Down the block, the quirky **Mushroom Cap** is a gift shop devoted solely to the town's main agricultural export (114 W. State St., themushroomcap.com). "This place is about heritage," says owner Kathi Lafferty, 59. She was raised in Kennett and met her husband here in the first grade; their mothers graduated from Kennett High together. "Almost all of us stick around," she explains. "And those who don't stay eventually find their way back." One who did is Aimee Olexy, 43, who left a successful restaurant in Philly to start one on State Street. These days, people wait a year for reservations to her eight-course tasting menu at **Talula's Table** (102 W. State St., talulastable.com, \$126 per person). But insiders know Olexy pays equal attention to her takeout dishes (tomato and mozzarella salad, \$8)—just one more reason for residents, and travelers, to settle down and make themselves comfortable, right here at home.