

America's Best Towns to Visit in 2024

CNN Travel

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You've elbowed into the Empire State Building, admired the architecture along the Chicago River and huffed and puffed up and down the streets of San Francisco.

Big US cities have attractions in spades — and crowds, too. This summer, we're looking at smaller cities that aren't already at the top of everyone's travel list — places where you'll often find small-town vibes and loads of personality as well as plenty to see and do for a few days or more.

At CNN Travel, we tapped our network of contributors for nominations for our inaugural list of [America's Best Towns to Visit](#). We evaluated their favorites and winnowed the finalists to 10 by looking at each town's attractions, food and beverage offerings, nightlife and cultural scene, sense of identity, proximity to other interesting spots and wow factor. We also looked at travel essentials, including lodging options and the ease of getting there and around.

Our choices range in size from about 50,000 residents to about 225,000. They're spread across the country and serve as a reminder of what's great about the United States: communities committed to making their towns better. You'll see that spirit in revitalized neighborhoods and downtowns and in residents who have put all their passion, creativity and know-how into endeavors that feed souls and bellies.

Here are our 2024 picks:

10. [Duluth, Minnesota](#)

High scores: Cool lakeside setting, outdoor activities, beverage scene

A small city best known over the years as an industrial, ore-shipping port on the Great Lakes, Duluth is now gaining a reputation as a refuge from the climate crisis. Its summers are typically quite temperate thanks to its setting alongside Lake Superior. The hilly city offers plenty of outdoor activities, a great beer scene, a cluster of lakeside attractions and a revitalized neighborhood showcasing handmade goods. You can join friendly Duluthians in a community sauna followed by a dip in cool Amity Creek.

9. [Knoxville, Tennessee](#)

High scores: Down-to-earth vibe, live music, outdoor access

You may know Knoxville as home of the University of Tennessee and its orange-and-white tsunami of fandom during sports events. Or you may know it as the host of the 1982 World’s Fair and its distinctive glass tower. But did you know this eastern Tennessee city also offers a burgeoning music scene (watch out Nashville and Memphis!), delightful classic theaters and delicious eats? And there’s a 1,500-acre Urban Wilderness for easy access to outdoor adventure.



Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids is home to monumental sculptures, including Iron Tree by Ai Weiwei.

Peter McDaniel/Courtesy Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park

8. Grand Rapids, Michigan

High scores: Art and design, beer scene, outdoor activities

With a world-class sculpture park and public art all over town, Grand Rapids is far more than “Beer City USA.” But with more than 100 breweries, distilleries and cideries, Michigan’s second-largest city comes by its beverage moniker honestly. Museums showcase Grand Rapids’ deep design roots, while the Grand River nods

to its family-friendly outdoor assets. And a planned amphitheater along the river's banks is just part of a bigger waterfront revitalization effort.

7. [Macon, Georgia](#)

High scores: Musical heritage, cultural attractions, architecture

With museums and a revived studio dedicated to its musical heritage, Macon scores high on cultural attractions and the sorts of local institutions that remain beloved for generations. Macon's revitalized downtown has made way for new restaurants, bars and a boutique hotel. And with a push to turn a site holding thousands of years of history into Georgia's first US national park and preserve co-managed by the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, the city is paying attention to how its earliest history speaks to its future.



Flagstaff's historic buildings have a new life with the downtown revitalization in recent years.
James Schaedig/Alamy Stock Photo

6. [Flagstaff, Arizona](#)

High scores: Dark skies, outdoor activities, scenery, retro vibe

Sunny days and starry nights are big draws in this high-elevation city. Enjoying lovely landscapes and the wonders of the cosmos is easy in Flagstaff, thanks to the

San Francisco Peaks, numerous national monuments, the Lowell Observatory and Flagstaff’s status as a Dark Sky City. Route 66 runs through here, where retro hotels cater to travelers stopping in, and downtown has seen a renaissance. The area’s Native American history is another reason to visit.

5. [San Luis Obispo, California](#)

High scores: Gorgeous scenery, retro vibe, outdoor activities, wineries

If you’re dreaming of old-school, relaxed California vibes, the super-pricey Bay Area and traffic-choked Southern California wouldn’t be it. But there’s a place figuratively and literally in between that’s a delightful throwback to the chill, 20th-century Golden State. After all, they don’t call San Luis Obispo “SLO” for nothin’. Here, you can indulge in everything from wine trails to hiking trails without a crush of humanity. The stunning natural environment, with the Pacific nearby, is the cherry on top.



The role of the ocean in Portland, Maine, can't be overestimated. Visitors will want to check out Portland Head Light and tuck into some fresh seafood.

Serena Folding/Visit Portland

4. [Portland, Maine](#)

High scores: Next-level food scene, coastal setting, outdoor access

This historic harbor town offers some seriously up-to-date dining alongside classics reflecting Maine's status as the US lobster capital. The food scene here has put it squarely on the map as a culinary destination, with two new James Beard Awards just added to the city's collection. You'll also find a booming craft beer scene and tons of opportunities to get out onto the water or into the woods. Strolling the bustling center offers a window onto centuries of maritime history and a Victorian-era rebirth.

3. Tacoma, Washington

High scores: Stunning setting, outdoor access, arts scene

City settings don't get much better than this. Tacoma's location between Puget Sound and Mount Rainier makes for exceptional outdoor recreation in and around town. There are some pretty spectacular sights in the city, too, thanks to Dale Chihuly, the art glass master and Tacoma native. At the Museum of Glass, exhibits and glassblowers at work in its hot shop tell the story of the medium. And flightseeing tours will give you a good look at the sacred ancestral lands of the Puyallup Tribe.



Providence's urban revival has created a beautiful downtown riverfront.
N. Millard/GoProvidence.com

2. Providence, Rhode Island

High scores: Art, architecture, design, food scene

Providence's dazzling downtown riverfront exists thanks to decades of ambitious work relocating rivers and roads to beautify and preserve the city. Downtown's rivers have been dancing in the firelight of beloved art installation WaterFire for decades, and public art is everywhere. The city is also home to the renowned Rhode Island School of Design and its museum. Architecture buffs will find plenty to admire, and Providence's culinary history (with top-notch seafood and Italian cuisine) and diverse restaurants mean you'll be treated to a global feast.

1. Richmond, Virginia

High scores: Cultural attractions, dining and drinks, intriguing neighborhoods

Richmond, Virginia – or “RVA” – deserves more of the national attention enjoyed by that other capital city a couple of hours to the north. Richmond earns high scores for its top-notch museums and dynamic neighborhoods, and it's taking a hard look at its complicated history. Plus, it's got a diverse, chef-driven food scene, more than 30 breweries and ready access to surrounding wine country. And there's a nearly year-round lineup of festivals — mark your calendars for the Richmond Folk Festival in the fall.