



The 20 Best Small Towns in America of 2012

From the Berkshires to the Cascades, we've crunched the numbers and pulled a list some of the most interesting spots around the country



The narrow-gauge Durango & Silverton train steams through history above the Animas River. (Photo by Scott DW Smith.)

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There are lists of the best places to get a job, retire, ski, golf and fall in love, best places lists for almost everything. We think any best place worth traveling to should have one quality above others: culture.

To help create our list, we asked the geographic information systems company Esri to search its data bases for high concentrations of museums, historic sites, botanic gardens, resident orchestras, art galleries and other cultural assets common to big cities. But we focused on towns with populations less than 25,000, so travelers could experience what might be called enlightened good times in an unhurried, charming setting. We also tried to select towns ranging across the lower 48.

There is, we think, something encouraging about finding culture in small-town America. Fabled overseas locales, world-class metropolises—you expect to be inspired when you go there. But to have your horizon shifted in a town of 6,000 by an unheralded gem of a painting or a song belted out from a band shell on a starry summer night, that's special. It reinforces the truth that big cities and grand institutions per se don't produce creative works; individuals do. And being reminded of that is fun.

10. Staunton, VA



(Richard Knox Robinson)

A Shenandoah mix of Confederate relics and Elizabethan theater.

Staunton—drop the u to pronounce it like locals—looks west to the Appalachians, east to the Blue Ridge, at the heart of the Shenandoah Valley. The town (pop. 23,700) played its role on the early frontier and as a staging center for the Confederate Army, bred America's 28th president (a highlight of the Woodrow Wilson Museum is the 1918 Pierce-Arrow limo he used after negotiating the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I) and nurtured the Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind and Mary Baldwin College. But Staunton's latter-day rejuvenation was based on something more prosaic-sounding: In 1908 the town created the city-manager government model, laying the foundations for growth that garnered such cultural assets as the Dixie Theater movie house, Mockingbird Roots Music Hall, Heifetz International Music Institute, the outdoor Oak Grove Theater and, above all, the American Shakespeare Center, housed in a landmark re-creation of London's Blackfriars Playhouse, where original staging techniques such as role-doubling are replicated and the dramaturge doesn't shy away from a bit of Elizabethan bawdy now and then. Staunton's National Historic Register red-brick downtown has galleries, a camera museum, an old-fashioned trolley and Tiffany window-lined Trinity Church. Up the hill at Victorian-era Thornrose Cemetery, there's a separate section holding the remains of almost 2,000 Confederate soldiers, while the band shell in nearby Gypsy Hill Park serves as the summertime home of the 70-piece Stonewall Brigade Band, founded in 1855 to feature the then-novel saxophone. -- SS

[Read how these towns were selected.](#)

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