

Southern Living®

The South's Best

Small Towns,
BBQ Joints,
Music Halls,
Travel Stops &
Cities on the Rise

DOUBLE
ISSUE!

Matthew & Camila

On Home, Family, and Their Secret Southern Hideout

Matthew and Camila
McConaughey in
Marfa, Texas

APRIL 2024

7 NEW REASONS
TO LOVE TEXAS

Southern Living®

THE SOUTH'S BEST

2024

HOW MANY TIMES have you been on a road trip and realized that you must have taken a left turn where you should have made a right and ended up in what felt like the middle of nowhere? More often than not, whenever that happens, you've actually arrived somewhere that's pretty special to the folks who call it home. When we started planning the survey for our eighth annual South's Best awards, we wanted to include a way for you, our readers, to not only vote for your favorite places but to nominate

them too. And while we're always excited to showcase bustling cities on the rise and charming small

towns, we also hoped to recognize beloved gems that might be tucked away on side streets or along back roads. As usual, your responses were overwhelming, and we're honored to celebrate many of them on the following 72 pages. So the next time you take a wrong turn, remember that you might be only a few steps away from a town's best-kept secret. Just ask a local.

—Southern Living Editors

THE VOTING PROCESS

An online survey was conducted by third-party agency Proof Insights among *Southern Living* consumers, asking them to rate their favorite places across the South. The survey was fielded from July 12 to August 23, 2023, and had over 20,000 respondents.

TOP 10

BEST SMALL TOWNS

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Chincoteague 2. Lexington 3. Abingdon | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Cape Charles 5. Middleburg 6. Floyd 7. Colonial Beach 8. Williamsburg 9. Wachapreague 10. Roanoke |
|---|---|

for Murphy's own family, who vacationed here for decades before she and her husband, Dave, bought the inn in September 2020. "The small-town charm and unspoiled beach hooked me 30 years ago—not to mention the ice cream from Island Creamery," she says.

At the end of the road in Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge—a 14,000-acre preservationist's paradise full of wooded walking trails and bike paths—lies the pristine beach where the sunsets match the splendor of the sunsets on the bay. Beachcombers find delight in the bounty of shells here, where dramatic dunes descend into a wide, flat, mile-long beach and the crashing waves of the Atlantic Ocean are a playground of their own in warm months.

One of the most visited refuges in the country, it is ringed with oyster beds and clam shoals that have buoyed this area's

economy and provided a steady source of income for residents for generations. It's difficult to find a menu in town that isn't heavy on the freshly caught seafood, particularly Chincoteague oysters (often called "salts" by locals), which find their way into some of New York's finest restaurants. Briny with a mellow flavor, they are an everyday delicacy here.

At AJ's on the Creek, for example, it's tough to choose between the oysters Rockefeller and those on the half shell, so many patrons order both. Chef Jeffrey Landry, who moved to Virginia from Maine, says the endless array of seafood inspires him daily. His menu is elevated, but the vibe at AJ's is relaxed, much like everything else on the island. "I fell for Chincoteague because coming here feels like a step back in time," says Landry. "It's not trying to be fancy or to become a hot tourist destination. It's a simple place where nature is the main attraction and the people are as down-to-earth as they come."

—Paige Porter Fischer



BEST HISTORIC SITE

COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

BEFORE IT FOUND a home at Colonial Williamsburg, the little cottage on William & Mary's campus was a residence, the military science department, and an ROTC-program office. About 20 years ago, Terry L. Meyers, chancellor professor emeritus of English, thought it might be from the 18th century and began investigating. Experts tried to pinpoint its age and original purpose, and in 2020, a sample of wood solved the mystery. It was the Williamsburg Bray School, one of the country's first schools for free and enslaved African American children. From 1760 to 1774, a white teacher named Ann Wager instructed over 300 pupils from ages 3 to 10 on reading and writing as well as skills like sewing. "Two free students, Mary and Elisha Jones, returned to their community and taught them how to read and write, becoming the first Black teachers in Virginia," says Tonia Cansler Merideth, an oral historian for the William & Mary Bray School Lab. After careful restorations, it will open at Colonial Williamsburg this fall. Matt Webster, the museum's executive director of architectural preservation and research, calls the building a rare instance of survival, saying, "The marks left behind like fingerprints in bricks, saw marks on framing, and worn floorboards and handrails return some humanity to those whose stories have been historically overlooked."

—Lisa Cericola

BEST BBQ JOINT

Pierce's Pitt Bar-B-Que

Tucked behind the big orange-and-yellow Williamsburg restaurant is a metal-walled cookhouse with tall chimneys rising above. Inside, they're still making ribs, chicken, and beef on cinder block pits, just like Julius C. "Doc" Pierce did when he opened Pierce's Pitt in 1971. Smoky pork is dressed in Doc's original sauce, a unique sweet and tangy blend of tomato and vinegar. Thick red-glazed ribs, smoky pulled chicken, and thin-sliced brisket round out the offerings along with crinkle-cut fries, coleslaw, and hush puppies.

—Robert Moss

2. **Mama Jean's Barbecue** Roanoke 3. **ZZQ Texas Craft Barbeque** Richmond
 4. **Southside BBQ & Catering** Chesapeake 5. **Texas Jack's Barbecue** Arlington
 6. **Ace Biscuit & Barbecue** Charlottesville 7. **Allman's BBQ** Fredericksburg
 8. **Monk's BBQ** Purcellville 9. **The Barbeque Exchange** Gordonsville
 10. **Mission BBQ** Multiple Locations