



3 Best U.S. Small-Town Summer Vacation Ideas For A Couple's Getaway In 2019


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PHOTO: VISIT GREENVILLE

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Summer + significant other = make travel plans!

Jettin' across the Atlantic or Pacific to parts unknown certainly has its appeal (just ask the late and great Anthony Bourdain) but to discount destinations within our own borders would be to a disservice to America, the beautiful, America, the vast, America, the plenty ... of places to go. And sure, there's the obvious big three: New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. BOOM: huge metropolises! Yes, they're definitely worth going go to — you could spend a year in each and still not scratch the surface of things to do, people to see, cuisine to try. Big cities are almost daunting, in a way. This article is not about big cities. It's about small cities. Towns you can spend a weekend in and feel like you really nabbed a taste for what it's about (a perk of small cities: much more conquerable and usually more charming!) And since June is prime-time for daydreaming and goal-setting about what the summer ahead may bring, it's high time to highlight a few of our favorite U.S. small

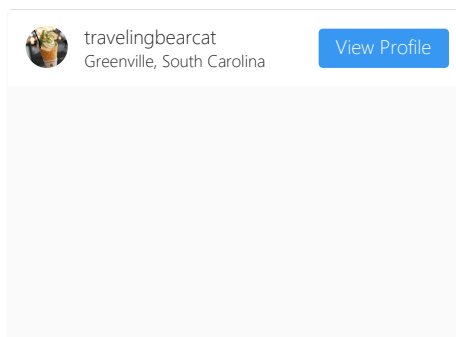
cities that are certainly worth a visit if you haven't been. (And if you have? Great! They're worth another trip.) So request those vacation days now and get to planning. Here's three small-town American cities to check off your list in summer 2019 — and why we love them so much. Happy traveling!

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1. Greenville, South Carolina

Population: 68,219

Why? Don't let Charleston take all the South Carolina press! Greenville, it's smaller, northern neighbor, which is nestled up against the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, can certainly hold its own. Geographically, the heart of South Carolina's upcountry is about halfway between North Carolina and Atlanta. Physically, the bustling downtown area — which is packed with boutique, one-of-a-kind shops oozing with Southern charm (the upscale kind, not the cheesy, touristy kind) — is an urban complement to the gorgeous green spaces, of which Greenville has many. (Don't worry, we'll get to that.) Better even, the entire city is dotted with public art installations — the piece by the Synovus building is particularly hypnotizing — and playful moments that highlight the city's cheeky personality: as we wandered through Falls Park on the Reedy, three giant blow-up T-Rexes scurried across the Liberty bridge at breakneck pace. Where they were going, who knows, but it made for one of those fun, 'I swear it happened' travel moments you'll bring up over and over in conversation. Let's just say, there's a very good reason *Travel & Leisure* named Greenville one of the '50 Best Places To Travel In 2018.' Well, it's 2019 now and the hype still stands.





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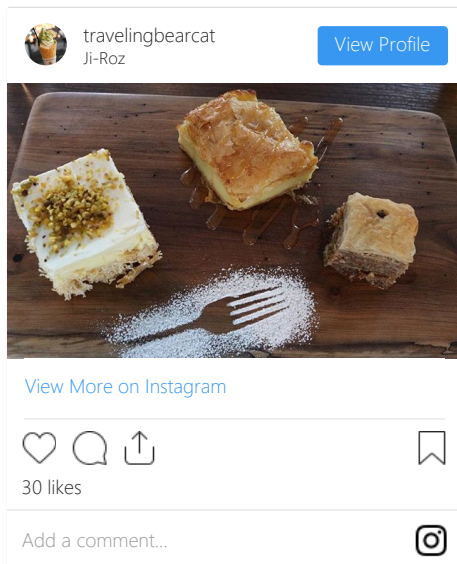


Where to stay? Springhill Suites Downtown Greenville. Nestled in the heart of vibrant downtown Greenville, this hotel features state-of-the-art innovation, luxurious accommodations, and on-site dining at Oak and Honey, an exciting new restaurant and bar. The hotel also features a 24/7 state-of-the-art techno gym facility, and an outdoor seasonal pool and sundeck. It's also located within walking distance to some of the areas most sought-after dining options, boutique shopping, and entertainment venues including the Peace Center, Bon Secours Wellness Area, Fluor Field, and Falls Park on the Reedy. One other item to note: the interior decor is *heads above* what you've come to expect from chain hotels — think clean, modern, inviting — and the floor-to-ceiling windows on the corner hotel units manage to be stunning without impeding on your privacy.

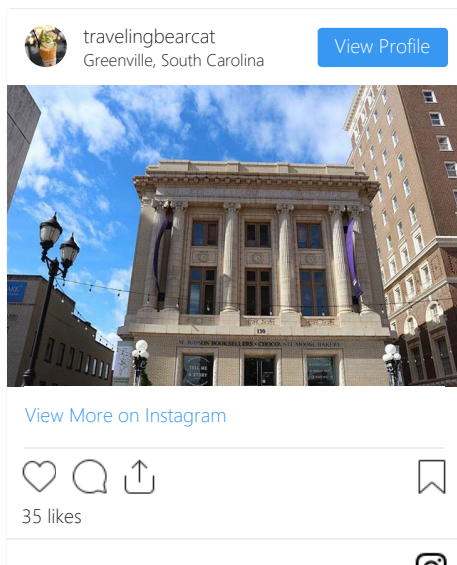
What to do?

1. Go greek at Ji-Roz. Everything is made from scratch at this authentic Greek restaurant, dedicated to making Greek cuisine made with a Mediterranean flare. John, the owner — one of the friendliest guys you'll ever meet, by the way — moved to Greenville when he was five years old, took a quick detour up north to study at LeCordon Bleu in Chicago where he discovered his passion for his Greek roots, and then returned to Greenville where *violà!!* Ji-Roz, a farm-to-table Greek concept was born. And we're so glad it was. (Listen, we've been to Greece and the food's better at Ji-Roz than what we had on a few of the islands.) John made a few recommendations and it isn't hyperbole to say each course was better the next: try the wood-fired octopus, feta balls, and spanikopita — and don't even think about skipping dessert: the Greek delicacies are an impeccably sweet (but-not-too-sweet)

send-off.



2. Bookworm at M. Judson Booksellers & Storytellers. A local literary treasure with regular pop-up events and tastings held with local chefs and guest authors, the bookstore was named after Mary Judson, the principal of Greenville Female College at the turn of the 19th-century and proponent of smart women. Today, it features, Southern, place-based literature of every kind, book-inspired interior design ideas you'll steal for your own home, and a chocolate mousse bakery to boot — because reading is always better when you're eating, right?



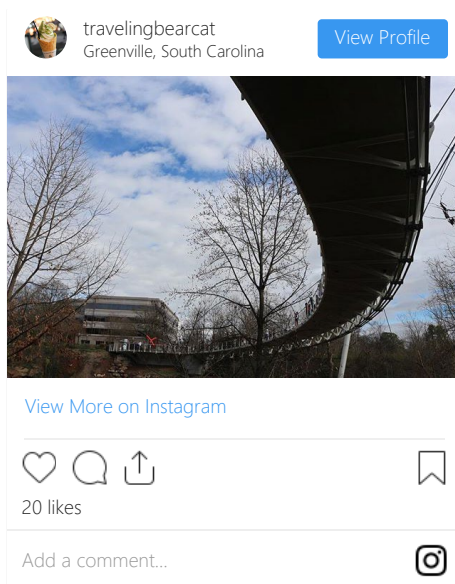
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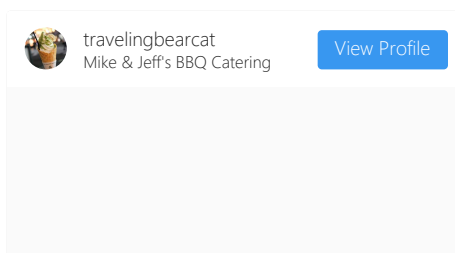
3. Create your own candles at Magnolia Candle. A unique date idea for couples of any ages, a master chandler will help you create your own soy candle by choosing your own scent, color and name (we chose 'tranquillo,'; Italian for 'quiet'). If you don't have time for the hour-long candle-making sessions, simply peruse the shelves and shelves of yummy scents: from apple bourbon & mint to candy corn to caramelized pear, the chandlers at Magnolia are constantly brainstorming inventive new aromas; we had serious trouble narrowing down our favorites. After you're finished candle-making, meander over to Foxcroft Wine Co. — a perk of downtown Greenville is that almost everything's walkable — for a glass of bubbly to complete your romantic evening.



4. Explore Fall Parks on the Reedy, a nationally-acclaimed green space with the spectacular Liberty Bridge — a 345-foot, curved bridge held in the air by a single suspension cable and the only one of its kind in the United States. And speaking of lovely outdoor spaces, this would be an apt time to mention Greenville experiences 220 sunny days a year (Chicago, are you paying attention?)



5. Sample southern BBQ on a Greenville food tour. It wouldn't be a trip to the Carolinas without some 'cue. Luckily, Greenville has plenty of options including a few spots on the "100-Mile BBQ" list. We hit the road with John Nolan, who created his own Greenville History Tours in 2006, stemming from his love of the city and all things culinary, not to mention, the decades he spent giving museum tours. He's a wealth of Greenville knowledge. (Fun fact: the city has ties to Albert Einstein; attend one of John's tours and you'll find out the fascinating connection!) John offers three different food tours — we took the Greenville BBQ Trail Tour, featuring back-to-back tastings at three local BBQ joints — the types that have smoke stacks sticking out of the rooftops and white smoke billowing out of the chimneys because yes, they're smoking the meats right on the premises. The individual portions are large enough to feed a small family — don't worry, they offer doggy bags — and for Southern BBQ newbies (me!), you'll get a chance to try hash for the first time at Henry's Smokehouse and choose from myriad sauces at Mike & Jeff's (my husband was brave enough to try the extra, EXTRA-hot and I learned mustard sauce on BBQ is the best invention since sliced bread.)





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2. Wilmington, Delaware

Population: 71,106

Why? Wilmington and the surrounding Brandywine Valley is a unique blend of history, culture, and gardens. In the short time I spent there, I felt transported to a romantic world: one filled with opulent estates, lush greenery, vast art collections, and quaint covered bridges — the kind us city folk only see on postcards. And yet to contrast the historic opportunities, downtown Wilmington is on its way to being a hip little corner of the globe full of upscale restaurants, a contemporary food hall, luxurious hotels — you'll start to see the duPont name everywhere — and a walkable riverfront with one of the coolest outdoor beer gardens we've ever clanked mugs in. (Converted rail cars make up the indoor area.) Simply put: Wilmington, Delaware is a tiny gem of rolling hills, no sales tax, and great outdoor areas. Don't ignore the small states!



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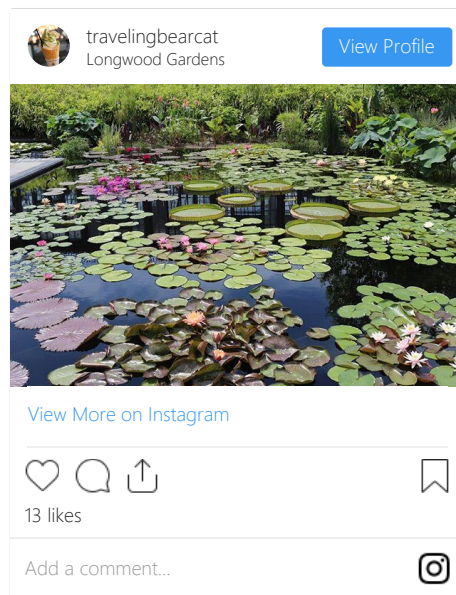
Where to stay? Hilton Wilmington Christiana. Centrally located to the myriad activities we list below, the Hilton Wilmington Christiana is an ideal resting stop for any kind of traveler. Their new gastropub, Market Kitchen & Bar, offers a creative menu featuring fresh, local ingredients but our favorite amenity was the outdoor fireplace where they happily let you bring a glass of wine to wind down.

What to do?

1. Try the crab cake at Backburner Restaurant and Tavern. Following that, try the oysters. (And then insist on ordering another round — they're that good. The beauty of being coastal = superb seafood.) Following that, try the pumpkin mushroom soup, which locals rave about. Also make sure to read the history of the restaurant; it's fascinating. (Hint: Hockessin, the town its located it in, used to be a farming village and the restaurant was formerly a company which sold hardware,

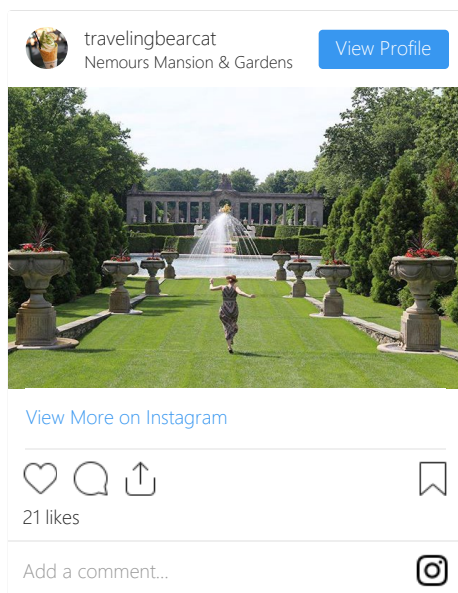
grain and coal.

2. Channel your inner Claude Monet at Longwood Gardens. Longwood Gardens is technically in Chester County, PA — when in Delaware, blink an eye and you'll be in Pennsylvania — but it's within the Brandywine Valley, so we're throwing it for good measure. And a good measure it is — the 1,077-acre botanical garden was, without question, the best botanical garden we've ever been to and that's saying a lot since we always try to stop by the local one in every city we visit; yes, we love flowers that much; see Instagram feed. The gardens were in full bloom when we stopped by in early June and all we can say is bring a camera because every turn is more photogenic than the next. Don't miss the lily pads outside of the atrium — Claude Monet would've a field day — and the Festival of Fountains show (at night, the five-acre fountain garden becomes illuminated). It's a choreographic masterpiece set to opera and it does *not* underwhelm.

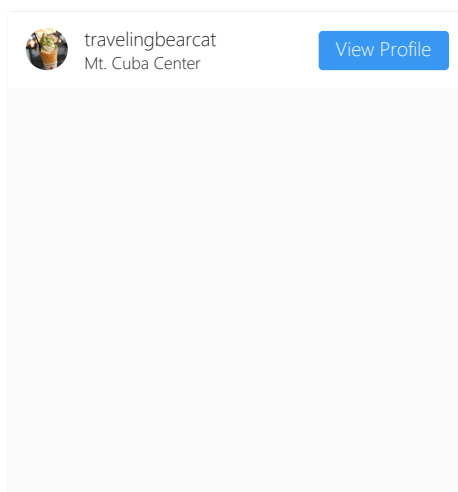


3. Teleport to Europe at Nemours Estate. Owned and developed by founder Alfred I. duPont, Nemours Estate comprises an exquisite, 77-room mansion, the largest formal French gardens in North America, a chauffeur's garage housing a collection of vintage automobiles used on the estate, and nearly 200 acres of scenic woodlands, meadows and lawns. It's like being transported to Europe without actually going to Europe. It's fantasy-like to meander the rooms, which all feature state-of-the-art technology at that time — hilarious to look at now, of course — or leap through the endless lawn and imagine what life must have

been like enveloped in such opulence and wealth. (The craziest part: it was a working home until the 1970s!)



4. Wander the naturalistic gardens at Mt. Cuba Center. For a less manicured, more natural nature experience, head to Mt. Cuba, which has been a home for conservation and preservation since the 1930s. The entire figure-8 walk, which you can stroll freely, peaks at a bewitching hidden pond (pack a book!) You can easily spend thirty minutes — or an entire day. After you're flowered out (no such thing!) stop for lunch at Buckley's Tavern and regain your afternoon momentum with an order of mozzarella sticks.






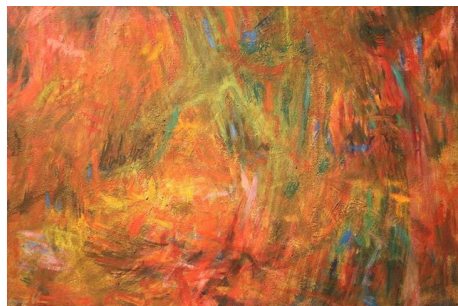
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5. Go art-crazy at Delaware Art Museum. There's no shortage of great art in Wilmington. The Delaware Art Museum features pre-Raphaelite art, Brandywine school illustrators and 9-acre sculpture garden; the Delaware Contemporary is your source for contemporary art, and the Brandywine River Museum of Art is renowned for its holdings of the Wyeth family of artists as well as it's unique setting: a renovated nineteenth-century mill with a dramatic steel and glass addition that overlooks the Brandywine River. (For another fun idea, try tubing; from our vantage point, we saw a few carefree couples floating happily in-sync with the current.)

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3. Des Moines, Iowa

Population: 217,521

Why? The capital city of Iowa is nothing to snuff at; there's a reason it's the fastest-growing city in the Midwest. And listen, I went to college there (Drake University!) So while I may be a bit biased, the fact is is that in four years (and one summer spent interning at Meredith Corporation HQ, a media company known primarily for publishing *Better Homes & Gardens* and its recent purchase of Time, Inc.), I can unequivocally say the stereotype about Midwesterners being nice is absolutely true — and their neighborhoods and communities are even nicer. Des Moines is affordable, fun, increasingly hip, and a truly wonderful place to raise a family.

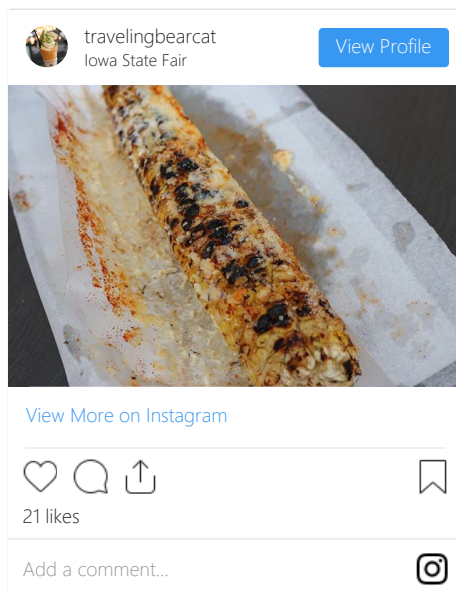


Where to stay? Des Moines folk — both locals and transplants — are so lovely and accommodating, we recommend skipping a hotel and trying Airbnb for a dose of

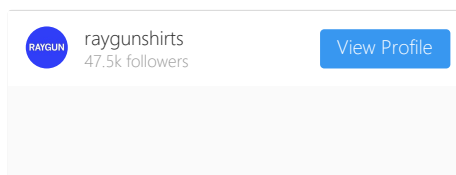
Midwestern hospitality. Check out the quiet historic Sherman Hill neighborhood, close to downtown Des Moines; we had a four-star experience with Dat & Alan (they even shipped me a few beauty products I accidentally left in the shower at no cost.)

What to do?

1. Experience Americana at its finest at The Iowa State Fair. There's really no apt way to describe the internationally acclaimed Iowa State Fair — it's the single largest event in the state of Iowa and one of the oldest and largest agricultural and industrial expositions in the country. Think: corndogs, anything-you-can-think-of-on-a-stick, people-watching to the extreme, giant award-winning fruits and veggies, and an entire cow made out of butter. You haven't seen a real state fair until you've seen **THEE BUTTER COW**.

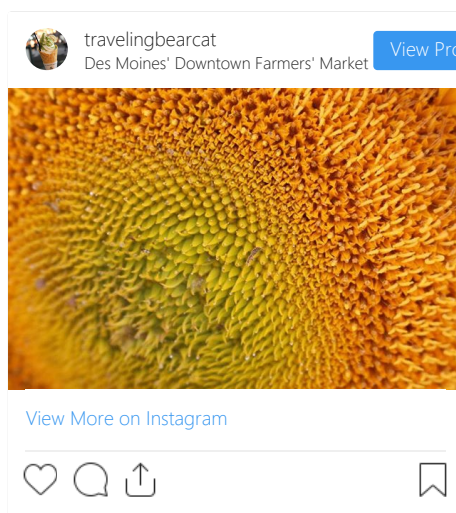


2. Buy a cool-ass shirt at the Greatest Store In The Universe. RAYGUN Shirts, which was founded in Des Moines' East Village — and has since expanded to Kansas City and Chicago — has the world's best T-shirts. No, seriously; It's a one-of-a-kind souvenir you can't get on the coasts.





3. Smell the fresh flowers and freshly-baked pastries at the Downtown Farmer's Market. Started in 1976 with just 15 vendors, the downtown Des Moines Farmers Market now supports nearly 300 local entrepreneurs, including farmers, producers, bakers and artists that represent 50 counties across the state of Iowa. The Market has been nationally recognized by families and critics alike and has been rated #2 of the 101 Best Farmers' Markets in America by *The Daily Meal* for two consecutive years: 2013 and 2014. The farm-fresh produce is simply that good.





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4. Kick back with live tunes at the 80/35 music festival. Named after interstates 80 and 35, which intersect in Des Moines, the 80/35 summer music festival is a gathering to discover mind-bending music, engage with eye-popping art, devour delicious fest foods, and hula-hoop to your heart's content — and that's just the start.

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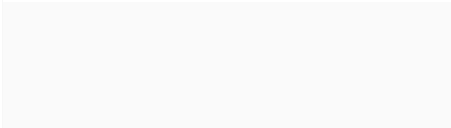
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5. Watch track-and-field greatness happen at the Drake Relays. I'm probably a bit impartial because I went to college at Drake University and Relays is what us crazy kids looked forward to each year. (Consider it our own version of Homecoming.) But they're really that fun: world-class athletes (the Relays are considered one of the top track-and-field events in the country) a painted street (thanks to Drake's myriad organizations, who paint it the week before) and plenty of beer: check out local joint Peggy's Tavern, University Library Cafe (order the nachos!), or West End Lounge after you've had your fill of sports.

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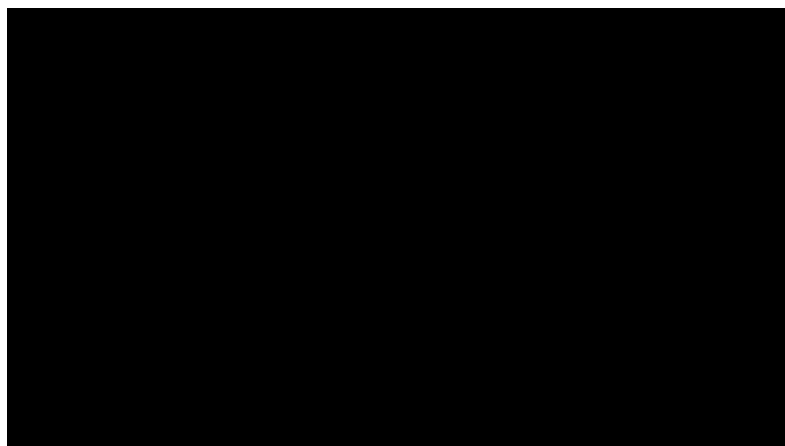
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Andrea Zimmerman is the editor-at-large at YourTango. She enjoys reading, traveling, and reading while traveling. She lives in Chicago with her husband and three-legged cat. Follow her @angiecat86 on Instagram.

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