

The five best small towns in America

By Laura Bly, USA TODAY

Updated 16m ago

Comment 5 Recommend 22 Tweet 19 [Email] [Print] [Share]

The assignment: Start in New York City and wind up in Los Angeles, exploring the best of small-town America along the way.



By Matthew B. Zimmerman, AP

Walla Walla, Wash., was named the friendliest small town in America in USA TODAY and Rand McNally's Best of the Road contest.

Three weeks and 25,000 miles later, five teams competing in the [Best of the Road](#) contest — sponsored by [Rand McNally](#) in collaboration with USA TODAY — have turned in their maps and car keys, consulted with a panel of judges and come up with the winners: five towns full of friendly people, great scenery, terrific food, patriotic fervor and just plain fun.

Selected from 30 nominees (each team visited the six in their category), the winners were announced Thursday at the Destination Marketing Association International's annual meeting in New Orleans.

For more on the winning towns, the worthy also-rans and the teams that got to sample their charms, check out [bestoftheroad.com](#).

Friendliest

Walla Walla, Wash.

Ads by Google

[Sonoma County Winery Perk](#)
Free Wine Tastings At 70+ Wineries. Receive Special Savings & Perks!
www.Visa.com/SonomaWineTasting
[Arby's® Casting Call](#)

www.Visa.com/SonomaWineTasting

Arby's® Casting Call

Video Contest - Win \$10,000 and Appear in a National TV Commercial.

www.Arby'sCastingCall.com

BP's Work in the Gulf

BP continues their work in the Gulf. Visit BP.com to learn how.

www.BP.com/GulfOfMexicoResponse

Walla Walla, Wash.

Team that visited: Jason and Nikki Wynn ("Gone with the Wynns") of Dallas, who were the winning team

What made it stand out: This southeastern Washington community may be famous for its sweet onions and growing wine industry, but those aren't the only things that put a smile on the Wynns' lips. "You can ride your bike around the entire city in the morning, see

kids at the BMX park in the afternoon and see a musical under the stars in the evening," they say. "It seemed everyone was involved and loved their city, from wine growers and politicians to cleanup crews. This is a happy town which made for friendly people."

Don't miss: "If you're here during the summer, go for a hot-air balloon ride" and visit one of the area's more than 100 wineries, the Wynns suggest.

Biggest surprise: The historic Marcus Whitman Hotel, which the Wynns say has "an amazing chef's table service with loads of local ingredients and micro-greens grown at the hotel."

More information:

877-998-4748

wallawalla.org

Category runners-up:

- Lake Havasu City, Ariz.
- Mount Airy, N.C.
- Nacogdoches, Texas
- Valdosta, Ga.
- Woodward, Okla.

Most beautiful

Sandpoint, Idaho

Team that visited: Daniel and JoAnne Schaub ("I [The McNavigators](#)") of Cary, N.C.

What made it stand out: Located on pristine Lake Pend Oreille in the Idaho Panhandle about an hour and a half east of Spokane, Wash., "Sandpoint isn't just a 'drive through and let's stop here' place," the Schaub's say. "Its quaint downtown shops and restaurants welcomed us in, and its landscape kept us in awe."

Don't miss: From a chairlift ride to the top of the local ski area, Schweitzer Mountain, "you can stand in Idaho and see Canada, Montana and Washington. At 6,400 feet, the expansive view kept us so mesmerized we missed our lunch date — and we had a snowball fight in July."

Biggest surprise: Sandpoint's mountain setting on the shores of one of the country's deepest lakes. "Being from North Carolina, we hadn't heard much about Idaho," the Schaub's admit. "We knew there were a lot of potatoes, and that's about it."

More information:

800-800-2106

sandpointchamber.com

Category runners-up:

- Baker City, Ore.
- Coral Gables, Fla.
- Franklin, Tenn.
- Marco Island, Fla.
- Pacifica, Calif.

Best for food

Lafayette, La.

Team that visited: Jim and Bonnie Parr ("[The Fun Finders](#)") of St. Petersburg, Fla.

What made it stand out: "At every meal, the main goal seemed to be introducing people to Cajun cooking and the history behind it," the Parrs say. "And we could work off the calories with zydeco dancing" at family-friendly restaurant/dance halls such as Randol's.

Don't miss: A lesson in how to make roux (a flour-and-oil mixture that's the basis of much Cajun cuisine) at The Accidental Chef, a convivial cooking school run by two cousins of Sicilian ancestry.

Biggest surprise: "True Cajun food is flavorful — but not overly spicy. Too much spice only covers the flavors of the food," the Parrs learned.

More information:

800-346-1958

lafayettettravel.com

Category runners-up:

- Addison, W.Va.
- Burnsville, Minn.
- Costa Mesa, Calif.
- Gulfport, Fla.
- Visalia, Calif.

Most patriotic

Rapid City, S.D.

Team that visited: Christopher Staudinger of Pasco, Wash., and Tawny Clark of Bremerton, Wash. ("[Captain and Clark](#)")

What made it stand out: Home to Mount Rushmore National Monument, the Crazy Horse Memorial and Ellsworth Air Force Base, Rapid City "was the first town we visited that would talk about the mistakes America has made as a nation and focused on how we have grown from them," say Staudinger and Clark. It's "a place where people from across the world and country can learn about America's past, become inspired by its present, and find hope in its future."

Don't miss: A leisurely drive through a herd of 1,500 free-roaming buffalo at Custer State Park.

Biggest surprise: The Hall of Records, which is an unfinished, off-limits stone chamber behind Lincoln's head at Mount Rushmore, "houses ceramic copies of our most important documents as a nation, sealed in a titanium vault."

More information:

800-487-3223

visitrapidcity.com

Category runners-up:

- Clarksville, Tenn.
- Emporia, Kan.
- Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.
- Peachtree City, Ga.
- Williamsburg, Va.

Most fun

Glenwood Springs, Colo.

Team that visited: Juliana and Joan Broste ("Traveling Jules and Traveling Joan") of Denver

What made it stand out: In a classic example of "close to home, out of mind," the mother/daughter duo had passed through but never spent much time in Glenwood Springs. They loved its "appeal to all ages, no matter what your threshold for excitement," with options as sedate as shopping in the historic downtown and as wild as zip-lining and whitewater rafting.

Don't miss: The town's outdoor hot-springs pool. A popular, year-round gathering spot since the late 19th century, the larger pool, 405 feet by 100 feet, holds more than 1 million gallons of water and is maintained at 90 degrees, while a smaller version, 100 feet long, is kept at 104 degrees.

Biggest surprise: Tandem paragliding through the Rockies. Says Joan, 62: "I assumed paragliding was only for athletes and adrenaline junkies, but it proved to be a thrilling — and serene — experience."

More information:

888-445-3696

glenwoodchamber.com

Category runners-up:

•Myrtle Beach, S.C.

•Park City, Utah

•Santa Claus, Ind.

•Vacaville, Calif.

•Yellow Springs, Ohio
