

America's Prettiest Towns

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder - in this case, these five experts



By Rob Baedeker

Rockport, Maine

The overall picture may come into slightly sharper focus after November, but that hasn't stopped us from finding the 20 prettiest towns in the homeland right now. From Bisbee to Cape May, they've each got something special that should put them on the savvy traveler's radar. Identifying America's prettiest towns is by definition a subjective undertaking - prettiness, to adapt an old saying, is in the eye of the beholder. So when we asked five experts for their lists of the country's prettiest towns, we left the definition of "pretty" up to the judges themselves.

"Ward's picks include [Flagstaff, Ariz.](#), which combines those natural and manmade elements into what he describes as a "definitive little Western town, where fine brick buildings on every block hold lively hotels, bars, stores and restaurants, and the majestic San Francisco Peaks soar to the north."

For Bob Krist, author of "Travel Photography: Documenting the World's People and Places" and host of PBS' "Restoration Stories," a selection of the U.S.'s prettiest towns ended up revealing a common denominator: tradition. "They're the kind of places that don't exist much anymore," Krist says of his list, which includes the coastal Maine town of [Rockport](#) and the southern New Jersey resort of [Cape May](#).

Krist adds that his picks share a photogenic richness that results from the "integrity of the traditional architecture. You can look down a street in Cape May (N.J.) and see seven or eight beautiful Victorians all in a row. It's an architectural integrity that existed before strip malls and before things got homogenized with aluminum siding."

While the towns here comprise a diverse array of locations, sizes and architectural styles, our expert's selections lean heavily toward the East, and New England picks figure prominently in their selections. Three of our five panelists chose New Hampshire towns ([Portsmouth](#) and [Hanover](#)) as among the nation's prettiest, and destinations in Maine, Vermont and Rhode Island are also sprinkled among the experts' choices.

"The Rough Guide to the USA" co-author Greg Ward is the sole panelist whose choices drifted wholly away from the Eastern Seaboard. Among the traveler writer's pretty-town favorites are [Springdale, Utah](#), situated near [Zion National Park](#), and [Galena, Ill.](#), which Ward describes as a "peaceful, verdant" town that "seems barely changed since local boy Ulysses S. Grant was elected president in 1868."

Sarah Tuff Dunn, describing her first visit to [Park City, Utah](#), says, "I was struck by just how blue the sky was, and how dry the air, during a ski trip one March. I was used to soggy or icy conditions back East. After I skied seemingly bottomless powder at nearby Deer Valley, the whole town of Park City (which looked like a candy village, thanks to all the different colors of the Victorian buildings) seemed like it was on some crazy high from the sun, the snow and the altitude."

Photographer Krist sums up the intangible quality shared by the pretty towns on his list: "They haven't been homogenized, they still have their local character - and the charm is real."

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Cape May, NJ

CAPE MAY was founded in 1620 by the Dutch Captain Mey, on the small hook at the very southern tip of the Jersey coast, jutting out into the Atlantic and washed by the Delaware Bay on the west. After being briefly settled by New England whalers in the late 1600s, it turned in the eighteenth century to more profitable farming and, soon after, to tourism. In 1745 the first advertisement for Cape May's restorative air and fine accommodation appeared in the Philadelphia press, heralding a period of great prosperity, when Southern plantation owners, desiring cool sea breezes without having to venture into Yankee land, flocked to the fashionable boarding houses of this genteel "resort of Presidents."

The Victorian era was Cape May's finest; nearly all its gingerbread architecture dates from a mass rebuilding after a severe fire in 1878. However, the increase in car travel after World War I meant that vacationers could go further, more quickly and more cheaply, and the little town found itself something of an anachronism, while the gaudier charms of Atlantic City became the brightest stars on the Jersey coast. During the 1950s, Cape May began to dust off its most valuable commodity: its history. Today the whole town is a National Historic Landmark, with over six hundred **Victorian buildings**, tree-lined streets and beautifully kept **gardens**, and a lucrative B&B industry. It teeters dangerously on self-parody at times, thanks to its glut of cutesy olde shoppes, but if you avoid the main drags and wander through the back streets, you'll find an appealing combination of historical authenticity and good **beaches**.

Information by Rough Guides