

The 20 Best Small Towns to Visit in 2013

From the blues to the big top, we've picked the most intriguing small towns to enjoy arts and smarts

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What makes a small town big on culture? For the [second year running](#), we sought a statistical answer to this question by asking the geographic information company Esri to search its databases for small towns and cities—this time, with populations of less than 15,000—that have exceptional concentrations of museums, art galleries, orchestras, theaters, historic sites and other cultural blessings.

Happily, the top towns also boast heartwarming settings where the air is a little fresher, the grass greener, the pace gentler than in metropolitan America. Generally, they're devoted to preserving their historic centers, encouraging talent and supporting careful economic growth. There's usually an institution of higher learning, too.

Most important are the people, unpretentious people with small-town values and high cultural expectations—not a bad recipe for society at large. As a sign on a chalkboard in Cleveland, Mississippi (our No. 2) puts it, “Be nice. The world is a small town.”

4. Baraboo, WI

Kids didn't bat an eye when they saw elephants bathing in the Baraboo River: Ringling Bros. once made its headquarters in Baraboo. By the turn of the last century, it took 100 railroad cars to transport the circus' 1,500 employees, animals, gear and opulently decorated parade wagons. When it bought out Barnum & Bailey in 1916, it had every right to call itself “the greatest show on earth.”

Clowns, trapeze artists and Vanna the baboon dazzle at the Circus World Museum, a monument to how the traveling show introduced frontier towns to art, music, exotic animals and marvels like electric lights. The masterfully restored wagons and lithographic ads are an Aladdin's cave of American folk art.

“Nothing is too good for Baraboo,” Albrecht Ringling, oldest of the seven Ringling brothers who grew up in town, said while gilt was being applied to columns in a theater he built and artists were painting a French Baroque mural on the fire curtain. “The AI” opened in 1915, though vaudeville has yielded to concerts, musicals and talkies accompanied by a 1928 Barton organ.

You can't go to this durable Midwestern town without experiencing powerful moments of déjà vu that emerge from the collective unconsciousness of America. On the lawn of the historic courthouse, folks gather on summer nights, kids in jammies, for concerts and movies. Adjacent to the town square are a handsome 1903 public library, galleries, antiques shops, German bakeries and two bookshops. (The Village Booksmith holds bring-your-own-supper showings of "Downton Abbey" in the uncut British version.)

Two big parades every year show off wagons from Circus World, marching bands and belly dancing. "That's always controversial," says Greg DeSanto, executive director of Baraboo's International Clown Hall of Fame and Research Center.

North of town, the Baraboo/Sauk County branch of the University of Wisconsin—"Boo U"—reaches into the community with concerts, plays, lectures and exhibitions.

The nearby Baraboo Hills offer naturalists and geologists textbook terrain scoured by ancient glaciers, later the meeting place of Midwestern forest and prairie. This landscape inspired the first generation of American conservationists, beginning with John Muir, raised in nearby Portage.

In 1973 a pair of Cornell University students landed at a Baraboo Hills horse farm, now home to the International Crane Foundation. Walking trails on the campus, where all 15 extant crane species are bred and studied—including the extremely rare whooping crane—bring home the preciousness of these critically endangered birds. To hear them bugle in unison is magic.

Aldo Leopold sometimes heard cranes on the abandoned farm by the Wisconsin River where he watched the seasons turn. He read the story of man's relationship with nature in the rings of a tree he was forced to fell—the "good oak" described in *A Sand County Almanac*, a bible of the American conservation movement. At the Leopold Center, about 15 miles northeast of Baraboo, you can see Aldo's shack, walk through groves of pine he planted and remember a visionary who, by rights, gets the last word.

"Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language. The quality of cranes lies, I think, in this higher gamut, as yet beyond the reach of words."

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