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17 Amazing Beach Towns That Top Our Readers' Travel List (2021)

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SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

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Sand, seafood, and stellar sunsets aren't enough to make a beach town amazing. In order to be an amazing beach town, the town itself has to be just about as cool as its beaches. From the Pacific coast to the Gulf to the Eastern seaboard, we've rounded up the beach towns that were popular with our readers in 2021. Beaches range from powdery white sand to dramatic bluffs, while the coastal towns offer plenty to see and do. Here are the 17 beach towns that topped our readers' travel list.

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1. Siesta Key, Florida

Our readers voted Siesta Key as the Best Beach in the U.S. in TripadVisor's 2021 Best of Travel Awards. Our writers love it, too. That's probably because in addition to powdery white sand (see the made-of-quartz), this gulf-side barrier island offers everything from kayaking and boating to fine dining and day drinking. Spend the day shelling, then savor succulent crab as you watch the stellar sunset.

2. Charlevoix, Michigan

This quaint Michigan beach town offers some of the best beaches in Michigan. Located where the waters of Lake Michigan, Lake Charlevoix, Round Lake, and the Pine River Channel meet, Charlevoix boasts beaches on both the great lake and inland lake. This charming Midwest town was named one of the best small towns in our 2021 Best of Travel Awards.

3. Duck, North Carolina

One of the best beach towns on the Outer Banks, Duck's beautiful beaches stretch seven miles along the Atlantic. The shallow waters of Currituck Sound border its west side, offering many ways to play as well as stunning sunsets. This quaint southeastern beach town is also home to fabulous restaurants, including the world-famous Duck Donuts.

4. Westerly, Rhode Island

From private beaches to state parks, Westerly and the surrounding area is home to some of the prettiest beaches in New England. In addition to sparkling ocean waters and long sandy barrier beaches, sumptuous local seafood, gorgeous vistas, and coastal adventures make this Rhode Island small town a perfect summertime getaway. It also makes for a great place to kickoff a leaf-peeping road trip in the fall or to conclude a coastal Rhode Island road trip in the spring.

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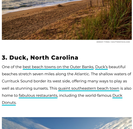

5. Hampton Beach, New Hampshire

Your classic East Coast beach, Hampton Beach is filled with the promise of fried food, sunken lobes, and salty air. The water is chilly, but the beach is wide, with a boardwalk that's loaded with fun things to see and do. This New Hampshire town makes for a great beach stop on a road trip from Boston, Massachusetts to Bangor, Maine. The charming small town is also a wonderful place to watch fireworks on the beach on the Fourth of July or sample seafood during the annual Hampton Beach Seafood Festival.

6. Orange Beach, Alabama

Just a hop, skip, and jump from Gulf Shores, Alabama, this affordable beach destination is family-friendly, with plenty of things to do and places to eat. The nearest airport is in Pensacola, Florida, but most people arrive via road trip on Alabama State Route 59 (Gulf Shores Parkway). Miss the famous Gulf Coast heat and humidity by visiting in February for the Orange Beach Seafood Festival.

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7. Long Beach, Washington

At 28 miles, Long Beach gets its name from being the the West Coast's longest sandy beach. This under-the-radar destination is home to some of the most beautiful sunsets in the world.

From flying kites and clam digging to beachcombing and bicycling, this hidden gem along Washington state's Long Beach Peninsula offers tons of activities for the whole family. Birdwatch, camp, and tour historic lighthouses. Visit during the third week of August for the annual world-renowned Washington State International Kite Festival, a week-long kite celebration and competition.

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8. Wailea, Maui, Hawaii

One of the most stunning places in nature on Maui, Wailea is most known for its five gorgeous, crescent-shaped beaches and its incredible golf courses. Looking to meet? It's also one of the best places to buy a beach house!

Hawai'i's tropical Valley Isle is a veritable sunset machine. Watch the sun dip into the Pacific as you stroll along the Boardwalk Trail.

9. Carmel-By-The-Sea, California

One of Northern California's most charming seaside towns, Carmel-by-the-Sea (or just "Carmel" for short), can be found on the Monterey Peninsula. Situated just a couple of hours south of the Bay Area, it makes for a wonderful day trip from San Jose and San Francisco, whether it's for a weekend getaway or to celebrate another trip around the world. It also makes for a fabulous pit stop on a PCH road trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

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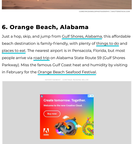
This California coastal town is also one of our readers' favorite quaint towns. In addition to quiet, white sand beaches and spa retreats, this upscale enclave features gourmet dining and one-of-a-kind shopping.



10. Tybee Island, Georgia

Tybee Island is a charming beach town just a few miles from Savannah, Georgia. Its beaches are family-friendly, and there's plenty to do and see on the island. Tybee Island's Tybee Lighthouse is a must-visit, and the Tybee Island Marine Science Center is a great place to learn about the local wildlife. Tybee Island's Fourth of July celebration is one of the most popular in the state, and the annual Tybee Island Seafood Festival is a great way to sample local seafood.

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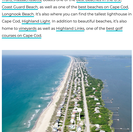
10. Bay St. Louis, Mississippi

One of the best places to explore along Mississippi's Gulf Coast, Bay St. Louis lies between New Orleans and Biloxi. The charming Mississippi coastal town is home to 100-Man Hall, a rare gem of the Mississippi Blues Trail. It also boasts eclectic restaurants where you can find a fantastic ochka. Seafood lovers should visit over the Fourth of July weekend for the Pat Lady of the Gulf Coast Festival.

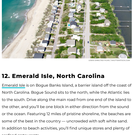
11. Truro, Massachusetts

Truro, Massachusetts, boasts one of the best beaches in the U.S. Coast Guard Beach, as well as one of the best beaches on Cape Cod, Longnook Beach. It's also where you can find the tallest lighthouse in Cape Cod, Highland Light. In addition to beautiful beaches, it's also home to vineyards as well as Highland Links, one of the best golf courses on Cape Cod.



12. Emerald Isle, North Carolina

Emerald Isle is an Bogue Banks Island, a barrier island off the coast of North Carolina. Bogue Sound sits to the north, while the Atlantic lies to the south. Drive along the main road from one end of the island to the other, and you'll be one block in either direction from the sound or the ocean. Featuring 12 miles of pristine shoreline, the beaches are some of the best in the country — uncrowded with soft white sand. In addition to beach activities, you'll find unique stores and plenty of seafood restaurants.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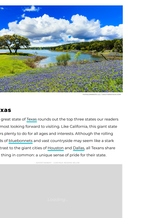
For those into pop culture, shopping, and Hollywood, the Los Angeles area offers more than enough entertainment. Check all the touristy activities off your list, like taking a tour of celebrity homes, seeing the famous Hollywood sign, or taking a stroll along the shops of Rodeo Drive. While you're there, don't forget to visit Mickey and Minnie at nearby Disneyland. California is also an explorers' paradise, boasting nine national parks including Joshua Tree, Yosemite, and Sequoia, home to the largest living tree in the world. Those wanting a more relaxing vacation will absolutely love Southern California, known for being one of the safest areas in the country, perfect year-round weather, and beautiful beaches.



Texas

The great state of Texas rounds out the top three states our readers are most looking forward to visiting. Like California, this giant state offers plenty to do for all ages and interests. Although the rolling fields of bluebonnets and vast countryside may seem like a stark contrast to the giant cities of Houston and Dallas, all Texans share one thing in common: a unique sense of pride for their state.

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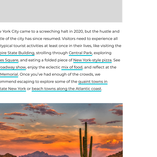
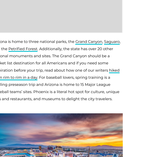
Thanks to the southern location, Texas has a warmer climate that makes it a popular destination for both retirees and year-round travel. South Padre Island and Galveston are excellent choices for beach lovers. The quirky capital of Austin lives up to its motto, "Keep Austin Weird," with plenty of fashion-forward shops, unique outdoor bars and eateries, and large tech and music festivals. For those wanting to experience the Texas cowboy lifestyle, be sure to book a stay at one of the many operational ranches. Finally, don't miss the charming Texas hill country, offering stunning views and flavorful wine.



New York

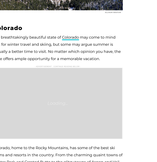
Unlike last year, people are looking forward to exploring the big cities again. New York City is starting to come back to life and we know all you extroverts out there have missed the energy! Don't sleep on the rest of New York state, though. It has plenty of places for the introverts to enjoy as well.



New York City came to a screeching halt in 2020, but the hustle and bustle of the city has since resumed. Visitors need to experience all the typical tourist activities at least once in their lives, like visiting the Empire State Building, strolling through Central Park, exploring Times Square, and eating a folded pizza if New York-style pizza. See a Broadway show, enjoy the eclectic mix of food, and reflect at the 9/11 Memorial. Once you've had enough of the crowds, we recommend escaping to explore some of the quaint towns in upstate New York or beach towns along the Atlantic coast.

Arizona

Arizona is another readers' warm weather favorite for both retirement and vacationing. From the larger cities like Phoenix and Scottsdale to the national parks, this state offers plenty of activities to please anyone.



Arizona is home to three national parks, the Grand Canyon, Saguaro, and the Petrified Forest. Additionally, the state has over 20 other national monuments and sites. The Grand Canyon should be a bucket list destination for all Americans and if you need some inspiration before your trip, read about how one of our writers hiked from rim to rim in a day. For baseball lovers, spring training is a thrilling preseason trip and Arizona is home to 5 Major League Baseball teams. Also, Phoenix is a literal hot spot for culture, unique bars and restaurants, and museums to delight the city travelers.

Nevada

Nevada is most famous for Las Vegas, the unofficial party capital of the country, but offers plenty to do for the outdoorsman as well. The state boasts two national parks, along with 24 state parks, and plenty of adventure along the way.

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Many will start their trip in Sin City before breaking off the explore the rest of the state. Our readers are anxious to get back to the bright lights and over the top shows that Las Vegas is famous for. It's hard to walk through one of the famous casino floors without playing at least one hand of Blackjack, but don't get too inside. Make sure to check out the spectacular dining options along the strip, like La Crique at Bellagio, overlooking the celebrated fountain show. To break away from the crowds, set off on one of the many day trips available to see Death Valley, a land of extremes, or the Hoover Dam, an industrial marvel over the Colorado River.

Colorado

The breathtakingly beautiful state of Colorado may come to mind first for winter travel and skiing, but some may argue summer is actually a better time to visit. No matter which option you have, the state offers ample opportunity for a memorable vacation.

Colorado, home to the Rocky Mountains, has some of the best ski towns and resorts in the country. From the charming quaint towns of Winter Park and Crested Butte to the glitzy towns of Aspen and Vail, skiers and snowboarders will find their happiness atop a Mountain. On the flip side, summer is the best season to visit Estes Park, home to the famous Stanley Hotel, and providing easy access to the sprawling Rocky Mountain National Park. Another national park, Mesa Verde, is known for being the best stargazing spot in the states and earned a coveted inclusion as an International Dark Sky Park.

Hawaii

It's no surprise to find Hawaii on any top United States destinations list. This tropical state is comprised of many islands, but visitors typically land on one of the six main islands: Kauai, Oahu, Molokai, Lanai, Maui, and the island of Hawaii (Big Island).

Each Hawaiian island offers different activities and types of terrain to explore or relax on. Oahu is the most commercialized and the capital city of Honolulu is home to world-class shopping, huge sandy beaches with incredible views of Diamond Head, and Pearl Harbor. It can's miss historical site. It's easy to island hop from hard Maui is a top destination for couples, offering luxury beach resorts and luscious green views offset by the pure aqua ocean water. The other islands may appeal more to the adventure traveler, don't miss seeing the volcanoes up close and personal on the Big Island and hiking through the lush landscapes and waterfalls of Kauai.

South Carolina

South Carolina embodies Southern hospitality, charm, and food. Visitors are immediately welcomed to this east coast state and will find plenty of entertainment along the way. The sub-tropical climate makes it a great destination any time of year.

South Carolina is home to some of the best golf courses in the country and the weather is mild enough to provide year-round access to many of the greens. Charming small towns are speckled throughout the state, many with historical buildings and town squares preserved and functional. Although a larger city, Charleston has managed to hold on to the small-town feel and history dating back to the 17th century. Don't miss taking a horse-drawn carriage tour through the cobblestone streets of downtown! Folly Beach is another city-favorite, a quick escape from downtown, to relax on the sand.

Michigan

Michigan has long been a popular destination for multi-generational travel. It is the Great Lakes region, with miles and miles of lakefront beaches, giving off coastal town vibes without traveling all the way to an ocean.

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Michigan has many small towns along the Great Lakes and is the only state to border four lakes: Superior, Michigan, Huron, and Erie. Due to the northern location and cooler climate, the ideal time to visit Michigan for time on the water is summer. Tulips sprout in abundance, and spring travelers should not miss the Tulip Time 8-day festival in Holland. For those looking for larger cities, Detroit and Grand Rapids top the list. The Motor City offers plenty of history to enjoy, along with a growing art scene, and is within many driveable favorites for nature lovers.

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National Parks

Okay, of course, national parks aren't a "state," but we had to throw them in as a bonus. So many readers stated they are most excited about exploring our country's natural gems in 2022! Thanks to the pandemic, people were forced to get outside and explore the beauty around them — and remembered how much they loved it. Attendance at national parks reached record-breaking numbers for the past 2 years and it doesn't seem like the trend is slowing for 2022. Make sure to book your entry and camping spot early!

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Allison is the Director of Marketing at Gateway Blend. She focuses on content for TravelAwaits and OOLA readers. She has a strong passion for the outdoors and loves spending her weekends hiking and exploring...

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