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ATLANTA TRAVEL NEWS

Never destinations, these small American towns promise subtle beauty
Greenville, S.C., Delray Beach, Fla. among stops in the South

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When Americans hit the road it's usually for "sun and fun" or "bright lights, big city." But in the years after Sept. 11, 2001, Americans also have hungered for a slice of security and normalcy. A chance to get off the beaten path, away from it all to someplace quieter, older, less hectic.

Six years ago, I wrote about "the call of the small," the allure of towns that I had run across in my travels. Since then I've collected more gems. The towns are rarely destinations themselves, just a beautiful spot on the way from someplace to someplace else. I'm able to linger in a few. Others are just a stop for lunch and a promise to come back another day.

Here's my second helping of small towns. If you'll take the time, you might fall in love with them, too.

Waimea, Kauai

Hanalei is prettier. Poipu has better beaches. But both of those Kauai towns are full of vacationers and transplants. Waimea, on the southwestern edge of the Garden Island of Hawaii, is a real town. It has just enough tourist attractions (the 3,500-foot-deep Waimea Canyon, rugged Polihale Beach — the longest in the state) to make it worth the trip.

Mostly what you get is solitude and a laid-back atmosphere without anyone trying to give you a time-share pitch. 1-800-464-2924, www.gohawaii.com/kauai.

Shelter Cove, Calif.

I came to this Redwood Coast gem while tracing the path of the San Andreas fault. The fault touches the surface here for the final time on California's "Lost Coast" before cutting north into the Pacific Ocean floor. A winding road down from Calif. 101 reveals a pretty town with a nice little fishing port and the transplanted historic Cape Mendocino lighthouse. Some residents take the easy way in — landing at a small airstrip in the center of town. www.sheltercove-lostcoast.com.

Leadville, Colo.

Many Colorado Rockies towns have that rubber-stamp ski-resort-condos-and-chain-stores look. But

Leadville, the highest incorporated city in the United States (elevation 10,152 feet), retains its somewhat scruffy mining-day roots. There's an old newspaper office on the main street and a diner painted a bright yellow that sets it off against the gray sky. The number of days when Leadville isn't buried in snow are few. Get there while you can. 1-888-532-3845, www.leadvilleusa.com.

Pine Bluffs, Wyo.

This isn't the mountains-and-waterfalls part of Wyoming around Yellowstone. Pine Bluffs is on the far southeastern edge, a few miles from the Nebraska border. What sets it apart is the local rodeo held at 7 p.m. most Fridays from Memorial Day to Labor Day. You'll see teenagers roping their first calf and great-grandmothers who've been riding ponies between the cones since World War II. There's nothing slick about this true slice of Western prairie life. 307-245-3695, www.pinebluffs.org.

Lawrence, Kan.

With more than 80,000 residents, Lawrence is the biggest place on my list of small towns. But when you drive into downtown in the late afternoon, with the sunlight making the old brick buildings glow, it feels cozy and small. I found myself thinking "I could live here." A college town with good bookstores and a microbrewery, Lawrence is also steeped in the history of "Bloody Kansas," the battles that raged over slavery just before the Civil War. 785-865-4499, www.visitlawrence.com.

Chippewa Falls, Wis.

Take a historic downtown that has been praised by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, add in Olson's, an old-fashioned ice cream parlor at the top of the main street and mix in a historic brick brewery by a rushing stream and you have a small town out of 1950s central casting. All you have to do is go over the hill on the other side of the river to find the strip malls and fast-food joints. But from the center of town, it's dreamy. 1-866-723-0340, www.chippewachamber.org.

Fredericksburg, Texas

For a small town in the Hill Country, there's a lot to do. This birthplace of Adm. Chester Nimitz is home to the National Museum of the Pacific War, one of the best World War II museums in the country. The town rents out dozens of vintage cottages built by German farmers as bed-and-breakfast inns. Or you can stay at the Hangar Hotel, a converted aerodrome where some of the guests arrive by small plane. There's even a major butterfly habitat. In the evening, drive over to nearby Luckenbach, the small town made famous by Waylon Jennings, for some country music, a pulled pork sandwich and a long-neck Shiner Bock beer. 1-888-997-3600, www.fredericksburg-texas.com.

Wabasha, Minn.

When people think of the Mississippi River Valley, it's usually blues music and steamboats and Cajun food. Up here in Minnesota, it's not so hot and humid and the river isn't quite so wide. But the history is still thick. Check out the nearby National Eagle Center, a sanctuary where our national symbol thrives. Stay at the Anderson House, the oldest hotel in the state, where you can pick out a cat to join you in your room for the night (giving a whole new meaning to the term "cathouse"). 1-800-565-4158, www.wabashamn.org.

Eureka Springs, Ark.

Built on a series of undulating hills reached by switchback roads, this Ozarks town is like a puzzle waiting to be solved by a wandering visitor. Put the car in a space, slip on a pair of comfortable shoes and wander around the inns from the turn of the 20th century that once attracted vacationers seeking cool summer temperatures and curative waters. Today, there are lots of art galleries, bistros and a sprawling "only in America"-style Great Passion Play theme park and museum. 1-866-566-9387, www.eurekasprings.org.

Greenville, S.C.

The old mill town that once was home to disgraced "Black Sox" baseball player Shoeless Joe Jackson has been turned into a modern high-tech center with a beautiful arched pedestrian bridge at Falls Park on the city's Reedy River. The entire downtown is wired for Wi-Fi. While other medium-size Southern cities look like they've been left behind in the new economy, Greenville shows there can be new life in old places. 1-800-717-0023, www.greatergreenville.com.

Lexington, Mass.

It amazes me that a place so old and crucial to American history still has been able to preserve its small-town feeling. The hardscrabble battlefield is now a manicured village green where picnickers can enjoy a fine summer afternoon. Docents dressed in colonial outfits show visitors where the Redcoats marched and the rebellious colonists stood their ground. With the heavy suburban traffic, it might take you longer than the Minutemen to get into nearby central Boston. 781-862-1450, www.libertyride.us.

Delray Beach, Fla.

The most recent housing bubble has led to canyons of condos along much of the Atlantic Coast. But Delray Beach, just north of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., still has an old-town feel. Life centers around the Colony Hotel & Cabana Club, the turreted Mediterranean-style inn built on the beach in 1926. www.delraybeach.com.

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