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From sea to shining sea – some of the United States' special spots

By Patti Nickell

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Across America, there are a host of gems awaiting your discovery. From the music of Austin to the ski trails of Big Sky to the rural colonies of Amana, travelers are sure to find an intriguing adventure. Whether it's the East Coast (St. Michaels, Maryland) or the West Coast (Marina del Rey, California) water enthusiasts can find a playground.



A Hornblower cruise is a great way to experience the world's largest man-made marina. Hornblower Cruises and Events

With the dawn of a new year of travel, I decided to reflect on some past destinations that I especially loved. These five places span the nation, and while they may not be the first spots on a traveler's itinerary, each is a true American gem.

The East Coast: St. Michaels, Md.

It was the best wake-up call I've ever gotten. The sun rose – not timidly – but blazing its way over the coastal marshes lining Chesapeake Bay in this town straight out of a Currier & Ives print. From my bedroom at The Inn at Perry Cabin, I woke to this pyrotechnic display. Who needs an alarm clock?

Stepping onto my deck, I took a deep whiff of the salty air, and wondered if people who get daily doses of this clean, fresh oxygen take it for granted. Maryland's Eastern Shore is a cornucopia of the good things life has to offer – tangy sea breezes, clear air, as many bicycles and sailboats as there are automobiles, and enough crabs, oysters and clams to make up a bountiful fisherman's platter.

The Inn at Perry Cabin is a charming base for exploring St. Michaels, a town with only one fast food outlet (Subway), no malls and no traffic light within 11 miles. It does have a first-rate Maritime Museum where you can visit the Hooper Lighthouse, tong for oysters in the harbor or sign on as an apprentice in a boat building class.

You can also spend a day browsing Main Street antique shops and taking a walking tour of the historic district before tucking into a mammoth platter of crabs at St. Michaels Crab and Steak House, where as they like to say, "the only thing we overlook is the water."

FYI: Tourtalbot.org.

The Midwest: Amana Colonies, Iowa

Spread out in a loop across the fertile central Iowa countryside, the seven villages that make up the Amana Colonies were laid out in the middle of the 19th century and meant to be an ox-cart's drive apart. Today, the Colonies are a National Historic Landmark, allowing visitors a window to the religious and secular lives of early German settlers.

Driving a rental car rather than an ox-cart, I was able to see a lot over a weekend visit. In the main colony of Amana, I sampled homemade fudge at The Chocolate Haus and dandelion wine at the Grape Vine Winery, and then watched basket weaving demonstrations at the Broom and Basket Shop.

In West Amana, I traipsed around an art gallery that had formerly been the village church. In South Amana, while shopping at Fern Hill Gifts and Quilts, I discovered that it had been the town's general store when Jesse James and his gang robbed it in 1877. In Middle Amana, I discovered something else: if you want to try the breads and pastries at Hahn's Hearth Oven Bakery, you better be there by 9:00 a.m. or risk disappointment.

Best Place to stay: The Guest House Motel in Amana. Best Place to eat: The Colony Inn in Amana where bountiful breakfasts will fuel you for the day. Best times to visit: If you're into German festivals with lots of oom-pah-pah, go in May for the MaiFest or October for Oktoberfest.

FYI: Amanacolonies.com.

The Mountain West: Big Sky, Mont.

Think *A River Runs Through It* where rainbow trout practically leap onto fly fishermen's reels; pack trips through aspen-studded meadows are a daily occurrence, and more than a few High Country guides resemble a long-haired Brad Pitt.

For city-dwellers starved for the great outdoors, this is paradise. For snow bunnies, Big Sky has a ski resort whose major peak, Lone Mountain, is 11,166 feet in altitude, and whose 5,800 skiable acres on three mountains and 400 inches of annual snowfall make it a winter mecca.

Still, it's a destination for all seasons due to its proximity to Yellowstone, the nation's oldest national park. Less than an hour's drive away, the 2.2 million-acre park is a sanctuary for bears (both black and grizzly), wolves, bison, moose and elk. Like most visitors, I headed directly to Old Faithful, the most famous of Yellowstone's geysers, which erupts every hour-and-a-half, spewing out thousands of gallons of boiling water.

I staked out my spot and was rewarded for my patience, not only with the geyser's angry antics, but with the appearance of a nonchalant moose, ambling along apparently unmoved by the spectacle going on behind him.

As impressive as Old Faithful is, the park has other not-to-be missed spots such as Black Sand Basin and Emerald Pool where minerals and algae color the mud and water, giving them the look of an Impressionist painting.

Best place to stay: the 112-year-old Old Faithful Inn in Yellowstone, a National Historic Landmark.

FYI: Bigskyresort.com.

The South: Austin, Texas

Some cities just seem to have it all – history, beauty and vibrancy. Austin, the capital of the Lone Star State, is one of those. Its location in the scenic Texas Hill Country, surrounded by a chain of seven highland lakes, makes it heaven for those who love hiking, boating and fishing.

If you're a history buff like me, you will want to tour the pink granite Capitol Building (the largest state capitol in the country, with murals depicting the fall of the Alamo and the Battle of San Jacinto, which

garnered Texas its independence from Mexico); the Greek Revival-style Governor's Mansion, and the Lyndon B. Johnson Library and Museum on the campus of the University of Texas.

The former president's widow, known during her tenure as first lady for her beautification projects, has her own memorial, the Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center, showcasing more than 650 native plants. Mother Nature's abundant handiwork is also on display at the Botanical Garden in Zilker Park and Umlauf Sculpture Garden.

As for vibrancy, anyone who has been watching *Austin City Limits* for the past four decades can attest to the fact that this city is a music lover's dream. Sixth Street hasn't become one of the nation's most famous tourist destinations for nothing.

Best place to stay: The Driskell Hotel. Built in 1886 by cattle baron Jesse Driskell, it retains its Old West feel. If its columned lobby, marble floors and stained glass dome were good enough for J.R. Ewing, they're good enough for the rest of us.

Best places to hear music: The Broken Spoke ("the last of the authentic Texas dance halls and damn proud of it!"); Antone's, Austin's best blues club; any of the clubs along Sixth Street.

FYI: Austintexas.org.

The West Coast: Marina del Rey, Calif.

I love California's stunning beach communities, from the glam appeal of Santa Monica and Laguna Beach in the south to the picture postcard charm of Carmel farther north. More off-the-grid than the others, and just a 15-minute taxi ride from LAX, Marina del Rey may not be as immediately recognizable. But after a weekend (or longer), you may emulate country crooner George Strait and leave your heart here.

As the name implies, it's all about the marina: the largest man-made marina in the world, with slips for 5,000 boats. A favorite vantage point is Fisherman's Village, a replica of a New England seaport where shops and restaurants abound and where cobblestoned paths lead to the marina.

Of course, the best way to experience the marina is to get on the water, whether by kayak, canoe, water taxi, sailboat or private launch. One of my favorite experiences was a Saturday night starlight dinner/dance cruise aboard the Hornblower luxury yacht, where I marveled at the waterside buildings draped in a dazzling display of twinkling lights.

Best place to stay: Marina del Rey Hotel is a welcoming oasis with an enviable marina location and a topnotch restaurant, Salt.

FYI: visitmarinadelrey.com.