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Summer vacations: 15 unforgettable trips

Ask a travel writer "What's your favorite place?" and the standard response is likely to be: "Any place I haven't been." But as summer vacation season shifts into high gear, USA TODAY's travel staffers pick three favorite warm-weather U.S. destinations they'd love to revisit on their own time and dime.

Interactive graphic: [Trips for every taste](#)

Sandpoint, Idaho

I was smitten with this lakefront town from the moment I saw it, tucked between the Cabinet and Selkirk mountains in Idaho's Panhandle like some Northwoods Brigadoon.

I loved hearing the thwack of an old, spring-loaded wooden door at the Beyond Hope Resort on an August afternoon and a young boy's hollers as he plunged from a rope swing into sun-dappled Sand Creek. I relished my sunset tour of Lake Pend Oreille, the state's largest, followed by a solo, late-night foray to a meadow where a dazzling meteor storm punctuated the enveloping darkness. I can still taste Sandpoint's salute to summer, a frosty huckleberry daiquiri spiked with the wild (and, I'd argue, superior) cousins to Eastern blueberries.

What I remember most, though, was a fierce communal desire to keep an increasingly bright spotlight of fame from turning Sandpoint into another Telluride or Jackson Hole.

Three years after my visit, property values are soaring, and high-end, gated communities have appeared for the first time.

Downtown traffic is more tangled than ever, thanks to a stalemate on a long-proposed highway bypass.

But some things haven't changed: The first two weeks of August, the Festival at Sandpoint celebrates its 25th anniversary with musical performers that, once again, will compete with an unpaid interloper: A resident osprey who makes regular victory laps above the lakeside picnic grounds with a hard-won fish in its grasp.

Details: sandpointchamber.com

— **Laura Bly**

The Big Island of Hawaii

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My first meeting with Pele, the venerated volcano goddess on the Big Island of Hawaii, was both glorious and decidedly un-PC: Our sightseeing helicopter swooped so near her lair on the eastern rift of the Kilauea volcano that I could feel her sulfur-scented breath as we dangled above the fiery abyss.



More than 20 years later, safety and environmental concerns have nixed such close encounters with one of the world's most active volcanoes. But Pele still holds sway on Hawaii's largest island — and on me.

During one repeat visit, I followed the lead of a wispy-bearded taro farmer as we hiked through a rain forest and into a moon-like lake of crunchy lava formed by an eruption decades earlier.

Later, I watched from the rail of a passing cruise ship as Kilauea's dark flanks were punctuated by orange bruises — smooth, *pahoehoe* lava that had broken through the surface of a honeycomb of underground tubes. At land's end, barely visible through a barrage of raindrops and flashbulbs, fire met water in a burst of angry steam.

I thought of those trips, and reunions still to come, when I heard that rangers at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park had launched a public awareness program designed to help stem the flow of misguided offerings left at Kilauea's summit, from candles and crystals to a whole cooked piglet in a cardboard box. Pele, it seems, is in no danger of losing her magic — or her grip.

Details: gohawaii.com/big_island/

— **Laura Bly**

Chicago architecture

"Here is a tall bold slugger set vivid against the little soft cities," wrote Carl Sandburg in 1916's *Chicago*.

As a college student and young adult, I spent many weekends there craning my neck at Louis Sullivan and Mies van der Rohe masterpieces, set vivid against the soft Wisconsin town where I grew up. But Sandburg's words took on a whole new meaning when I gawked at a shimmering, fun-house reflection of the Chicago skyline in British artist Anish Kapoor's outdoor sculpture, *Cloud Gate*.

Better known by its physically descriptive nickname, "The Bean" is a centerpiece of Millennium Park, a 3-year-old cultural playground built above railroad tracks and parking lots just north of Grant Park in the Loop (Chicago-ese for downtown). It's joined by a Frank Gehry-designed music pavilion (think stainless steel tresses being blown askew in a lakefront breeze) and a pair of 50-foot glass towers dubbed the Crown Fountain. Forget Sandburg's "City of the Big Shoulders": This is "city of the big lips," with water spurting from the pursed puckers of human faces projected onto the towers' giant video screens.

I can only imagine what Sandburg would have thought of the city's latest architectural wonder, Santiago Calatrava's Chicago Spire. When completed in 2010, the twisting tower at the juncture of Lake Michigan and the Chicago River — said to be inspired by a column of smoke from a Native American campfire — will be North America's highest building. Tall, bold and vivid, indeed.

Details: choosechicago.com

— **Laura Bly**

Santa Fe

Travel aficionados often dismiss Santa Fe as an adobe Disneyland — a cartoon version of what the Southwest once was.

And, yes, the four-century-old, Spanish-founded capital of New Mexico can seem overly commercial at times, even contrived.

But don't let the naysayers talk you out of a visit. Sure, the picture-perfect, adobe-built downtown is clogged with turquoise-selling tourist shops. Canyon Road is a shopping mall of often iffy art (though there are a growing number of world-class galleries, too).

But that just scratches the surface of what this high-altitude outpost of 70,000 artists, writers and other creative-class exiles from mainstream America is all about.

Santa Fe, like California, is a state of mind. It's a place where being different is encouraged, where creativity is prized more than money and where you never have to wear a tie (indeed, you'll look funny if you do).

Nestled against the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, at more than 7,000 feet, it's also a place of incredible beauty, populated by people who understand that beauty and will fight to preserve it.

When I first started spending summers in Santa Fe years ago it was to see my parents, who live a short walk from the Plaza. But over the decades, I've developed a yearning for it all my own.

I'll be there soon, diving into the heaping breakfast burritos at Pasqual's; spending lazy mornings with Leo at Leo's Art Books; strolling (and raising my eyebrows, no doubt) through the latest art installations at SITE Santa Fe; and hiking up a storm.

Can't wait to get back.

Details: santafe.org

— **Gene Sloan**

Ocean City, N.J.

I must be crazy, right? No sane travel writer would admit to a flirtation with New Jersey — land of oil refineries and strip malls.

Maybe so. But more than a decade ago I married a Jersey girl and found myself heading "down the shore," as they say, to Ocean City. Egad, if I didn't fall in love a second time.

Home to one of the last great beach boardwalks in America, it's a throwback to simpler times — a fun-filled summer escape where the attractions don't get much more complicated than a ride on the 140-foot Ferris wheel.

Grab a stool at Mack & Mancos' boardwalk pizza counter, order a "cut," and you'll begin to feel the vibe. Seagulls squawking overhead, salt in the air. The wide beach of fine sand before you.

Families cruise up and down the boardwalk, lined with old-fashioned amusement rides, miniature golf courses, waterslides and arcades where you'll still find a game of Skee-Ball for 10 cents. At Gillian's Wonderland Pier, laughing children reach for the brass ring on a wood-carved Merry-go-round — just as they did a century ago.

There are no bars; alcohol is banned. The strongest drink you'll find here is fresh-squeezed Bob's lemonade

A few years ago Disney unveiled a faux boardwalk near Orlando, complete with arcade games and rent-by-the-hour surrey carts. At the time, I quizzed the designers about their inspiration. They took a field trip, they told me — to Ocean City.

Details: oceancityvacation.com

— **Gene Sloan**

Southwestern Utah

More than four million people a year head to the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and it's hard to fault them. It is, indeed, one of the grandest formations on Earth.

Still, in my book, it isn't nearly as marvelous a landscape as the brilliant red-orange spires, bridges and other mind-blowing rock formations found a hundred miles north in Utah's Bryce Canyon National Park, which draws fewer than half as many visitors.

Add the deep canyons and soaring cliffs of Zion National Park, just 85 miles to the west, plus the area between the two parks, and you have what is perhaps the West's most spectacular outdoor playground — a red-rock region ripe for hiking, biking, bouldering and a half-dozen other pursuits.

Moreover, it's all wonderfully accessible in a way the Grand Canyon is not — particularly for young, outdoorsy children. Even my youngest daughter, Mattie, 4 at the time of our last visit, could handle the prized hike up the river at Zion — where 2,000-foot cliffs loom on both sides. At Bryce, we rambled down the easily digestible trails through the massive orange "hoodoos." Contrast that with the Grand Canyon, where the classic hike to the bottom is an expedition.

Check into a park lodge (there's one each at Bryce and Zion) or the Best Westerns just outside the gates. We've done it both ways at both parks (usually paying less than \$100 a night) and it's a tossup which is best. Then pull on your hiking shoes and hit the trail.

Save a little energy, though, for the night. In most rural areas, a glance upward reveals about 2,500 stars. But this, after all, is Utah. Everything is bigger. At 8,000-foot-high Bryce Canyon, on a clear night, you'll see three times as many.

Details: scenicutah.com

— **Gene Sloan**

Texas barbecue country

As any red-blooded, iron-stomached, twitchy-nostriled food fan will tell you, barbecue is an art form, a belief system — and a vacation style. Many pilgrims begin by poking around the pulled-pork pits of the Carolinas, then wander westward to the smoke shacks of the Deep South and think their journey is complete when they sop up the sauce-drenched salons of Kansas City.

But I believe that true 'cue enlightenment cannot be achieved until one explores the lesser-known, minimalist cooking aesthetic that governs the beef-and-sausage joints of south-central Texas.

I establish a base in Austin (where Sam's Bar-B-Cue is a fave) and then fan out in a 60-mile arc where I encounter most of the superstars of the genre: Kreuz Market in Lockhart; City Market in Luling; Cooper's in Llano; Louie Mueller's and Taylor Cafe in Taylor; The Salt Lick in Driftwood; and Southside Market and Meyers' Elgin Smokehouse in Elgin.

At these places the focus is on the meat, not the side dishes or sauce. The signatures are spicy sausages, and fatty and meltingly tender beef brisket. Pit masters season the latter just with salt and black pepper and slow-cook it, usually over oak.

The brisket is then sliced and presented on butcher paper, with crackers or a slice of white bread, maybe a pickle, raw onion and some smoky pinto beans. Communal seating is the norm, which makes it simple to swap tales and soak up all that Texas-essence drifting by.

Then I waddle back to Austin for beer and music.

Details: texasbbqtrail.com

— **Jerry Shriver**

South Dakota

If I had teenagers or some other alien beings to whom I wanted to demonstrate what America feels like, I'd strap them in a convertible at Sioux Falls, S.D., and tell them to gun it along the I-90 corridor toward Rapid City. And 346 miles later, they'd know.

In this age of jet travel and GPS guidance systems, few people understand anymore just how vast this country is, or how quickly the pioneers' hearts must have sunk when they could see no trees between the horizon and the lead oxen on their wagon train.

South Dakota's flat, stark and oddly beautiful stretch of the Great Plains goes on forever and ever, amen, and to experience it either numbs you beyond belief or blows you away. When I pull off on one of the straight-as-an-arrow county roads that parallel the interstate and push my car to the max, it still seems as though I'm crawling. There's nothing quite like it.

That's the physical aspect. Southern South Dakota also gives you a feeling for American kitsch culture, Old West lore and salad bars featuring M&Ms. At Devil's Gulch outside Garretson, you can peer into a chasm that Jesse James and his horse supposedly jumped to escape a posse following a bank heist. At the drugstore in Wall you've got your 80-foot dinosaur, 6-foot jackelope and memorabilia from *Dances with Wolves*. And of course, Mount Rushmore near Keystone reminds us of times when presidential deeds were indeed monumental.

Details: travelsd.com

— **Jerry Shriver**

Mississippi Delta

You don't have to buy a \$200,000 seat on a rocket ship to glimpse a separate universe. Just head south from Memphis on Highway 61 through the Mississippi Delta.

Distinct from the rest of America and from the South itself, the Delta is a potent subculture shaped by misery and shrouded

in mystery and mythology. Its legacy of slavery and poverty tears at your soul, its blues soundtrack toughens your hide, its hospitable citizens can restore your humanity.

The 185-mile route between Tunica and Vicksburg through flat, fertile farmland can be driven in a day, but full appreciation probably takes a lifetime. My several journeys have averaged 2½ days each and they've barely allowed me to get a handle just on the food and music.

For me, the Delta gets interesting in Clarksdale, at the legendary crossroads of highways 61 and 49, where bluesman Robert Johnson is said to have knelt and sold his soul to the devil in exchange for guitar-playing prowess. I sit and reflect on that at the nearby Abe's Barbecue, where the rib sauce is spicy as hell.

From there I hit the Delta Blues Museum and drive past Stovall's Plantation (where Muddy Waters was raised) and keep heading south (I haven't brought myself to stay at the Shack Up Inn in Clarksdale, where the rooms are converted sharecropper shacks). There are gravesites to visit (I've seen two that supposedly are Johnson's and have just read about a third), oddities to explore (the Muppet memorabilia at the Jim Henson Museum in Leland is charming, Parchman Farm prison of blues lyrics fame is not), and tamales and perhaps the country's finest steaks to ingest (at Doe's Eat Place in Greenville).

Details: visitthedelta.com

— **Jerry Shriver**

Northern New Mexico

I've heard it said that northern New Mexico is a comic opera played with solemn intensity. I appreciate a little drama in my travels, so when I've had my fill of Santa Fe style, I hit the northbound back roads for continuous performances daily.

Maybe it's the confluence of Native American and Latino cultures. Or the proliferation of artists, seduced more than a century ago by the mystical quality of the light. Or the clash of the religious and the profane. But Taos and the flyspeck towns along the way are full of memorable encounters.

I usually stop in Chimayó for the savory *chile adovada* served in the terraced garden at Rancho de Chimayó. Afterward, I'll drop into one of the intergenerational weaving shops to see designs with the dazzle of a New Mexican sunset.

True believers (and doubters, too) make the pilgrimage to El Santuario de Chimayó, where the dirt is revered for its healing powers. Years ago, the priest declined to tell me whether he believed in those powers. What matters, he said, is that thousands of miracle seekers *do*.

The road winds through Truchas, a rickety town teetering on the edge of a spectacular canyon, where most every inhabitant, it seems, swears he or she appeared in *The Milagro Beanfield War*, filmed there in 1987.

In Taos, I drop by La Fonda de Taos hotel, whose late owner procured nine naughty paintings ("Banned in Britain!" the sign reads) by author D.H. Lawrence.

Former night desk clerk Johnny Chapman, who would detach himself from his oxygen tank only to light up a Winston 100, boasted that "people from all over the United States, parts of Arkansas and the rest of the world" came to see the works of art. Chapman is gone, but the banned paintings still reside at La Fonda.

They're not great. But the company is good.

Details: newmexico.org

— **Jayne Clark**

Navajo and Hopi lands, Arizona

You don't need a passport to experience the foreign. Northern Arizona's Indian country is striking in its exoticism, stunning in its rawness and dizzying in its vastness.

The empty straightaways streaking toward the twisted red buttes and soaring mesas tempt you to press on the accelerator. But there's no need to hurry in Indian country. For years, I've been poking around the three mesas that comprise the tiny Hopi reservation, along with pieces of the 27,000-square-mile Navajo reservation that surrounds it, and little seems to change.

That's for better *and* worse. Poverty and the ills it feeds abound. But so does cultural richness in a land where ages-old

tradition is daily routine. The landscape is dotted with hogans, traditional dwellings still preferred by some Navajos. Older women still wear the long, full velvety skirts favored by their mothers. At historic emporiums such as Hubbell Trading Post in Ganado, silversmiths and weavers still come bearing goods for the trader.

And while Jamestown, Va., may be hogging the spotlight this year with its 400th birthday, it's a mere toddler compared with some Hopi villages, such as Old Oraibi on Hopi's Third Mesa, which claims continuous habitation since the 1100s.

At Canyon de Chelly (pronounced Shay), a 1,310-square-mile national monument that lacks the breadth of the Grand Canyon but rivals its red-rock beauty, you can horseback-ride at breakneck speed amid ancient cliff dwellings. On the canyon's rim, craftspeople peddle ghost-bead necklaces, pit-fired pots and inlaid silver bracelets and talk about life on the "rez."

It's not a living-history demonstration. It's just life.

Details: arizonaguide.com

— **Jayne Clark**

Virginia's Crooked Road

"It's just like steppin' on termites," said Chickie Renfro, a pistol of a 73-year-old, as she demonstrated the machine-gun-fire art of flat-foot dancing.

We'd stepped outside the 847-seat theater at the Carter Family Fold in Hiltons, where Renfro was giving me an unsolicited lesson in the local dance craze, which is generations old. It was a warm summer Saturday night and progeny of the legendary Carters (A.P., Sara and Maybelle), whose 1927 recordings sparked the commercial country music industry, were presiding over the weekly bluegrass show.

The Carter homestead is just one venue on the Crooked Road, a 253-mile route that showcases southwest Virginia's rich music traditions. On summer Friday nights in the one-stoplight town of Floyd, the weekly jamboree at the country store attracts its usual mix of young and old, rural and urban, graceful and not. Elsewhere along the route, rhythmic doings play out in dozens of spots from a state-of-the-art theater to one-chair barber shops. And each exudes the sort of uninhibited jubilation that you just don't see often anymore.

This summer, I'm heading back down that crooked road and I'll look for Chickie Renfro on Saturday night in Hiltons. I hope we meet on the dance floor to stomp some termites.

Details: thecrookedroad.org

— **Jayne Clark**

Pawleys Island, S.C.

Even before unloading the car at our Pawleys Island oceanfront rental, I had a routine.

Slip off shoes. Run barefoot through the tall sea oats and across the dunes. Dip toes into the Atlantic. The footwear might not go back on for two weeks, save for a trip to the store or a night out for the catch-of-the-day at a fish restaurant in nearby Murrells Inlet.

I've been to many beaches, but something about this secluded 4-mile stretch of sand about 25 miles south of overdeveloped Myrtle Beach soothes my soul. Driving over the little causeways that connect Pawleys to the mainland is like disconnecting from the world.

It's the only place in my adulthood where this peripatetic, workaholic type A can recall slipping into sloth mode for days on end.

Maybe it's Pawleys' carefully nurtured unpretentiousness. There are no gas stations, T-shirt shops, grand resorts — only a few hundred houses that owners often rent out, the screen-porched Sea View Inn and the intimate Evans Pelican Inn.

Though Southern gentry (including Al Gore) have discreetly vacationed here since the 18th century, when rice planters fled to the sea to escape the sweltering heat, McMansions are rare and the simply furnished wooden beach house is a badge of honor. The island's slogan — "Arrogantly Shabby" — says it all.

Here, I did virtually nothing. Not even check the clock. I walked or jogged the beach, which can be virtually deserted.

I took a book to read in the omnipresent locally made rope hammocks. But inevitably I put it down, lazily swung and blissfully snoozed.

Details: townofpawleysisland.com

— **Kitty Bean Yancey**

Prince William Sound, Alaska

What an adrenaline rush to feel a 34-pound halibut on the line, plunging and tugging until you think your arm will fall off!

Or marveling at hundreds of spawning, silver-scaled salmon fighting to make their way upstream, back to their birthplaces — flipping desperately at your feet or being scooped up by fat bears lying in wait in bushes by the waterside.

Or trying to keep a foothold on a slippery glacier in the middle of summer, hearing the boom! as mounds of ice fall into the sound below (called "calving") and kayaking in frigid waters where seals and otters pop up to peek at visitors.

I have been on a big-ship Alaska cruise where passengers gasped from afar at the wonders of Glacier Bay and we tried our skills at ice-walking on a carefully choreographed excursion.

But it was nothing like sailing for a week on Whittier, Alaska-based Discovery, a six-cabin, 65-foot motor yacht with Alaska-based captain/naturalist Dean Rand, plus guides who know every nook and cranny of Prince William Sound and took us to some secret spots.

You can take a day cruise on larger ships, such as those run by Cruise West, but on a smaller boat you disembark frequently to kayak and hike. At night you anchor in secluded coves. And if you're lucky, after a meal of that halibut you caught, a glimpse of the aurora borealis makes an unforgettable dessert.

Details: discoveryvoyages.com

— **Kitty Bean Yancey**

Santa Ynez Valley, Calif.

I grew up on Westerns, envying Calamity Jane and Annie Oakley; after all, isn't it in Americans' pioneer genes to conquer wide open spaces on horseback?

Cowgirl Boot Camp at California's Alisal Guest Ranch & Resort let me live that dream a few years back.

The boot camp, so popular that it has been expanded to six times a year, plays out against a magnificent backdrop.

The Santa Ynez Valley is a region of rolling hills and vineyards made famous by the 2004 film *Sideways*. It's home to ranches, including Michael Jackson's Neverland and late president Ronald Reagan's former spread.

For a weekend, 18 city and suburban women gathered here to learn to saddle and bridle Alisal's generally docile mounts, ride 10,000 acres of trails, fly-fish and even wield a lasso.

I was disappointed when the targets turned out to be sawhorses with fake steer heads. Just as well: I couldn't even master the art of tossing my loop a few feet from my cowboy-hatted head.

The seen-it-all real cowgirls putting us through our paces have been riding since they were kids, have castrated calves, fought to be taken seriously by male cowpokes and sustained serious injuries while barrel racing or training skittish colts. I could see them roll their eyes when we city slickers complained about bruised pinkies and saddle sores.

But over margaritas and line dancing, we melded over tales of home, kids and love gone wrong, the kind of impromptu bonding that makes a vacation with a group of strangers forever memorable.

Details: alisal.com

— **Kitty Bean Yancey**

What's your go-to warm weather spot? Share your favorite summer destinations below.

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