

10 Small Towns to Visit Now

As you approach Valentine from Marfa, you'll find a tribute to the movie *Giant* on US 90, featuring large cutouts of stars Rock Hudson, James Dean, and Elizabeth Taylor.



From old favorites to new offerings, these towns feature hidden gems worthy of a trip

Our annual list of buzzworthy small towns—defined here as towns with populations under 20,000—includes a burgeoning bedroom community, an underrated coastal treasure, and a Hill Country artists’ haven. With recommendations for where to stay and what to eat in each of the 10 standouts, all that separates you from your next getaway is a full tank of gas.




Bastrop

POP. 9,242



Naseem's Downtown Lofts
Starts at \$189/night.
airbnb.com/
rooms/29133919



Store House Market and Eatery
813 Main St.
512-412-6114;
storehousebastrop.com

Ten years ago, Bastrop was a town of 7,000 best known for its forest of loblolly pines that offered a refuge for nature lovers. While the Lost Pines still attract outdoor enthusiasts, the hamlet just east of Austin has more recently become a retreat for artists, writers, and farmers—and those fleeing the city in search of a more affordable life.

Between 2010 and '19, Bastrop's population grew 25%. Tech executives and Hollywood actors are certainly part of that growth (*Shazam* star Zachary Levi is building a film production studio just outside of town), but it's the lower-profile residents who are facilitating the biggest revitalization efforts.

Last year—thanks to \$2 million from the local Main Street Rehabilitation Project—the city widened the thoroughfare's sidewalks and repaved the street, and shop owners restored the wrought iron balconies and brick storefronts. The face-lift added extra sheen to downtown's new businesses, like

the cozy Painted Porch bookshop, owned by nonfiction author Ryan Holiday, and its next-door neighbor, Astro Record Store.

An afternoon of shopping requires sustenance. Nearby, Store House Market and Eatery serves gin cocktails and seasonal farm fresh items like crispy sweet potato croquettes in a renovated former bordello. The restaurant's owners, Sonya Cote and David Barrow, also own nearby Eden East Farm, not only guaranteeing fresh produce for Store House but also providing a quality farmers market open on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

If you'd rather play farmer yourself, Barton Hills Farm, 8 miles from downtown, offers seasonal events, from pick-your-own flowers and strawberries in the spring to a harvest festival in the fall, complete with a corn maze and petting zoo.

All these simple yet carefully tended pleasures make it easy to find yourself again among the Lost Pines. —Clayton Maxwell

Photos: Tiffany Hofeldt (above); Dave Shafer (right)



Gun Barrel City

POP. 6,084

When you look at a map of Gun Barrel City, the eastern boundary looks like a long gun barrel, which is how the town got its unconventional name and accompanying motto: "We shoot straight with you." But if you're expecting to find a town befitting a spaghetti Western, it's best to look elsewhere.

"Everybody wants to assume we have an old lawless history," Mayor David Skains says. Instead, the town's highlight is Cedar Creek Lake, the fourth largest lake in Texas. With about 320 miles of shoreline, visitors can enjoy swimming in the coves and fishing for largemouth bass, flathead catfish, and crappie.

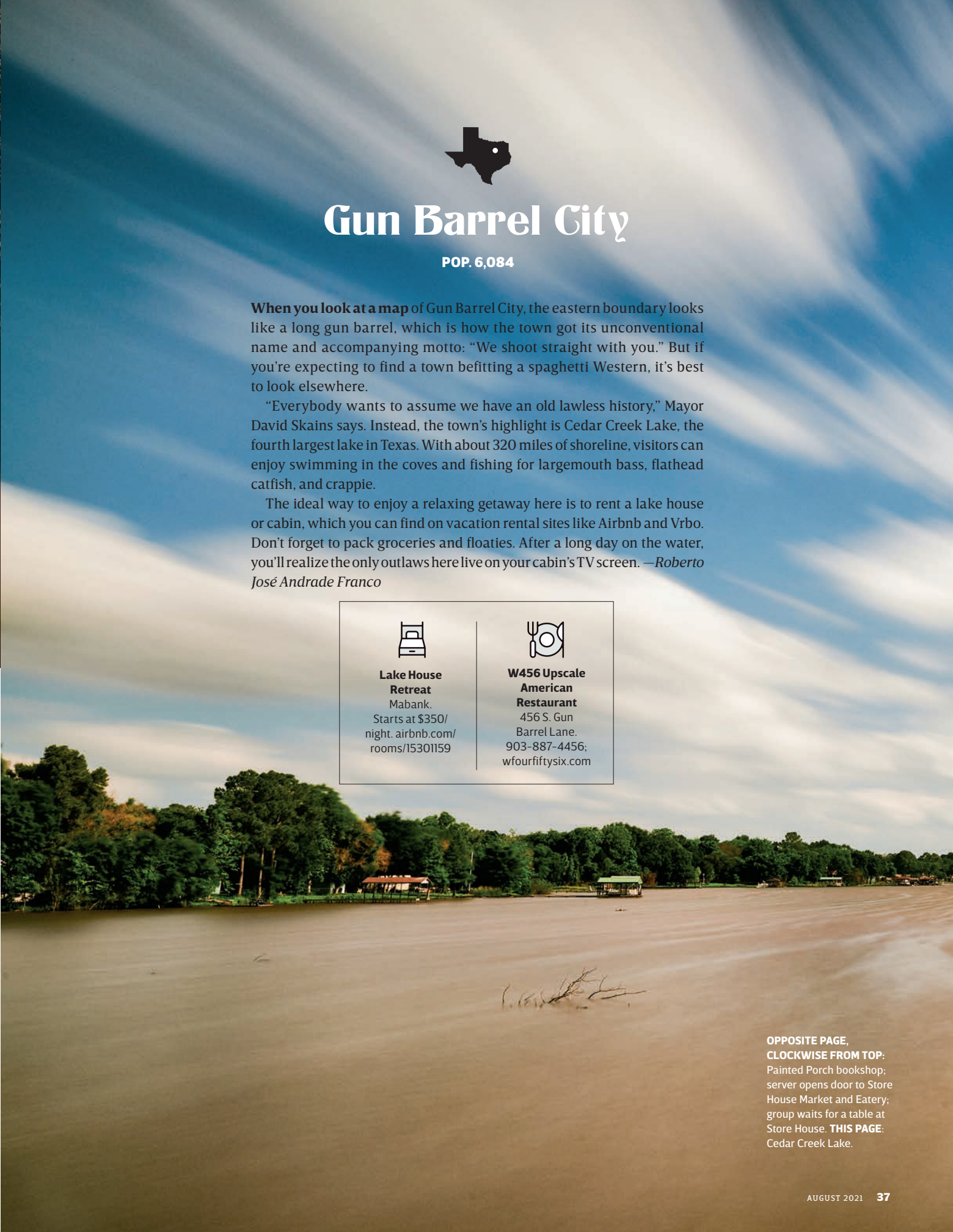
The ideal way to enjoy a relaxing getaway here is to rent a lake house or cabin, which you can find on vacation rental sites like Airbnb and Vrbo. Don't forget to pack groceries and floaties. After a long day on the water, you'll realize the only outlaws here live on your cabin's TV screen. —Roberto José Andrade Franco



Lake House Retreat
Mabank.
Starts at \$350/
night. airbnb.com/
rooms/15301159



W456 Upscale American Restaurant
456 S. Gun Barrel Lane.
903-887-4456;
wfourfiftysix.com



OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Painted Porch bookshop; server opens door to Store House Market and Eatery; group waits for a table at Store House. THIS PAGE: Cedar Creek Lake.



Roma

POP. 11,490



La Borde House
Starts at \$80/night.
601 E. Main St., Rio Grande City.
labordehouse.com



El Mexicano
2695 E. Grant St.
956-849-4275

If you feel like you're standing on a movie set amid the sandstone dwellings of Roma's historic plaza, that's because you are. In the 1952 film *Viva Zapata!*, Marlon Brando swaggers among the balconied buildings that once housed Roma's founding families, many of whose descendants still live in town. Just walking its dusty streets transports you to another era in the life of the history-rich border town.

A plaque-guided walking tour of the plaza details Roma's integral role in settling South Texas. Roma was the last trading port for 19th-century steamboats that traveled the Rio Grande. The church steeple that presides over the square was built by Father Keralum, a French Catholic missionary priest and architect who rode horseback throughout the Rio Grande

Valley in the mid-1800s.

JC Ramirez, a Western-wear shop that opened in 1848 near the plaza, links past and present Roma. Owners Noel and Cecilia Benavides, descendants of the families who settled this area in the 1700s, serve as amiable unofficial town historians. Shoppers can pick up some new Wranglers, catch up on local news, and hear a tale of the town's past.

The nearby Roma Bluffs World Birding Center, an observatory overlooking the Rio Grande, offers an expansive view of the river and the Mexican town of Miguel Alemán across the border. With more than 500 winged species flying along this clear and wide stretch of river, a plaque confirms: "You are standing in one of the greatest birding spots in North America." —*CM*



Canton

POP. 3,805

The red and yellow sign proclaiming "World Famous Hamburgers" illuminates a stretch of Interstate 20 in Canton, acting as a siren song for famished travelers. It isn't a McDonald's; it's Dairy Palace, a 24-hour local institution that's been in operation since 1984. And while it may not count "billions served" or boast international locations, the diner does have a fandom that spans the globe.

"Our burgers are eaten by everybody," manager Terry Hipp explains. "We pretty much have missionaries who go all over the world." Customers eagerly send in photos of themselves posing with Dairy Palace bumper stickers in locales like Guatemala, Canada, and Iraq. Who wouldn't be a fan of a restaurant that offers an elk burger, a stack of pancakes, and a chalupa?

Canton, located an hour east of Dallas, isn't just world famous for its burgers: First Monday, one of the world's largest public flea markets, covers 400 acres. Anything from furniture to crafts to edible goods can be purchased there. Other attractions include the historic Main Street and the country fair and rodeo in late March and early April.

Strike up a conversation with a local—at a flea market booth or over sweet tea at Dairy Palace—and ask about the origins of the county's nickname: The Free State of Van Zandt. Some say it dates to 1861, when hundreds of residents protested the state's secession. They argued that if Texas could leave the union, then Van Zandt County could leave Texas. —*RJAF*

OPPOSITE PAGE,
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

LEFT: Noel and Cecilia Benavides own JC Ramirez in Roma; Roma Bluffs World Birding Center; mural memorializes priests who rode their horses to visit missions bordering the Lower Rio Grande; Our Lady of Refuge Catholic Church's steeple peeks out among the palms; the historic plaza. THIS PAGE: First Monday Flea Market in Canton.



Mill Creek Ranch Resort
Starts at \$145/night.
1880 N. Trade Days Blvd. 877-927-3439;
millcreek ranchresort.com



Dairy Palace
2301 N. Trade Days Blvd.
903-567-6551;
dairypalace.com



Valentine

POP. 67



Love Shaks

Starts at \$35/night.
airbnb.com/
rooms/12106256



The Water Stop

1300 W.
San Antonio
St., Marfa.
432-386-8164

Within the tourist triad of Big Bend, Marfa, and Fort Davis, Valentine's always been a bit lost somewhere to the west. It's primarily known as the location of the Prada Marfa art installation and a place to get a romantic letter postmarked on Feb. 14.

But the town's profile is rising. Valentine's vacant houses, commercial buildings, and handful of adobe structures are primed for revitalization. "Abandoned properties are seeing new life, being improved, spruced up, and lived in," City Council member Laurel Keenan-Coniglio says.

Clara Bensen, a writer who moved to the area in 2018, purchased two buildings

and plans to turn them into Valentine Bar and Hiway Café. While there are no official opening dates yet, the signs of life have the region buzzing.

Currently, Valentine's in Valentine—an annual party on Feb. 14 with live music, drinks, and food trucks held at the Valentine Mercantile—is still the town's tourist lifeblood. Some locals prefer that visitors stick to their hip neighbor, Marfa, which offers lodging, restaurants, and many artistic diversions.

"[Valentine] is still completely renegade, and folks generally seem to want to keep it that way," Bensen says. —Joe Nick Patoski



THIS PAGE: Stay in Love Shaks' vintage campers in Valentine. **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** raspberry chipotle and peppered turkey sandwich from On the Square Bakery and Deli; Cindy Gonzalez of The Burrito Lady restaurant; Austin band Pike & Sutton at Green Apple Art Center in Eden; mural by Calina Mishay Johnson; Zane Blackwell of Blackwell Custom Knives.



Eden

POP. 1,899



Peach Tree Guest Haus

Starts at \$119/night.
325-456-2216;
edentexas.com/
peach-tree-guest-
haus



On the Square Bakery and Deli

208 Jackson St.
325-763-8073;
facebook.com/
onthesquarebakery
anddeli

This biblically named town is heaven for music fans. Each year, 10 or so touring musicians stop at the Green Apple Art Center to play intimate shows.

Nine years ago, rancher Craig Pfluger repurposed the old mohair processing factory and two contiguous buildings to create a "listening room" with indoor and outdoor stages. The all-volunteer nonprofit space gives those who visit—including Texas musicians like Charley Crockett and Joe Ely—a taste of the bucolic life the West Central Texas town is known for. After a show earlier this year, Austin guitarist Jackie Venson was introduced to the kid goats on Pfluger's ranch. "You can't experience Eden without some livestock and wildlife," Pfluger says.

Agriculture has historically been Eden's main industry, but the town also caters to meat-lovers: Local shop Venison World specializes in wild game. Residents' enthusiasm for their one-of-a-kind concert experience proves no matter where you live, what your profession is, or what your diet consists of, live music is part of the fabric of life in Texas. —JNP



Port Isabel

POP. 6,292



Queen Isabel Inn
Starts at
\$125/night.
300 S. Garcia St.
956-943-1468;
queenisabelinn.com



**Joe's Oyster Bar
and Gulf Seafood
Market**
207 E. Maxan St.
956-943-4501;
gulfseafoodmarket.com

Every year, hundreds of thousands of beachgoers headed to South Padre zip through Port Isabel, the last mainland town before crossing the causeway onto the island. They don't know what they're missing.

The town is an authentic port with a shrimp fleet, fishing adventures, and a rich, colorful history. Its heart, the lighthouse overlooking the Lower Laguna Madre and the channel to the Gulf of Mexico, is a Texas icon.

Across from the lighthouse, Port Isabel's main strip includes the South Padre

Island Dolphin Research & Sea Life Nature Center, which features hands-on exhibits and dolphin tours. Around the corner, you'll find the Queen Isabella State Fishing Pier; a docked pirate ship; and charters for fishing and dolphin and osprey watching.

The town's location at the southern end of the Laguna Madre near the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico further distinguishes it from other coastal cities. "It's the water, man," says Port Isabel native and fishing guide Fulgencio Buitureira. "You're in paradise here." —JNP

Photos: Tom McCarthy Jr. (above); Tiffany Hofeldt (right)



Prairie View

POP. 6,678

Like many small college towns, Prairie View is sleepy. Residents go to neighboring towns to buy groceries, lodge guests, or use a bank. But it's slowly waking up with roadway improvements, planned historical markers at Wyatt Chapel and Hope African Methodist Episcopal, and a history museum in the works at the historically Black college Prairie View A&M University.

Frank Jackson, who served as the city's mayor for 14 years and is now the assistant vice chancellor for state relations at PVAMU, welcomes the changes. "We're like other historically Black college towns in the South like Grambling [in Louisiana] and Tuskegee [in Alabama]," he says. "There's a lot here. We just haven't told our story. Here's where Texas' second oldest university sprang out of a plantation."

The town, 50 miles northwest of Houston, is home to another impressive superlative: one of the largest cricket sport complexes in the United States, the Prairie View Cricket Center. You can also find crickets—and bees and butterflies—enjoying the expansive John Fairey Gardens, just 8 miles away in Hempstead. The education and conservation garden features 3,000 plants from Texas, Asia, and Mexico.

Be sure to stop by the nursery to pick up a plant—some of which are propagated from the garden's collections—to take a piece of this growing region home with you. —JNP



The Boho Cottage
Waller. Starts
at \$100/night.
airbnb.com/
rooms/47495833



Hedgehog Grill
40100 US 290
Business, Waller.
936-372-5777;
hedgehoggrill.com

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Port Isabel Lighthouse; Joe Castillo, owner of Joe's Oyster Bar and Gulf Seafood Market; Fulgencio Buitureira. **THIS PAGE:** The creek at John Fairey Gardens.

THIS PAGE: Trey HELLINGER is a craftsman at the Fenoglio Boot Company, one of Nocona's famous leathercraft businesses.

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Castroville Visitors Center is representative of the town's Alsatian architecture; sunflowers in the fields of Castroville; Magnolia Filling Station; Castroville resident Tex Ledyard shops for cowhide rugs.



There's a stretch of Nocona that makes you feel like you're in 1960s Detroit. The exterior of the Horton Classic Car Museum features painted midcentury-style signage, while rows of candy-color classic cars line the interior. You might forget for a minute that you're actually in 2021, just 8 miles from the Oklahoma border.

The private collection of Nocona natives Pete and Barbara Horton includes about 120 cars, the oldest a 1931 red convertible Packard Phaeton with a pearl-color interior. Any hot-rod lover or aesthete can spend hours checking out the vehicles, buffed to such a shine you can see your reflection on them.

The museum hearkens to the industrial history of the Red River-adjacent town. It's known for producing a wide range of leather products, including cowboy boots, whips, saddles, and baseball gloves.

The Old Boot Factory has become a shopping destination, but you can still see local craftsmanship at work at the last baseball glove factory in the country. Less than a five-minute drive from the car museum, the Nokona American Ballgloves factory offers tours Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The tour covers the company's origin story, how its gloves have evolved over the decades, and the meticulous work that goes into them. —RJA



Nocona

POP. 2,960



Red River Station Inn
Starts at \$95/night.
219 Clay St.
940-825-3107;
redriverstationinn.com



Fenoglio's BBQ
510 W. US 82.
940-825-3843;
fenogliobbq.com



Castroville

POP. 3,009



The Hillside Boutique Hotel
Starts at \$234/night.
1651 US 90 W.
830-538-3200;
hillside-texas.com



Luigi's
1403 Angelo St.
830-444-0462;
facebook.com/
luigicastroville

With red poppies blooming in spring, European-style cottages, and more historical markers than stop signs, this quaint town is just as mellow and picturesque as the slow-moving Medina River that flows through it.

Castroville—named for founder Henri Castro, who settled the town in 1844 after immigrating from the Alsatian region of France—is just 25 miles from San Antonio.

The Old World charms are best experienced with a walking tour through the Alsatian dwellings of the historic district—paper guides are available at the Landmark Inn, a small museum where the staff is well-versed in local lore. Pit stops at the Magnolia Filling Station and its nearby cousin restaurant, Paris Street Po'Boys, fuel the walk with good coffee and authentic Louisiana po'boys, respectively.

The freshly renovated Hillside Boutique Hotel, west of town, is a designer getaway with a spa and top-notch restaurant. It's an ideal locale for admiring the Medina River Valley that surrounds Castroville, particularly while lounging by the luxurious pool.

New additions bring a fresh, more upscale flair to the town, but Castroville is still all about its European roots, which you can experience this October at the Alsatian Festival. —CM

Photos: Dave Shafer (left); Tiffany Hofeldt (above)