

MATERIAL WEALTH

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OCTOBER 2012

SMALL TOWNS EXUDE
BIG CHARM

Pg. 20

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IT
TAKES
A
VILLAGE



AS THE MASSES FLOCK
TO CITIES, WE REVEL IN
THE AMERICANA ROOTS
OF SMALL TOWN, USA

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
SAM POLCER



STAUNTON, VA

YOU MIGHT GET THE IMPRESSION that you've arrived in the most quintessentially American town when you come to this culturally rich and impossibly charming hamlet nestled in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley. It's the architecture that hits you at first—some of it dates back to the 18th century and earned the town a Great American Main Street award (Virginia's first) from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The sense of history is palpable, and rightfully so: Originally named Augusta Courthouse, Staunton (pronounced STAN-ton) had the westernmost courthouse in British North America prior to the American Revolution, and unlike other small towns in the area, Staunton escaped the Civil War unscathed.

After the war, thanks to its prime location along the railroad, business boomed. "Staunton was covered with mills at that time—it was the breadbasket of the South in the 19th century," says Frank Strassler, executive director of the Historic

Staunton Foundation, which played a key role in saving many of the town's gems from destruction during the 1970s. A stroll through Staunton's five historic districts reveals a veritable catalog of American architectural styles; it's the kind of place where every nook and cranny has a story. Cranberry's Grocery & Eatery, for example, is housed in an 18th century building with a brick exterior slapped on during the

"GO TO AN OLD-FASHIONED HOOTENANNY. BRING YOUR INSTRUMENTS, SING ALONG OR STOMP YOUR FEET."

Victorian era, and has been a clothing store, New York deli, tailor's shop, taxi garage, Chinese laundry and general mercantile. These days, it's a sweet spot for a breakfast of locally-made granola.

Indeed, as impressive as the façades of main street truly are, it's when you actually step inside these immaculately preserved buildings that the town really comes to life. There are world-class attractions like The Blackfriars Playhouse, for instance, the

world's only re-creation of Shakespeare's legendary indoor theater, complete with chandeliers and wall sconces, and the Camera Heritage Museum, a photo nerd's paradise. Art galleries (The Michael B. Tusing Gallery, for a delightfully eclectic assortment of paintings, sculptures and home furnishings by mid-Atlantic regional artists), shops (Sunsports Studios & Glass Blowing, for live glass blowing demonstrations) and restaurants (Zynodoa, for the goat cheese tartlet) abound, leaving you with the impression that Staunton, population 23,746, is much bigger than it actually is. In fact, there's so much going on along and around Beverley Street that you might even miss the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and Museum just up the hill. One thing you should not miss is the Wednesday night ritual at Marino's Lunch Spot—they host weekly, good old-fashioned bluegrass hootenannies. Everyone's welcome to bring their instruments, sing along and stomp their feet. It doesn't get much more American than that.

● 108 miles from Richmond

KENNETT SQUARE, PENN



LONG A CONVENIENT GETAWAY FOR PHILADELPHIANS, this historic town three miles west of the world-famous Longwood Gardens has seen an influx of gourmet restaurants and fashion boutiques in recent years, but hasn't lost any of the small town charm and friendliness that put it on the map. There's a barbershop, a clock tower, an Outdoor Winter Market and an annual Candlelight Holiday Home Tour. To cap it off, there's also a shop devoted to mushrooms, which isn't as random as it sounds: Kennett Square, pop. 5,273, is the self-proclaimed Mushroom Capital of the World and is responsible for 37 percent of the country's mushroom crops.

● 30 miles from Philadelphia

ST. GENEVIEVE, MO



SOME OF AMERICA'S BEST SMALL TOWNS PRE-DATE America—take this exquisite former French farming community, which has more historic charm than a Norman Rockwell painting. Narrow streets and fenced gardens surround magnificently preserved houses and storefronts built in the French Colonial style, though thanks to the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the streetscape is anything but homogenous: the American entrepreneurs and German immigrants who moved here in the 19th century also left their marks architecturally. But the French living hasn't stayed in the past—the area is now home to no fewer than nine wineries, many of which offer tastings. Santé!

● 76 miles from St. Louis, MO

SAUGATUCK, MI



CITY FOLK HAVE BEEN COMING TO THIS FORMER logging village located where the Kalamazoo River meets Lake Michigan for summer vacations since the late 19th century, right around the time a group of Chicago artists founded a summer art colony. These days the Saugatuck area is known as the "Art Coast of Michigan," and continues to attract its share of visitors: With nary a big box store in sight, this quiet lake town exudes timeless charm. With family-owned inns, a paddle-wheel boat, historic churches and a complete lack of pretension, "quaint" doesn't quite do it justice. Grab a spot on the deck of the Mermaid Bar & Grill and watch the sunset over the sailboats.

● 140 miles from Chicago

ROCKLAND, ME

A PERFECT DAY IN ROCKLAND, ME starts early. Like, before dawn early. If you're in the self-proclaimed "lobster capital of the world," the correct thing to do is get up when it's still dark, go down to the waterfront and watch the lobstermen head to their boats to check their traps out in Owls Head Bay. While the sun peeks over the horizon, the quiet is pierced by the shrieking of seagulls. Here lies an authentic, working waterfront juxtaposed with a thriving tourist industry—a rare sight. Sitting on the dock watching the remnants of a bygone culture, this is a sunrise completely worth waking up for.

The lobstermen aren't the only ones up at that hour—on Main Street at the decades-old local favorite Rockland Café, the fishcake benedict brought to you by a waitress who calls everyone "dear" (or, because this is Maine, which is notorious for heavy drawls, "deeya") and the dish a "benny," is the next obvious step. From there, you could take a brief break from

seafood and check out one of many shops selling Maine-made products, such as Trilliam Soaps, which is worth a visit if only for the scented trail that follows you once you leave the store. You could visit the Farnsworth Art Museum for its stellar collection of American masters, including works by Andrew, N.C. and Jamie Wyeth. Eventually, you might swing by the lively Rock City Café for a cup of their organic

"WHILE THE SUN PEEKS OVER THE HORIZON, THE QUIET IS PIERCED BY THE SHRIEKING OF SEAGULLS."

breakwater blend and to flip through books by local authors at Hello Hello, the bookstore hidden in back.

Dinner at Rockland's secret weapon, the world-class and Anthony Bourdain-approved Conte's 1894, where the lovably brusque waitstaff and heaping plates of seafood pasta—or whatever the staff tells you to eat—is a truly unique experience, and pairs well with an indie film or live performance at the Strand Theatre, an

immaculately restored 1923 movie house. Before all that, though, don't let your lobster appreciation be confined to your time in Rockland; a visit to Jess's Market is in order. There, the catch is about as fresh as you can get it, and they'll pack and ship live crustaceans for the most delicious souvenirs.

However you end up spending your time there, you'll leave with the impression that Rockland wears its special kind of salty authenticity with ease—you might even walk away with a touch of seaside swagger. Thankfully, it doesn't look like the town's changing anytime

soon. "They sold 30,000 friggin' pounds at the festival this year," says one Mainer over beers at the airy Trackside Station. He's referring to the Maine Lobster Festival, which brings tourists in droves every year. "The industry ain't goin' anywhere." He pauses, before adding: "And we have the largest lobster trap Christmas tree in the world."

This should come as no surprise.

● 77 miles from Portland, ME

MADISONVILLE, LA



FIRST NAMED COQUILLE BY FRENCH SETTLERS because of the area's seashells, the highlight of this tiny town (pop: 748) north of Lake Pontchartrain along the banks of the deep Tchoufoune River is, unsurprisingly, its riverfront. Visitors go there for events like this month's Wooden Boat Festival, which draws upwards of 30,000, to learn about canoes, pirogues, bateaux and steamboats at the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Maritime Museum; to picnic under the huge oak trees at Fairview-Riverside State Park; or simply, and perhaps most pleasurably, to stuff themselves silly with locally caught crustaceans at casual seafood joints like Morton's Seafood Restaurant and Bar.

● 40 miles from New Orleans

TILGHMAN ISLAND, MD



AS FAR AS SMALL FISHING TOWNS GO, THIS three-square-mile island jutting out into Chesapeake Bay is about as salty as it gets. There are a few authentic skipjacks—part of the last commercial sailing fleet in North America—as well as crabbing boats in the harbor, waterfront oystermen's shacks and a nautical bookstore. During the summer, the island, which is home to about 795 residents, is a relaxing getaway with fishing, sailing and wildlife-spotting opportunities—but even in winter, the hot buttered rum, roaring fireplaces and Chesapeake Bay seafood at places like the Tilghman Island Inn complement a misty maritime romance.

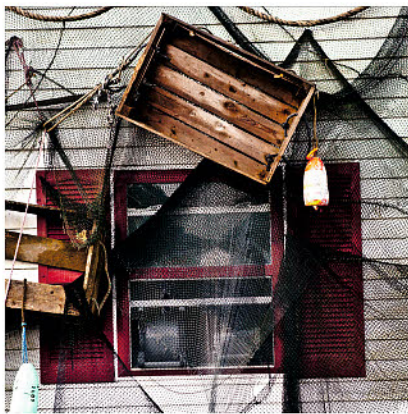
● 83 miles from Baltimore

FORT BRAGG, CA



SOME OF THE ROUGH EDGES HAVE BEEN smoothed over at Fort Bragg, which boasts a few establishments a longshoreman wouldn't be caught dead in, like shops named "Splendiferous" or "Pippi's Longstockings"—but make no mistake, it still retains all the rugged beauty you'd expect from a former logging town-turned-fishing port. And with the three-year ban on salmon harvesting lifted, things are looking good for this community of 7,250. Visitors can stop along Route 1 for a pint at the North Coast Brewing Company, or for the catch of the day at Silver's at the Wharf in Noyo Harbor, looking out over moored fishing boats and basking sea lions.

● 163 miles from San Francisco



ESTES PARK, CO

PART ASPEN, PART CARBONDALE, PART Black Hawk, this outpost somehow manages to be the kind of place where an old-fashioned taffy shop next door to a shop selling rocks out of an authentic "ore cart" looks right at home down the street from a fly fishing outfitter. But then again, when your town is surrounded on three sides by federally protected land and is the gateway to a 415-square-mile national park, no amount of rubber tomahawk souvenirs and soft-serve ice cream shops can change the fact that there are, as locals will tell you, "more elk than mice."

The environment, as with any first-rate adventure town, has always been the draw. Estes Park was named in 1864 by William Byers, then editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*, after being hosted by Kentucky-born gold miner Joel Estes, who himself moved there, along with his wife and 13 children, after an expedition six years earlier.

Cattle and fishing were the main industries for a time, but it was when F.O. Stanley arrived, seeking a cure for tuberculosis, that

things really took off. The wealthy co-inventor of the Stanley Steamer automobile was so rejuvenated by the area that he recognized its potential as a luxury resort and spent half a million dollars to build The Stanley Hotel (which, much later, served as the inspiration for The Overlook Hotel in Stephen King's *The Shining*). The ensuing publicity created a boom in tourism, with Stanley running bus trips up the Big Thompson Canyon.

"A LOT OF US CALL IT ESTES PARK VILLAGE, BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT IT FEELS LIKE."

These days, while many Colorado towns have surpassed Estes Park as luxury destinations, the hotel remains the place to stay.

While the first outdoor adventurers to come were rugged dude ranchers, over the years they've been joined by all manner of hikers, bikers, climbers, snowshoers and, increasingly, fly fishermen. The reason? Rocky Mountain National Park, where hundreds of miles of trails, more alpine tundra than any other national park, as well

as meadows, waterfalls, glaciers, peaks and rivers "allow people to dial up whatever level of adventure they want," park ranger Kathy Brown says. "They can go from very mild to very extreme." Needless to say, adventure outfitters, climbing schools, gear shops and tour guides have had no problem stepping in and getting people outdoors.

But then, of course, there's all that taffy and ice cream, as well as down-home spots like the Big Horn Restaurant piling on hearty breakfasts under taxidermed animals and fine dining joints like Mama Rose's serving up exquisite Italian fare. There's even a go-kart track. Somehow, amidst all this ruggedness,

Estes Park has remained about as family friendly as it gets thanks to that most-prized of small town attributes: a tight-knit community.

"A lot of us call it Estes Park Village," Brown says, "because that's what it feels like. At some resort towns, there really isn't a community underneath the veneer. But this one, when you scratch it ... you'll find that people take care of each other."

● **66 miles from Denver**

ISLAMORADA, FL



KNOWN AS A "VILLAGE OF ISLANDS"—SIX, TO BE exact—it's no surprise that this town of 6,119 attracts its share of visitors who come for an impressive array of wet 'n' wild adventures. Things can get a bit touristy, but so what. With seafood this fresh, who's complaining? There are attractions like the Theater of the Sea Marine Mammal Park and the History of Diving Museum, as well as local favorite Founders Park, where paddleboard, kayak and sailboat rentals are available, but whatever maritime pursuit calls you, when the sun goes down, fish tales are best shared over a bowl of conch chowder at Lorelei Restaurant & Cabana Bar.

● **81 miles from Key West**

ELLIJAY, GA



TUCKED INTO THE NORTH GEORGIA'S Chattahoochee backcountry, this outpost along the Appalachian Trail is a paradise for hikers and mountain bikers. The former can find a quieter, wilder alternative to the AT on the Benton MacKaye Trail, a 288-miler along the west slopes of the Appalachians that cuts through the Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains, while the latter have access to some of the best secluded singletrack in the state. Off the trails, it's a much slower affair in this charming town of 1,588, with antique stores, an ice cream shop and The Hitching Post, "Home of 33 Degree Beer," which you can get in a to-go plastic gallon jug from a drive-thru window.

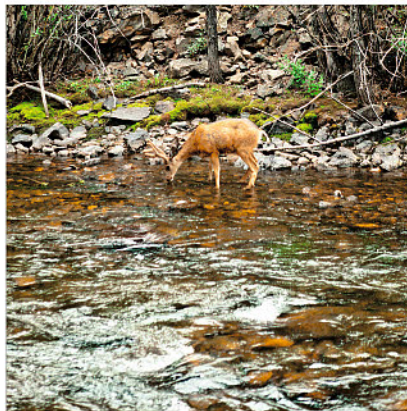
● **78 miles from Atlanta**

ELLCOTTVILLE, NY



COVERED IN SNOW, THIS TINY TOWN OF 538 IS ONE of the best ski destinations in the East, thanks to the Holiday Valley resort's 58 slopes, which are spread over four different faces. But during the warmer months, it's no slouch either: In addition to its newest attraction, the Sky High Adventure Park—upstate New York's best approximation of the Ewok village—the area is home to an extensive mountain bike trail network that led the International Mountain Bicycling Association to bestow it with their coveted "Epic" designation. Also epic is the Pale Ale at Ellicottville Brewing Company: A fine way to finish a day spent hurling yourself downhill.

● **51 miles from Buffalo, NY**



BEACON, NY

IF YOU LIVE IN NEW YORK, particularly in Brooklyn, arguably the artistic heart of the east coast, you've probably already made the pilgrimage to Beacon. Start at Grand Central and go straight north from New York City, and just off the Metro North commuter railroad stop you'll find Beacon's Main Street feels like a virtual twin to Bedford Avenue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, but with a higher density of historic brick storefronts and, thankfully, fewer plastic bags strewn about the sidewalk and under the eyes of all-night partiers. The beef at the burger joint is pasture-fed and locally raised; every other business is a carefully curated art gallery, coffee shop, wine bar or home design store and, of course, tattoos are everywhere. Bohemia is alive and well, and here, the sunsets aren't cluttered by skyline.

That artists are flocking to the Hudson Valley is not a new phenomenon—the area has a long history of painters. Impressionist Frederic Edwin Church, whose former home, Olana, serves as the main attraction museum

of the town of Olana much like Dia:Beacon serves its namesake. But in the latter case, art-wise visitors won't find much in the way of landscape paintings; Dia's permanent collection includes works by LeWitt, Warhol, Bourgeois, Serra and even abstract yarn sculptures by Fred Sandback.

Dia, housed in a former Nabisco factory, has been drawing daytrippers since 2003, which should come as no surprise: It's one of

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the largest contemporary art museums in the country and houses an impressive collection of works by some of the most important visual artists of the last 50 years. Needless to say, when it came to town, the fair trade coffee began to flow.

Beacon itself has been transformed from a shuttered post-industrial river town into an extension of the museum. A perfect day trip is to hop on the train (discount passes including admission to Dia can be picked up at Grand

Central Terminal), hit up the museum and then stroll the length of Main Street. Curiously, the town's best offerings can be found at either end of the thoroughfare.

On the west end, nearest the train station, highlights include the Bank Square Coffeehouse, where you can recharge after exploring the gorgeous museum grounds; Fovea Exhibitions, an excellent little gallery devoted to photojournalism; Clay Wood & Cotton, a twee-riffic handmade goods shop; and Chill Wine Bar, a casual, dimly lit restaurant and wine bar. Toward the east end, The Hop, a craft beer shop and tasting room, is worth a stop for its beer flights, and the patio at The Roundhouse

at Beacon Falls, an expansive property that currently includes a boutique hotel, event space and fine dining restaurant, is an idyllic spot for a late lunch.

It's hard to tell if it's the natural setting, which includes a waterfall in the distance, or because it's one of Beacon's many reminders that city-grade culture can take many forms, one transplant at The Roundhouse echoes a common refrain: "We're so glad this is here."

● 71 miles from New York City ●

OXFORD, MS



THE SITE OF MISSISSIPPI'S FIRST UNIVERSITY HAS hit a rough patch or two over its history—like the one during the Civil War when the whole town was nearly burned to the ground by Union troops. Thankfully, Faulkner's hometown is once again a thriving literary and arts center. Among other attractions, there's a film festival, a book conference, an arts festival, a writers workshop and two independent bookstores, including the excellent Square Books. And if all this artsy-fartsy stuff isn't for you, there are always the thousands of fans cramming into Vaught-Hemingway Stadium cheering on Ole Miss to keep you interested—on a purely sociological level, of course.

● 77 miles from Memphis

NASHVILLE, IN



THIS TOWN, SET IN INDIANA'S PICTURESQUE hill country—which becomes an especially inspiring place come colorful fall—has craft and antique shops and more art galleries than any town of 803 has a right to. But this is no recent renaissance: It's been an artistic destination ever since painters like noted American Impressionist T. C. Steele started the Brown County Art Colony around the turn of the century. And while it may not have the Grand Ole Opry, this Nashville does lay claim to the eclectic Muddy Boots Café, which hosts country, jazz and rock acts, and is five miles south of the Bill Monroe Memorial Park, site of the longest-running bluegrass festival in the country.

● 54 miles from Indianapolis

OJAI, CA



QUITE A FEW WRITERS, PHOTOGRAPHERS, ARTISTS and composers have set up shop here: Tucked in the idyllic Ojai Valley, home to vineyards, olive groves and orange trees, this town offers excellent art museums and galleries, poetry, film, music and playwrights festivals as well as an exquisite farmers' market. Ojai radiates a decidedly West Coast spiritual vibe. Frank Capra used the town to represent Shangri-La in the film version of *Lost Horizon* and these days, especially when you throw a carne asada burrito at Ruben's Burritos and a tasting at the Casa Barranca Organic Winery & Vineyard into the mix, it remains nothing short of paradise.

● 86 miles from LA

