I know the difference between expensive travel and the truly luxurious
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Certain destinations are on everyone’s wish lists: New York, San Francisco, the Grand
Canyon. And those places belong on those lists.

But it’s a big country, and there are so many more places to see—including, increasingly,
quirky, character-filled small towns that are anything but sleepy. I asked several high-end
travel designers about their favorite rural retreats. These are people who deal in the exotic,
who send their clients to have once-in-a-lifetime experience in far-flung places. But when I
asked about our own backyard, they were full of enthusiasm. Here are their places to go now.

Wellfleet, Massachusetts

“Well with its riot of clapboard houses, clambered across by bursts of hydrangea and a smattering
of art galleries across Main Street, Wellfleet is undeniably picture-perfect,” says Tom
Marchant, the cofounder and owner of Black Tomato. It’s just two miles wide and has stunning
beaches on both the Bay and the Atlantic, but its location on outer Cape Cod means that “this
charming town has remained quiet and uncrowded over the decades, making it a real favorite for a weekend hideaway. The simplicity of days spent on the beach, enjoying Wellfleet’s famous oysters with a glass of something chilled, makes this an idyllic getaway.” The past ten years have seen trendier openings, like PB Boulangerie & Bistro, run by Daniel Boulud alum Philippe Rispoli, and the cutting-edge contemporary Gaa Gallery.

Sebastopol, California

Surrounded by apple orchards and vineyards, and only 15 miles from the Pacific Ocean, lies the western Sonoma County town of Sebastopol, which Revealed America founder Marty Behr calls “charming and quirky, with a diversity of attractions that is rare in such a small community. You can dine on a delicious down-home burger or grilled salmon that came off the boat an hour ago. You can shop for cutting-edge art or rare antiques, take in the unusual street art or taste wines at local boutique wine shops.” Visit the Barlow, a 220,000-square-foot culinary and arts center, featuring architecture that pays modernist homage to the picturesque apple canneries that were once here.

Ketchum, Idaho

Once a modest mining and ranch town, Ketchum is now a popular year-round destination that’s known for laid-back sophistication—and 250 days of sunshine per year, says Cari Gray, the founder and president of Gray & Co. “Winter attracts world-class skiers to neighboring Sun Valley, but once the snow melts, Ketchum and its surroundings are a paradise: mountain biking, fly-fishing and incredible arts events.” She also praises the “amazing” food, including lunch on the mountain at Seattle Ridge Lodge, fondue at the historic Roundhouse, and a schooner and a fowl burger at the local watering hole, Grumpy’s. The toughest table in town is for the Italian fare at Enoteca. The renovated Sun Valley Lodge was recently joined by the hip new Limelight Hotel, a transplant from Aspen.

Bedford, New York

“This tiny, well-heeled Westchester County town is synonymous with some big names,” notes Black Tomato’s Marchant. But he adds that while it sits just 45 minutes by train from New York City, it feels worlds away. “A bastion of civility, gentle Bedford is also home to the charming Bedford Post Inn. Dating from the 1860s, the property was lovingly restored by owner Richard Gere and is a member of Relais & Châteaux.” Elsewhere, Jean-Georges Vongerichten set up shop in at the hyperlocal Inn at Pound Ridge, and La Crémailère, a farmhouse restaurant that channels Julia Child, has been dubbed by Vanity Fair as home to the best French country cooking on the East Coast. “A chintzy, iconic spot where you would half expect Tom Wolfe to saunter in with a bone-dry gin martini any minute, it’s Bedford at its finest.”

Durango, Colorado
Behr of Revealed America recommends this small and historic city in southwestern Colorado, near the New Mexico border: Its downtown core is clustered with 19th-century buildings on the National Historic Register, including several restored hotels and fine restaurants. And surrounding the downtown area are extraordinary historic homes of the same vintage. There’s outdoor recreation aplenty, including whitewater rafting, hiking, ATV touring and more. The 19th-century Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad steam train departs from town and traverses dramatic mountains and canyons.

Santa Ynez and Los Olivos, California

“This is where they filmed Sideways and Seabiscuit,” notes Gray, who recommends the area northeast of Santa Barbara for its sweeping landscapes, vineyards, quiet roads and horse farms. “The Santa Ynez Valley has also gained a reputation among cyclists, hikers, food and wine aficionados and savvy travelers who love the low-key vibe. We love the Fess Parker Wine Country Inn in Los Olivos. The Santa Ynez Inn is recently renovated, the Ballard Inn is a foodie hotspot, and locals love the traditional Italian fare at Grappolos and the vibrant farm-to-table at S.Y. Kitchen. There’s also Gray’s “fave quirky museum,” home to a massive collection of antique horse-drawn carriages.

Bellingham, Washington

The coastal hub of northwestern Washington, with ferries to the San Juan Islands, the city of Victoria on Vancouver Island, and north up the Inside Passage to Southeast Alaska, is about 90 minutes by car from Vancouver and Seattle. Says Behr, “The city itself offers excellent outdoor recreation, including orca whale watching, hiking, kayaking, sailing, golf and river rafting on the Skagit River. Accommodations, fine dining and shopping abound in the central core and the historic Fairhaven district.”

Crested Butte, Colorado

Sitting at almost 9,000 feet, Crested Butte is an alpine paradise with July wildflowers such as lupine growing waist-high. There are fishing spots and hiking and biking trails right out the door. “The town is so appealing that the savvy folks at Eleven Experience have made it their base, and they offer up the two best spots in town to stay, Sopris House and Scarp Ridge Lodge,” says Gray. “Both are just a short walk to Elk Avenue and its shops, coffeehouses and the great Elk Avenue Prime Steakhouse. Other top spots to refuel include Soupcon and Ryce. Catch a performance at the Center for the Arts or an open-air summer concert.”

Bozeman, Montana
“Bozeman is an adventurer’s paradise with gorgeous sunny days and fabulous hiking and fly-fishing in the summer,” says Behr. “Surrounded by mountains, Bozeman effortlessly blends a small town feel with a lively cultural scene, a bit of cowboy culture and the vitality of a college town.” The historic main street features charming shops, galleries, coffee shops and wonderful restaurants, and the Museum of the Rockies boasts an enormous collection of dinosaur fossils.

Leavenworth and Plain, Washington

"Leavenworth is a Bavarian-themed village that attracts tourists from around the world with its steady stream of festivals, from the legendary Oktoberfest to an outdoor film festival,” says Jake Haupert, chief explorations officer of Explorer X, adding that it’s not horribly cheesy but “done as well as it could be done—it’s full-on, quirky and inviting.” And it’s surrounded by mountains and rivers, good food, wine and so on. Nearby Plain is a “secret treasure” adds Haupert, who chose to build his own vacation cabin there. “It’s my place to go and disconnect, contemplate, get my heart pumping on some multisport adventures and enjoy some good local wine or my favorite brew, the Bootjack IPA from Icicle Brewing Company.” He also recommends Plain Hardware, an “awesome little store with my favorite soy lattes.”

Tofino, British Columbia

Gray loves this surfer town in northwestern Vancouver Island. She cites its Wickaninnish Inn, frequently ranked among the best hotels in North America, especially during its winter “storm watching season”—a wildly successful marketing spin on inclement weather. “Local activities include the best year-round surfing in Canada, sea kayaking, beach walks, hiking in the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, fishing, rainforest explorations and whale watching. The best food in town comes from the talented Chef Lisa Ahier and her SoBo restaurant—smoked wild salmon chowder anyone?” After citing other accomplished eateries, Gray concludes, “In general, Tofino is awesome for cold wetsuits, hot coffee and great local seafood.”

Washington, Connecticut

“Encompassing five iconic Litchfield County villages, Washington makes for a charming rural getaway,” says Marchant. “Just short of two hours from New York City, Washington will feel like a home from home for most city slickers with its urbane attitudes as a refreshing complement to its picturesque countryside. A favorite of in-the-know New Yorkers, the Relais & Châteaux member Grace Mayflower makes for a fabulous and relaxing place to stay with an indulgent spa and trendy restaurant on hand.” The local favorite Community Table is about to reopen with its show-stopping seasonal cuisine, while for a more relaxed evening affair, the authentic G.W. Tavern offers a taste of rural life with local ales on tap.

Astoria, Oregon
On a peninsula at the mouth of the Columbia River, Astoria is not only home to spectacular natural beauty and a fascinating history, but it also features wonderful art galleries, a lively weekend street market, a budding food scene and a solid beer culture, explains Behr. Explore the area’s history at nearby Lewis and Clark National Park, which features Fort Clatsop (where Lewis and Clark spent the winter of 1805–06). Astoria was also the first permanent United States settlement on the Pacific coast, and many beautiful Victorian homes remain throughout town. “Begin your day at the quirky Columbian Café, where every meal is made from scratch, stroll the hilly streets to view the sherbet-hued homes, visit the Columbia River Maritime Museum to find your inner sailor and finish your day with a hoppy IPA at Buoy Beer on a pier out over the river. Astoria is the perfect jumping off point for your coastal road trip or a cozy spot for a romantic weekend.”

Cody, Wyoming

Gray likes Cody for its Center of the West museum, which is actually five museums under the same roof. The Western Art Museum features extensive work by master wildlife sculpture TD Kelsey and is “a must-see museum for all ages,” she says. “There’s also Old Trail Town, a re-created frontier town with 1800s log cabins. Colonel William F. ‘Buffalo Bill’ Cody actually founded the town in 1896, and it remains wild country today, with plenty of coyotes, mule deer, wolves, bears, antelope, big-horn sheep and herds of elk. Fishing spots and hiking trails abound. Road cyclists love the South Fork road, which heads past famous Castle Rock out to Shoshone National Forest. Stroll along Sheridan Avenue for stores to buy the requisite boots and hat.

Looking for more vacation ideas? Check out my story on cool cities to visit.