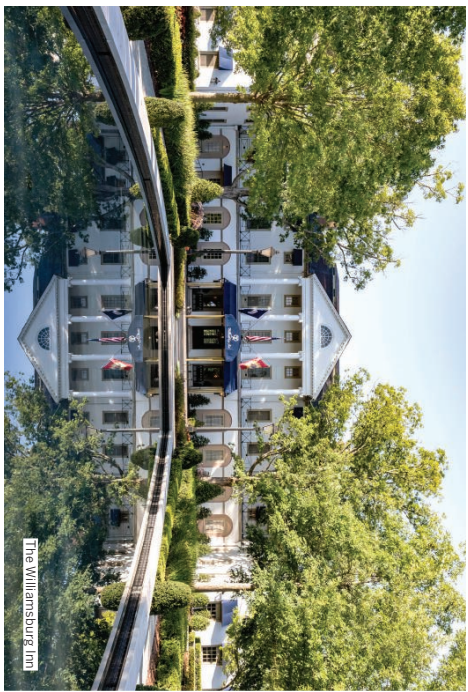




The Cheese Shop is a local favorite in downtown Williamsburg.



The Williamsburg Inn

BEST SMALL TOWN

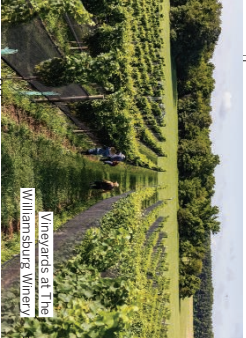
The New Williamsburg

The colonial charmer is having a modern moment

BY
MARISA SPYKER

LIKE MANY others who pass through Williamsburg, Virginia, Brittany Rolston has fond memories of the historic town that can be summed up

In a single faded snapshot: "I was 4 years old sitting on a cannon in front of the Governor's Palace. I knew this town for Colonial Williamsburg and Busch Gardens, and that was about it." Three decades later, she sees this southeastern Virginia spot much differently. At 35, the Williamsburg local owns a boutique: **The Shoe Attic**, in the heart of town and can walk there from her home. She has a hard time telling you where her favorite places to eat and drink are because there are way too many to choose from. After living outside Washington, D.C., for years, Rolston says she's found something special in Williamsburg: community. "One of the biggest draws is the people," she says. "Everyone is so nice and



Vineyards at The Williamsburg Winery



PETER FRANK EDWARDS



Craft brewers are helping attract a younger crowd to this historic town.

share sidewalks with contemporary boutiques and trendy taprooms. Those who know Williamsburg well find comfort in familiar mainstays like **The Cheese Shop**, a local institution famous for its stuffed sandwiches slathered in an addictive secret-recipe house dressing. Others are discovering the city's magic for the first time, with spots like the **Precarious Beer Project**, a 10,000-square-foot brewery and music venue, luring city dwellers from Richmond and D.C. for a weekend (or even a lifetime).

Then there are those, like resident Chris Smith, who are rediscovering—and investing in—Williamsburg in the midst of its renaissance.

Along with business partner Robby Willey, Smith attended college here at William & Mary before setting off to pursue big-city career opportunities. But they both soon felt the familiar pull of small-town living and, putting their degrees in business and economics to use, decided to follow their dream of opening their own brewery. Williamsburg was the obvious choice. "It felt like a very authentic story—we met each other

PETER FRANK EDWARDS

Holston. "People aren't coming here just for the history or theme parks anymore. They're coming to enjoy the town."

That sea change is evident in the bustling Merchants Square, where nearly 100-year-old general stores

welcoming, and I think that's what ultimately makes visitors fall in love with it and want to stay." When you chat with the locals in town, you'll often hear the phrase "fall in love." Meandering through its 18th-century epicenter, it's easy to see why: Here, horse-drawn carriages clip-clop down cobbled streets lined with mature oaks; verdant fields are laid out like red carpets leading toward stately brick buildings; and white picket fences guard furlies of daffodils and locks of sheep. But the small-town charm extends far beyond its many colonial treasures. Today, the appeal lies in its ability to perform a delicate dance between old and new, between honoring its past and embracing a more modern future. "Williamsburg has grown so much in the past few years," says



A bartender mixes up one of the house specialties at Amber Ox.



The Williamsburg Winery

here, and we ultimately came back to a community that we wanted to support," says Smith.

After four years of researching and planning, **The Virginia Beer Co.** opened and is now among the slew of burgeoning businesses along the Williamsburg Tasting Trail, which includes craft breweries, distilleries, wineries, and even a

meadery (a marriage, once again, of past and present). Housed in an old auto body shop—a cue taken from brew

scenes in large cities—it's now a go-to spot on sunny Saturday afternoons, when locals gather around communal picnic tables to clink frothy pints with names like Liquid Escape.

The same goes for Precarious Beer Project and its Southern-style dining counterpart, **Amber Ox Public House**, which has its own Beer Lab. Amber Ox is also helmed by a pair of young investors, Chris Cook and Andrew

Voss. But unlike many other local entrepreneurs who are inevitably lured back to Williamsburg, Voss (a Michigan native) had no previous connection to the town before he decided to invest in it. Wooed by an initial visit, he uprooted his family despite having a fresh mortgage and says, "We haven't second-guessed it for a minute."

"What we've grown to appreciate about this place is that it feels very much like a small community, but it has this really cool downtown vibe," Voss says. "When people who don't know Williamsburg come to visit, they are often blown away by just how much there is to see and do here."

That's the magic of Williamsburg. Whether you come here for the unmatched historic character or craft brews, the friendly neighbors or bucolic beauty, it's a place that reels you in and keeps calling you back for more.

THE TOP 20

1. Williamsburg, VA
2. Beaufort, SC
3. Fairhope, AL
4. Franklin, TN
5. Fredericksburg, VA
6. Fredericksburg, TX
7. Beaufort, NC
8. Thomasville, GA
9. Bluffton, SC
10. Aiken, SC
11. Mount Dora, FL
12. Paducah, KY
13. Euclid Springs, AR
14. Natchitoches, LA
15. Isle of Hope, GA
16. Opelika, AL
17. Florence, AL
18. Mantee, NC
19. St. Marys, GA
20. Deland, FL

ENJOY WILLIAMSBURG LIKE A LOCAL

► **EAT:** Serving elevated rifts on classic bar fare (like their delicious oak-smoked fried chicken wings), **Amber Ox** has a rustic vibe and a roster of regulars (so be sure to make a reservation). Another newbie to the food scene, **Casa Pearl Oysters & Tacos**—helmed by a young chef and veteran of Charleston, South Carolina's The Ordinary—delivers the Chesapeake Bay's finest bounty in a casual gas station turned oyster-and-taco bar.

► **DRINK:** The burgeoning Williamsburg Tasting Trail is transforming the historic town into a boozy getaway. A few standouts: **Billsburg Brewery** serves up frosty pints in a peaceful marina-front setting. **Silver Hand Meadery**, meanwhile, reimagines the ancient sipper with rare and locally sourced varietal honey.

► **DO:** Be sure to take advantage of the network of rambling scenic trails. Ambitious runners and bikers can hit the winding, paved 52-mile **Virginia Capital Trail**, which travels through postcard-worthy pastures all the way from Jamestown to Richmond. **Freedom Park** offers shorter trails for hiking and biking with a side of history: It was once home to one of the earliest free black settlements in America.

► **SHOP:** Retailers in Merchants Square range from the cute to the fabulously funky. For a whimsical mix of fashionable must-haves and statement-making wild cars, browse **The Shoe Attic**. **Quirks** is a favorite among locals for lots of creative gift ideas, and **French Twist Boutique** offers breezy closet staples (like the perfect linen dress) at reasonable prices.

BEST MOUNTAIN TOWN

Gatlinburg's Next Chapter

This tiny, wildly popular village in the Smokies just keeps getting better

THE OCTOBER 1966 cover of *Southern Living* featured a breathtaking shot of U.S. 441 with a camper-shelled pickup leading a caravan of cars through fall foliage in what is now the most visited national park. Our readers have loved the Smokies forever. And their favorite spot? Gatlinburg.

Given the millions of people who visit this area every year, the actual size of Gatlinburg—less than 5,000 residents—escapes many travelers, but it's the homey Appalachian charm that helps draw all of them here in the first place.

The village has continued to evolve, with a variety of

new attractions joining the perennially popular pancake houses, candy shops, and craft galleries. Two-tiered **Anakeesta** has a shopping village downtown where you catch a "chondola" lift to the mountaintop Firefly Village, with canopy walks, zip lines, and other outdoor-recreation options. Now Parrot Heads also have a mountain perch with the opening of **Margaritaville Resort Gatlinburg**. Take the SkyLift to the new 680-foot **SkyBridge**, billed as North America's longest pedestrian suspension bridge.

THE TOP 10

1. Gatlinburg, TN
2. Blowing Rock, NC
3. Boone, NC
4. Blue Ridge, GA
5. Highlands, NC
6. Dhlonega, GA
7. Hot Springs, AR
8. Staunton, VA
9. Hendersonville, NC
10. Black Mountain, NC

Blake Shelton has opened an outpost of his **Ole Red** restaurant here. There's also locally owned **Gatlinburg Brewing Co.** with its downtown taproom, or you can sample flights of hooch at moonshine tasting rooms.

For lodging, rent a cabin in the Smokies (or a room at Dollywood's DreamMore Resort in neighboring Pigeon Forge), and make the drive to Gatlinburg for entertainment. Or reverse that, booking a room in the thick of things and taking a day trip into the mountains for hiking and horseback riding.

But that's all icing on the cake. In the end, people will always head to the Smokies for the exact same reason *Southern Living* did in 1966: This place is gorgeous.



Cades Cove in the Smokies



Sugarlands Distilling Co.



Smoky Mountain Brewery



Dollywood's DreamMore Resort



Loco Burro



BEST COLLEGE TOWN

The Cool Kid

Athens, Georgia, is a mosh pit of iconic bands, collard greens, and Bulldog pride

BY
KAITLYN YARBOROUGH

IT'S A RANDOM Tuesday night, and a line is already forming on the curb outside the **Georgia Theatre**. Two backpack-laden students walk past, talking about their midterms. An older couple ducks into **Last Resort Grill** nearby, in search of praline chicken. A man zooms past on a unicycle. Welcome to Athens. It's the home of the Dawgs, the old stomping ground of beloved rock bands, and keeper of a bar-per-capita

stat that could induce the splits (over 70 bars in a square mile). Athens is a place of many attitudes, and which version you get depends on when—and where—you meet this very cool town.

There's nostalgia in the dim light and sticky floors of historic music haunts like the **40 Watt Club** and the Georgia Theatre. Echoes of old friends still permeate the thick, beer-shrouded air in these venues that once hosted Michael

Stipe's distinctive songs. The B-52s' signature funk, and even Pylon's jangly underground rock.

There's soul wafting from every kitchen as you breathe in the telltale aromas of the famous fried chicken at **Weaver D's**, the hangover-curing biscuits at **Mama's Boy**, and the Frogmore stew at **5 & 10**, Hugh Acheson's flagship.

There's pride in the prodigious shadow of Sanford Stadium, where the hedges aren't just smart landscaping and the mascot isn't just a dog. The

stadium is home, and Uga is a rock star. And there's optimism in locals' eagerness to turn tired spaces into shiny, happy new faces. An old tire company is now a favorite brewery and farmers' market. A kudzu-covered former cotton warehouse returns as an arts district.

What doesn't change? The **Waffle House** on West Clayton Street. **The Tree That Owns Itself**, a quirk respected even by the local government. (Go read the plaque.) The old-fashioned root beer floats at **Add Drug**, a landmark since 1961.

Athens is a blend of everything that makes the South diverse and weird and unpredictable; laid-back and loud; rooted and rebellious.

UP ALL NIGHT

With well over 100 bars, restaurants, and shops hugging the small and walkable city-style blocks, Athens' historic

downtown is more alive on an average Monday than many towns are on a Saturday night. Daylight hours see UGA college students filling in and out of various cafes, such as the coffee shop/bar hybrid **Walker's Coffee & Pub**, as locals pop into shops like **Archie Paper Goods** (a stationery lover's heaven).

Once the sun goes down, innocent errands turn into late-night shenanigans. Spontaneous souls could end up dancing at the pop-up silent disco wearing big glowing headphones next to dozens of strangers, watching an indie film at **Chiné**, a nonprofit art house opened in an old five-tee building, or sipping at the bar of **Manhattan Cafe** next to a dude reading a Cormac McCarthy novel while others sway in the back corner next to an ancient jukebox with handwritten track cards. A straight shot down Prince Avenue from downtown Athens. Normaltown

THE TOP 10

1. Athens, GA
2. Charlottesville, VA
3. Chapel Hill, NC
4. Oxford, MS
5. Savannah, GA
6. Auburn, AL
7. Tuscaloosa, AL
8. Clemson, SC
9. Tallahassee, FL
10. Knoxville, TN

ROBBIE CAPONETTO

"Echoes of old friends still permeate the thick, beer-shrouded air in these venues that once hosted Michael Stipe's distinctive songs."

Millidge Avenue, known as UGA's sorority row

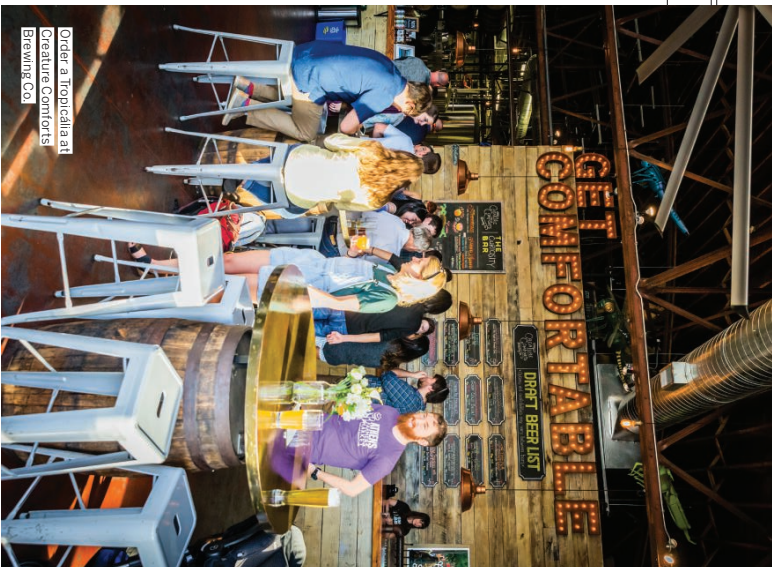


Take a selfie with one of Athens' Bulldog statues





Above: The Old Pal in Normaltown
Left: White Tiger's BBQ Pork Sandwich



Order a Tropicália at Comfortable's Brewing Co.

is where you'll find the townies. The old-school strip of storefronts is now frequented by the impossibly cool. Bars here: **The Old Pal**, **Hi-Lo Lounge**, and **Normal Bar**—are the grown-up, hipper version of those downtown. **Automatic Pizza** serves up slices in a retro former gas station, and **White Tiger Gourmet** hawks melt-in-your-mouth barbecue in a 100-plus-year-old location that once housed a grocery store.

You might hear whispers of a beer so good that they don't dare let it out of Georgia. Uber-popular **Creature Comforts Brewing Co.** in the old Snow

The beer in question is Tropicália, a citrusy little number with hoppy notes and apparently a certain cachet. Due to production constraints, it garnered a cult following—borderline mania—when it was first released in 2014. A few years later, the frenzy reached all the way to Atlanta and the production crew of box office monster *Avengers: Endgame*—then to Thor himself.

"It was all kind of mind-boggling," says cofounder and brewmaster Adam Beauchamp. "One of the directors basically started sending his production assistants to chase down the trucks when it was really difficult to find. They were buying fridge-full amounts of it for everybody on set, including these big stars like Chris Hemsworth."

Staples like the fruitily springtime Athena Paradiso and the easy-drinking Classic City Lager stock all the bars, restaurants, and frat houses throughout town.

The late-night dining scene here is also legendary, from street hot dogs at one of two dueling carts—old rivals that sit on either side of the same block—to the signature feia fries at **The Grill**. Before you know it, 3 a.m. rolls around. Last call. Not at the bars—those



AUTOMATIC FOR THE PEOPLE

Step inside **Wuxtry Records**, and nostalgia hits you like an old Tom Petty song. Suddenly, it's 1976, the year this place opened, right before the Athens music scene went wild.

The oldest still-operating record store in Georgia, Wuxtry has been in business for over 40 years, refusing to give up on vinyl, even when CDs took over the market. When records came back in vogue, the small store on East Clayton Street downtown was still packed with crates and crates of it.

This is where the future members of R.E.M. hung out. Lead guitarist Peter Buck even worked there for a short time. "He was my Neil Young coach," says Bertis Downs, longtime advisor and friend of the band (or "the guys," as he calls them). He also knew Bill Berry, R.E.M.'s drummer, from the time they spent together on UGA's concert committee. "And then all of a sudden, boom, they're in this really popular



Visit the Alice H. Richards Children's Garden at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia.

band." That's an understatement. It was Downs who approached Dexter Weaver, owner of local restaurant Weaver D's, to ask if R.E.M. could use his catchphrase as one of their most famous album titles: *Automatic for the People*. Sound familiar?

For Weaver, the tagline is about being quick to please his customers. His slogan traveled all the way from the lime green cement walls of a soul food



Dexter Weaver, owner of Weaver D's



Automatic Pizza

closed an hour ago—but at **Little Italy**, a pizza dive serving up hot slices bigger than your head. The fun stops at 3. That is when the guy behind the counter starts hollering for everyone to get out.

ROBBIE CAPONETTO

joint to the top of the charts. "And then, a year later, when the guys were nominated for a Grammy, we got Dexter and his sister to come to the Grammy Awards as R.E.M.'s special guests!" Downs hoots.

You won't meet a church lady or frat boy from the past three decades who hasn't had a meal at Weaver D's. "While or dark meat, baby?" asks Weaver from behind the counter. He opened the restaurant in 1986, and it's all about the chicken, followed by homemade macaroni and cheese, collards or green beans (something healthy for goodness' sake), and the essential corn muffin. You can easily see how this place would inspire an album name. It's that special.

"All of the great things in my life started when I moved to Athens," says Patterson Hood of the band Drive-By Truckers, which got started here in the 1990s and still considers Athens home. What called Hood to Athens in the first place? "R.E.M." he cracks. "That's what it all boils down to, right? The music."



Clockwise from far left:

Fisher's at Orange Beach Marina; the Original Oyster House; The Gulf; bivalves at the Original Oyster House



sustainability. Among the on-site restaurants at the lodge are the Gulf-front **Perch** and **Foodcraft**.

Venture out of the park and follow repeat visitors to breakfast at places like **Ruby Slipper Cafe**, **Brick & Spoon**, and **Duck's Diner**. The same crowd will likely recommend lunching at decades-old **Sea-N-Suds** right on the beach, **Doc's Seafood Shack & Oyster Bar**, **Tacky Jacks**, **Mikee's Seafood**, **Original Oyster House**, **The Gulf** (pair any dish with a mojito), or **Lucy Buffett's Lulu's** (order The "Pa-Menna" Cheeseburger).

For dinner? Don't miss **Cobalt**, **The Restaurant** or **Fisher's at Orange Beach Marina** for stunning views of the water. Fill any gaps in your itinerary with "y'all won't believe this" selfies while you sip on a beachy beverage at the **Flora-Bama**.

BEST BEACH TOWN

Gulf View

With its white sand, decadent seafood, and pristine wildlife sanctuaries, the Alabama coast was once the South's best-kept secret

JUST ASK THE Gulf Shores/Orange Beach crowd what they like best about this 32-mile stretch of sugary sand, and they'll immediately start naming restaurants. That's because they consider the sand and surf a given.

Outdoor riches here are remarkable: Gulf shoreline, bayous, rivers, and lakes,

not to mention the **Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge**. The new **Coastal Alabama Back Bay Blueway** offers four different trails for paddling.

Within **Gulf State Park** are 28 miles of paved trails to explore. A new 25-acre **Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo**, significantly larger than the old site, will create better space for the animals while providing more educational opportunities for guests.

It's hard to imagine now, but back in its bell-bottom days, Alabama's Gulf Coast offered little beyond campgrounds and the occasional mom-and-pop motel. The dining scene was practically nonexistent. Then, after

Hurricane Frederic struck in 1979 and the coast began to rebuild, development accelerated, and it hasn't shown any signs of slowing down since.

Now there's every kind of lodging you can fathom as well as a wide array of activities that are perfect for families. Meanwhile, the **Hangout Music Festival** and other events, along with attractions like **The Wharf**, are drawing a new generation to this coast.

The **Lodge at Gulf State Park**, a Hilton property, opened to wide acclaim in 2018 and is noteworthy for its level of style and comfort and also for its commitment to both conservation and

THE TOP 10

1. Gulf Shores/Orange Beach, AL
2. Hilton Head Island, SC
3. Tybee Island, GA
4. Destin, FL
5. Myrtle Beach, SC
6. Key West, FL
7. Panama City Beach, FL
8. Wrightsville Beach, NC
9. Isle of Palms, SC
10. St. Augustine, FL