



6 GREAT PLACES

You've (Maybe) Never Heard Of

Check out the
six sustainable
communities that
shine in our fifth
annual spotlight.

by JOE HART

When the time came to research towns for our annual expedition to “great places you’ve never heard of,” we started by asking MOTHER EARTH NEWS’ Facebook friends. In a matter of days, we received suggestions from more than 200 people eager to share the positive aspects of their hometowns and favorite locales. We intentionally left some great places off our list, such as Eugene, Ore., and Asheville, N.C., that are already well-known as high-quality, sustainable communities. Instead, we talked to folks who live in lesser-known (at least outside their region) towns that are nevertheless impressively fun, affordable and liveable.

The resulting towns and cities stand out for their commitment to culture, community and sustainability. The past several years have brought challenges to every corner of the country, yet in good times or in bad, strong communities such as these thrive on values that come without a price tag: civic pride, a strong sense of place and hope for the future.



CHARLES RYDLEWSKI (2); ABOVE RIGHT: GERALD TANGTANG'S PHOTO MEMORIES



Elgin, Ill., has something for everyone: arts, entertainment, local food, recreation and more.



Elgin, Illinois: Crafting a Strong Community

Located less than an hour northwest of Chicago on the banks of the Fox River, Elgin, Ill., was once a small but thriving industrial city famous for its watch-making factories. That industry has mostly gone, leaving Elgin with an opportunity to reinvent itself. They've added their very own opera, a symphony orchestra (twice-named "Illinois Symphony of the Year"), a cultural center that hosts concerts, theater productions and more, and a host of arts programs designed specifically for kids. This year, Elgin will break ground on 55 new housing units for Illinois artists and their families in a historic building downtown. The town's evolution has allowed the former industry and manufacturing sectors to maintain a presence, but this presence is now more balanced and distributed throughout the community.

"In its heyday, downtown Elgin was a hub of industry and manufacturing along the river," says Jason Pawlowski, promotions coordinator for the Elgin Downtown Neighborhood Association. "We get comments all the time from former residents or visitors who tell us they expected to see a downtown resembling a ghost town, but instead found a vibrant, revitalized, walkable area."

Elgin, Illinois

Population: **107,500**

Median household income: **\$86,235**

Weather: **A four-season Midwestern climate with hot summers and cold, snowy winters.**

What makes it great: **Opportunities for all ages to enjoy the arts, an active local food market and an eye trained on a greener future.**

One of the centerpieces of that vibrancy is the Elgin farmers market, which Pawlowski directs. The market is restricted to growers and vendors from a 150-mile radius. "Our goal is to make it more than just a place to buy food," he says. "We want it to be a public area where people can gather." Pawlowski coordinates live entertainment, public art exhibits, food and wine tastings, and wellness and green-living demonstrations.

For a city of slightly more than 100,000, Elgin has a remarkable sustainability agenda. City leaders are currently finalizing a comprehensive sustainable master plan that will incorporate the social, economic and environmental objectives of its citizens into the city's policy, development and culture. The city has a curbside recycling program; a storm water filtration project protects the water basin; city purchasing policies promote hybrid cars; and new utility buildings are LEED certified, while improvements to current buildings are made with green standards in mind. The city's garbage transfer station is a certified LEED project, with a green roof and a graywater system.

The master plan also includes an addition to Elgin's outdoor recreation opportunities with the future expansion and connection of bike paths throughout the city. Pawlowski hopes plans such as these will help Elgin embrace its full potential for sustainability.



Community is strong in Floyd, where opportunities to gather abound.

Floyd, Virginia: Celebrating the Past, Preserving the Future

American folk music exists everywhere, but what we tend to think of as traditional American folk was born in the southern Blue Ridge Mountains and the Piedmont region. Various old-time fiddle and banjo styles practiced there—after they were recorded—influenced virtually all of American popular music. Floyd, Va., lies in the heart of the region, and it's a place profoundly influenced by this musical tradition.

In Floyd, the music scene converges at the Floyd Country Store, which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2010. Both informal jams and stage concerts are common at the Country Store, and it holds a popular Friday Night Jamboree. The Country Store is also a traditional country store, selling everything from candy to Carhartt clothing.

The town is also home to the County Sales record store, which was formed in the mid-60s during the folk revival, and still serves as a primary

outlet for traditional American music, both old and new. In 2003, state tourism promoters started The Crooked Road, a tour of musical communities, including Floyd, on the Blue Ridge.

The living legacy of Floyd's music brings tourists and musicians to town, but the region has a strong, alternative community that dates back to at least the early 1970s.

"Land prices were cheap, and that was advertised in an early volume of *MOTHER EARTH NEWS*," says Fred First, a local author, photographer and columnist for *The Floyd Press*.

"The first wave found that the locals treated newcomers relatively well, and that brought an influx of the 'alter-natives,' as some call them now." According to First, some of these back-to-the-landers were potters, who planted the seeds for what is now a vibrant arts community.

The growing number of people who have moved to the region to join the community includes George and Rain Lipson, who own Green Label Organic, a certified-organic clothing company. "A lot of people have moved from D.C., California, New York," George says. "And a lot of them are young people who have started new businesses, and they tend to be green businesses." He lists a few—an organic coffee roaster, a health food store, and a crew of organic growers who supply stores in nearby Roanoke.

Such growth is key to the success of the community. "But," says First, "a number of concerned people in town realized that we had something that could be lost by growing too fast." In response, citizens formed the organization SustainFloyd, which aims to "promote an environment that supports sustainable jobs and long-term stewardship in the creative economy and land-based resource sectors." The group built a new market in Floyd, and has sponsored a farm-to-school program.

With its multifaceted development, commitment to its roots and focus on sustainability, the community is poised to thrive.

Floyd, Virginia

Population: 432

Median household income: **\$25,781**

Weather: **A mild, mountainous climate with mild summers and white winters.**

What makes it great: **A DIY, back-to-the-land ethic combined with a strong mountain music tradition.**



Floyd offers a steady stream of live music events featuring American folk styles.

ASSOCIATED PRESS (2); ABOVE RIGHT: RON SALMON

Louisville, Kentucky: More Than Horses, Baseball Bats and Fried Chicken

Kentucky's largest city—home of the Kentucky Derby, the University of Louisville and Kentucky Fried Chicken—is hardly off the beaten track. But what's less known is that, in recent years, Louisville has quietly emerged as a major center of cultural diversity and sustainable development.

"It's a small town with a huge heart, and it's also a really culturally diverse place," says Valerie Kausen, who moved to the city from California three years ago with her spiritual healing practice.

The diverse Old Louisville neighborhood has one of the country's largest collections of restored Victorian homes, and it also boasts an extensive system of pedestrian-only streets. Recent development projects show additional promise. Film producer Gill Holland, *Louisville Magazine's* 2009 "Person of the Year," has purchased tracts in the downtown area and is helping to reinvent the neighborhood as an arts district built on sustainable development. Holland's neighborhood centerpiece is The Green Building, a 15,000-square-foot converted dry goods store that houses a café, gallery and office spaces, and is Louisville's first LEED Platinum green building project.

What's even more impressive about Louisville is the organization 15Thousand Farmers. Co-founded by Kausen, along with residents Gary Heine and Steve Vice, the organization defines home food gardeners as "farmers" and builds community by bringing "home farmers" together to share advice and harvests.

As the organization's name suggests, 15Thousand Farmers aims to add 15,000 farmers to Louisville by 2015. The group recruits new farmers by providing a simple approach based on the square-foot gardening model. The idea is taking off. Kausen reports that in its first five months, the organization has signed 1,000 new farmers.

"A lot of new people are inspired by the simplicity of what we're offering," she says. "And even with one 4-by-4-foot box, they're learning a lot. If nothing else, they're learning how much work it takes to grow food, and they appreciate the beautiful farmers market food that they're buying."

The grass-roots spirit reflected in 15Thousand Farmers is matched by an active city government. The comprehensive "Go Green Louisville" program includes sustainability directives—and the tools to back them up. Residents can receive a rebate for trading in a gasoline-powered mower for an electric model. In October 2010, Louisville announced an energy efficiency program designed to save the city \$13.5 million in energy costs over the next 15 years. The city has even installed a green roof on the Metro Development Center.

Louisville, Kentucky

Population: **569,135**

Median household income: **\$46,661**

Weather: **A distinct, four-season climate with hot, humid summers and moderate winters.**

What makes it great: **A pedestrian-friendly town with community-wide support for home gardeners, plus government-backed sustainability initiatives.**



Louisville hit a homer with their local food and energy-efficiency efforts.



15THOUSAND FARMERS; ABOVE: ALAMY/DON SMETZER



Carrboro, North Carolina: The 'Paris of the Piedmont'

Located just a few miles from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the city of Carrboro has earned its nickname as the "Paris of the Piedmont." A strong commitment to the arts, music and locavore culture makes the town a capital of southern bohemia.

In 1995, Carrboro was the first municipality in North Carolina to elect an openly gay mayor, Mike Nelson, and also the first to extend legal rights to same-sex partners.

The same spirit infuses nearly every aspect of the town's culture and politics, according to Kirby Zeman, a research associate at UNC who serves as

a community affairs reporter at Carrboro's independent, volunteer-run radio station, WCOM—which in itself is a primary point of pride for the community. "It's kind of a nouveau Berkeley," Zeman says.

Carrboro, North Carolina

Population: **19,891**

Median household income: **\$37,088**

Weather: **Warm, wet summers and mild winters with occasional snow.**

What makes it great: **The "Paris of the Piedmont" is a Southern cultural and food mecca that offers lots of live music.**

Considering its size (fewer than 20,000 residents) and location, Carrboro has a reputation that draws surprising attention from far-flung locales. The primary music venue is the intimate and affordable Cat's Cradle, which attracts notable bands and indie music fans from across the region. The town also hosts an annual music festival.

Carrboro has received national press for its commitment to the local-foods movement, a distinction made possible by the town's year-round farmers market, a handful of high-quality restaurants that specialize in local fare, and a natural foods co-op—the Weaver Street Market—that's as much a social meeting place for food lovers as it is a grocery store. The Market sponsors a variety of events, including wine tastings, jazz concerts and brunches. "It's an ad-hoc town square," Zeman says. "People bring blankets to sit on the lawn and listen to the music."

Like a lot of attractive towns with growing populations, Carrboro faces the specter of sprawl. But the city appears to be doing a great job of using development to spur environmentally responsible initiatives. "Sustainability is probably one of the No. 1 topics around here right now," Zeman says. An example is Veridia, a suburban development featuring LEED-standard buildings that incorporate photovoltaics, solar heating and rainwater catch-and-reuse, as well as a community garden.



CHAPEL HILL/ORANGE COUNTY VISITORS BUREAU (2)

Carrboro delivers an enviable selection of art, music and fresh food.

Huntsville, Alabama: Civic Pride Comes First

Officials in Huntsville, Ala., have launched an ambitious program to turn the city into a regional leader in sustainability. The highlights of the program are impressive: a city government that operates with zero waste; a transition of the city fleet to alternative fuels; and a recycling program that's the best in the state.

But the philosophy behind these initiatives that makes them successful, according to Joy McKee, director of the city's Operation Green Team, is a uniquely Huntsvillian trait: civic pride.

"First and foremost, people have to have pride in their community," McKee says. "Only then can you teach the environmental side."

In keeping with this approach, McKee has launched a number of simple programs designed to raise environmental awareness. The city runs a hot line, for example, that allows citizens to report littering as it happens. Offenders receive a letter from the city.

A tossed cigarette butt or soft-drink cup may seem like a little thing, but McKee explains that each littering incident is an opportunity to raise awareness.

With a wealth of educational opportunities and a major industrial center for space, air and military engineering, Huntsville is also home to a growing number of alternative artists and thinkers. One gathering point for artists is Huntsville's Flying Monkey Arts Center. This rehabbed industrial mill not only provides studio space for artists, but also hosts events ranging from spoken word slams to independent film viewings to the annual Cigar Box Guitar Extravaganza, featuring performances on homemade instruments.

Another, even more ambitious industrial rehab is the Lincoln Mills project. Conceived of as a mixed-use, urban ecovillage, the 200,000-square-foot textile mill includes goats and chickens, and a living roof planted with edible gardens. The development contains a microbrewery and eventually will have a movie theater, residential lofts and a restaurant, along with space for a farmers market.

"There's a lot of room for innovation in Huntsville," says resident Angela Musquiz. "In a bigger city, you're an itty-bitty ant, but here you have a lot more opportunity to make a difference."

Huntsville, Alabama

Population: **176,706**

Median household income: **\$46,014**

Weather: **A humid subtropical climate with hot, wet summers and mild winters with occasional snow.**

What makes it great: **A band of energetic thinkers are building a compelling arts and sustainability infrastructure.**



Huntsville actively designs a sustainable future by balancing industry, the arts and energy efficiency.



HUNTSVILLE/MADISON COUNTY CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU (2)



Fredericksburg: history, community, good food and great wine.



HOUSERSTOCK (3)

Fredericksburg, Texas: Historic German Heritage

Nancy Tiemann and her husband, Tom, toured many small Texas towns in their search for a country destination to retire to from their home in Austin. “We were looking for a place with a real sense of community and its own identity,” she says. They found what they were looking for in Fredericksburg, and they decided it was too good to wait for. Eight years ago, long before their retirement, the couple moved to a small farm outside of town.

Fredericksburg is located in Hill Country, the rich farm region in central Texas. The Tiemann’s property included an old orchard, which Nancy has since restored. Her interest in selling the fruits of her farm, as well as fresh eggs and sweet corn, connected her to others in the community who were interested in founding a farmers market. Today, Tiemann is the market’s co-president.

“Our vendors all come from within a 50-mile radius of the market, and we have plenty to draw from,” Tiemann says. “We have peaches, vegetable farms, vineyards. Truly, the epicurean center idea is happening, and I couldn’t be happier than to be a part of it.” A mix of commercial growers—many of them organic—use the market, as do small-scale garden growers. Texas Hill Country is said to be the second-most-visited wine region in the United States.

Originally a proudly German settlement, Fredericksburg retains elements of a traditional German village. The town has a strong historic preservation ethic, and much of the architecture is intact, including a cobblestoned “marktplatz,” or central town

Fredericksburg, Texas

Population: **8,911**

Median household income: **\$32,276**

Weather: **Hot and dry, with mild winters and wet springs.**

What makes it great: **A quaint, historic German village with a strong identity and a commitment to organic farming.**

square, complete with pavilions and playgrounds, which serves as a hub for community events.

One of these events, now in its eleventh year, is the annual Renewable Energy Roundup and Green Living Fair. Co-organizer Laura Rice says that the fair is held in Fredericksburg in part because of the marktplatz and the general appeal of the town, and also in part because of its proximity to Austin and San Antonio.

There’s also a natural affinity to sustainability in the town. “The town is starting to embrace it,” says Rice, a Fredericksburg native. “The Germans who settled here have always done things like conserve water and collect rainwater. As far as renewables go, that’s starting to catch on. Organic farming has helped drive it. There’s no other region as strong for organics in the area.”

The food and wine industry is complemented by a thriving cultural scene. A dozen venues in the town and the surrounding region host musical acts, and the town boasts six theater performance groups. Artists of all sorts live in the region, and the downtown is home to several art galleries. 🌳

