



Travel Queer Here

These inclusive smaller Southern towns take pride

BY BETH D'ADDONO

In today's political climate, traveling in the South while queer can feel like a dicey proposition. Of course, New Orleans, Houston, Atlanta, Miami, and Asheville, North Carolina, are a few of the bigger cities that roll out the rainbow welcome mat. New Orleans is the gold standard, with its Southern Decadence festival akin to a queer Mardi Gras every Labor Day. It's the largest LGBTQ+ event in the South.

But there are smaller towns, too, destinations where tourism and vibrant LGBTQ+ bragging rights coexist, forming well-rounded arts, culture, outdoors, and dining scenes reflecting a geographic sense of place. These five towns practice inclusive tourism along with a public commitment to DEI—diversity, equity, and inclusion. It's not just the right thing to do; it's good business. Rainbow travelers spend plenty of green, adding up to \$100 billion a year from the queer community in the US alone.

 **ATHENS, GEORGIA**
visitathensga.com

Roughly 70 miles northeast of Atlanta, Athens sits in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a green getaway that attracts adventure seekers of all stripes. More than 127,000 people live in this college town, home to the University of Georgia. The edgy arts, theater, and live music scene is vibrant—unsurprising in the town formative for queer-relevant music acts including the B-52s, Indigo Girls, and R.E.M. Visit the colorful State Botanical Gardens and Georgia Muse-



INCLUSIVE CITIES | ON THE ROAD

From top: Athens Pridefest celebrates love; R.E.M. performed at the 40 Watt Club; Lexington shows pride all year long. **Opposite:** Normaltown neighborhood rolls out the rainbow welcome mat in Athens.

um of Art, with its 18,000-piece collection including art by Georgia O'Keeffe and Andy Warhol. Athens Pride + Queer Collective runs Pride Week, a week of events including Queer Prom. There's the annual AIDS fundraiser Boybutante Ball and drag shows at Athens Showgirl Cabaret. The dining scene is also diverse. A fabulous four-way rainbow crosswalk in the heart of downtown speaks volumes.

 **LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY**
visitlex.com

Lexington is about more than horses and bourbon. Named one of the most LGBTQ+ inclusive American cities by the Human Rights Campaign, the city of 320,000 is writing its own narrative of acceptance. The walkable downtown is home to bars and clubs that cater to a queer crowd, places like The Bar Complex, where drag shows and DJs entertain. For creative bites, head to Epping's or Lockbox. For a quiet breakfast, the LGBTQ+-owned Lussi Brown Coffee Bar delivers the goods. Crossings opened as a leather bar in the 1980s and remains a favorite watering hole. For a nonbar option, The Pride Center has an LGBTQ+ lending library and a busy activity schedule. Community thrives at events including Pride Week and Black Pride Week. Trans lives matter with the support of TransKentucky. Pay attention to the three-story-tall mural tribute to Sweet Evening Breeze at the corner of Church Street and North Limestone: She was a 20th-century pillar in Lexington's Black, gay, trans, and queer communities.

FROM TOP: NICOLAS MEJIA; GL JOHNSON; CO VISIT LEXINGTON. OPPOSITE: CO VISIT ATHENS GA



 **JOHNSON CITY, TENNESSEE**
visitjohnsoncitytn.com

Queer folks in rural places are often left out of the conversation surrounding LGBTQ+ life and culture—which is why Johnson City, an old mountain railroad town, begs a closer look. While its “Go. All. Out.” brand refers to the region’s myriad outdoor activities, Johnson City is also a hub for the LGBTQ+ community of Central Appalachia. Although it was late to the pride party, the 2018 debut drew 10,000 supporters, impressive since there were 66,000 residents at the time. Fast-forward, and now Johnson City delivers small-town charm, a gorgeous setting, and plenty of LGBTQ+ support and acceptance. There’s a Pride Center at East Tennessee State University and one downtown, and queer programming from groups like the Appalachian Equality Chorus and Rainbow Athletics. The dining scene features locally owned eateries dishing American comfort food, beer-fueled pub fare, and Thai, Japanese, German, and Indian cuisine.

 **PENSACOLA, FLORIDA**
visitpensacola.com

Situated in the Florida Panhandle, Pensacola is best known as a military town with easy access to 40 miles of white powder sand beaches. But it also happens to be a proudly queer city that produces one of the largest Pride events in the Southeast. Beyond an ever-evolving list of LGBTQ+-owned and -allied businesses, there’s nightlife at places like The Cabaret and The Roundup and themed events including Pawdi Gras and the Stamped Film Festival. Culture vultures can access an array of museums, theater, ballet, opera, and symphony, while the walkable downtown thrums with restaurants and shops, including queer-owned breakfast spots Craft Gourmet Bakery and Jitterbug Beverage Co., and drag brunch pop-ups from Steel Pony Diner. From pho to hot chicken tacos, global eats add more variety to the mix.

 **EUREKA SPRINGS, ARKANSAS**
visiteurekasprings.com

The gayest small town in America according to *The Advocate*, Eureka Springs is an oasis of inclusiveness in the heart of the Ozarks. Heralded for its natural springs, art scene, Victorian architecture, and scenic beauty, Eureka Springs is a beehive of queer activity. The town hosts four annual Diversity Weekends that attract droves of LGBTQ+ tourists and allies, culminating in one of the largest Pride parades in Arkansas. Nightlife abounds at places like Eureka Live, Missy’s White Rabbit Lounge, and Rowdy Beaver Den. Come suppertime, dine at queer-owned Nibbles Eatery or the intimate Stone House wine bar, two of many options. Best of all, genuine Southern hospitality prevails for all, y’all.

FROM LEFT: C/O VISIT JOHNSON CITY TENNESSEE; C/O VISIT EUREKA SPRINGS, ARKANSAS. OPPOSITE: C/O VISIT JOHNSON CITY TENNESSEE

LGBTQ+ and allies celebrate in Johnson City. **Opposite from left:** Johnson City TriPride Parade; the Rainbow Stairs in Eureka Springs.

