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America's Top College Football Towns

The crisp fall air, the sound of a marching band, and thousands of decked-out fans—it's got to be game day. In any of these eight destinations, you'll find true grit on the gridiron and more than enough off-campus attractions to justify staying the weekend.

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Austin, Tex.

University of Texas Longhorns

There's no shortage of sports-crazed towns in Texas—after all, the state is the inspiration (and setting) for the ode to high school football, *Friday Night Lights*. But as a weekend getaway destination, Austin trounces the competition. The perfect base for exploring this self-described "weird" city is the 40-room Hotel San José, a 1930s motor court turned boutique bungalow with reclaimed-pine platform beds and a wisteria-lined courtyard (1316 S. Congress Ave., sanjosehotel.com, from \$95 with shared bath, doubles from \$160 with private bath). It's right on South Congress Avenue (a.k.a. SoCo), a busy strip of kitschy souvenir shops and indie boutiques like Parts & Labour, where everything for sale—say, tees printed with "Remember the Oilers" and other Texas-centric slogans—is made by local designers (1117 S. Congress Ave., partsandlabour.com, T-shirts \$22). Of course, live music is a huge part of the city's appeal, but the famous 6th Street spots can get uncomfortably crowded—especially on a game day. The East Side Show Room (part bar, part art gallery, and part music venue) effectively conveys Austin's eclectic vibe and offers the best odds for scoring some post-game breathing room (1100 E. 6th St., eastsideshowroom.com).

Game-day tradition: With a history dating back to 1893, the Longhorns have had plenty of time to hone their rituals. The school song, "The Eyes of Texas" (set to the tune of "I've Been Working on the Railroad"), is more than a century old, and the fan-favorite "hook 'em horns" hand signal has been in play since 1955. And after every Longhorn touchdown at Darrell K. Royal–Texas Memorial Stadium, the roar of the 95,000-strong crowd is accompanied by the blast of a cannon—a booming manifestation of Lone Star State swagger.

Get your tickets: texasboxoffice.com, from \$70.

Boise, Idaho

Boise State University Broncos

For the capital of a state best known as a top potato producer, Boise has a surprisingly fertile arts scene. The 112-room Hotel 43, named for its location on the 43rd parallel—and in the 43rd state—plays up the city's cultural offerings, presenting all guests with an Arts Passport (981 Grove St., hotel43.com, football package rates from \$109) that covers free admission to the Boise Art Museum (670 Julia Davis Dr., boiseartmuseum.org), a 10-minute walk away, and free or

discounted tickets to performances by [Ballet Idaho](#), [Opera Idaho](#), and the [Boise Philharmonic](#). About five blocks away, the Basque Museum & Cultural Center is dedicated to promoting and preserving the history of the city's large Basque population, and the museum store stocks fun, handmade souvenirs like a Spanish leather bota wine bag and *abarkak* dancing shoes (611 Grove St., [basquemuseum.com](#), closed Sun.–Mon., admission \$4, bota \$15, shoes from \$40). There's no museum for potatoes in town—that's in [Blackfoot, Idaho](#), four hours away—but The Boise Fry Co. comes close. At this local favorite, diners can order seven types of spuds, cut five different ways and topped with 15 choices of homemade seasonings and dipping sauces (smoked sea salt, blueberry ketchup) for more than 100,000 different edible options. One appropriately highbrow variety: the \$8 Bourgeois, a plate of fine-cut fries flash-fried in duck fat and garnished with black truffle salt (111 Broadway, Suite 111, [boisefrycompany.com](#), fries from \$2.50).

Game-day tradition: When Boise State first unfurled its stadium's royal-blue turf back in 1986, it was an attention-getting move, to be sure. But since then, the Broncos have made more headlines for their action on the field, as the team has evolved into a perennial football powerhouse with one of the best home records in NCAA history. At each game, the 32,000 fans come clad in a designated team color: blue, orange, white, or sometimes all three, divided by stadium section.

Get your tickets: [broncosports.com](#), from \$30.

Eugene, Ore.

University of Oregon Ducks

The state of Oregon is truly a drinker's paradise, thanks to the flourishing Willamette Valley wine scene and the craft-beer and micro-roast-coffee communities already firmly established there. Travelers can try some of the region's most famous (and certified sustainable) pinots in Eugene at the Territorial Vineyards tasting room, in an old coffee warehouse in the funky Whiteaker neighborhood (907 W. 3rd Ave., [territorialvineyards.com](#), open Thurs. 5 p.m.–11 p.m., Fri.–Sat. 5 p.m.–9 p.m., tasting \$7), before slipping around the corner to Ninkasi Brewing Company to sip its signature Total Domination IPA on a new outdoor patio (272 Van Buren St., [ninkasibrewing.com](#), pint \$4). No trip to Oregon is complete without a stop at one of the McMnamin brothers' joints—quirky restaurants, bars, and hotels typically housed in converted historic buildings. Just a block from the university campus, East 19th Street Café has pool tables, plenty of outdoor seating, and a list of five tap beers produced in the McMnamins' own breweries (1485 E. 19th Ave., [mcmnamins.com](#)). In keeping with the collegiate spirit, guests can stay the night at the Excelsior Inn, a nearly 100-year-old building that originally served as a sorority house. The 14-room B&B a block from Oregon's campus has cherry furniture and vaulted ceilings, and the restaurant's daily breakfasts are made with fresh eggs and organic produce from owner Maurizio Paparo's farm (754 E. 13th Ave., [excelsiorinn.com](#), doubles from \$99).

Game-day tradition: Pregame parties stay toasty warm at Moshofsky Sports Center (a.k.a. "the Mo"), which hosts a large portion of the 54,000 Ducks fans who will flood next door into Autzen Stadium before kickoff. It's one of the biggest indoor tailgate gatherings in the country, with live music, big-screen TVs, and appearances by the mascot, Donald Duck—the iconic character that Walt

Disney himself approved for the university's use.

Get your tickets: goducks.com, from \$31.

Knoxville, Tenn.

University of Tennessee Volunteers

Life in Knoxville revolves around the Tennessee River—it hugs the edge of the university campus and carries sightseers past the city center, thanks to boats like the 325-passenger *Star of Knoxville*, which gives 90-minute sightseeing tours (300 Neyland Dr., tnriverboat.com, cruises from \$14.25). Top local barbecue spot Calhoun's, serving up award-winning baby-back ribs, creamy country-style coleslaw, and cornbread, sits right on the bank and is accessible by both water and land (400 Neyland Dr., calhouns.com, ribs from \$13)—though swimming home on a full stomach is not encouraged (better to take a boat). A few blocks north of the river in downtown's Market Square area, the 28-room Hotel St. Oliver provides plenty of Southern charm—the 1876 building is decorated with period furniture and oil paintings in gilded frames (407 Union Ave., stoliverhotel.com, doubles from \$89). The hotel is also within walking distance of Knoxville's most curious attraction, the 266-foot-tall Sunsphere: a golden glass ball built for the 1982 World's Fair.

Game-day tradition: If you plan on tailgating at Tennessee, you'd better bring a life jacket. What started in 1962 as one man's attempt to beat traffic by traveling to Neyland Stadium by boat has turned into a fleet of 200 vessels, dubbed the Volunteer Navy, that docks on the Tennessee River before each game. Inside the 102,038-seat stadium, the country's fourth-largest, the bluegrass classic (and unofficial school anthem) "*Rocky Top*" is played at least 20 times a game. It's no surprise the Vols tend to win at home—what opposing team wouldn't be distracted by that?

Get your tickets: utsports.com, from \$40.

Madison, Wis.

University of Wisconsin Badgers

Out-of-towners tend to think of one thing when the state of Wisconsin comes up: dairy. But there's more to Madison than cheddar and cheese curds. This southern Wisconsin city was actually at the forefront of the locavore movement, a fact that's reflected in the inventive homegrown offerings at the downtown Dane County Farmers Market, one of the largest farmers market in the country: Try raw milk and cave-aged cheeses from Bleu Mont Dairy or 12 varieties of Asian and European exotic pears from Future Fruit Farm (Capitol Square, Saturdays, dcfm.org). At local shop Fromagination, which specializes in picnic baskets loaded with locally made artisanal cheeses, the ecofriendly ethos spills out into the decor—the reclaimed-slate flooring once served as roof tiling on an abandoned Chicago warehouse, the tables are made of wood from a barn on a Wisconsin farm, and the clocks are circa 1917 from the state capitol (2 S. Carroll St., fromagination.com, picnic baskets from \$25). It doesn't get much more local than the Babcock Hall Dairy Store, where students from the UW Food Science Department sell sweet concoctions made on-site, like scoops of Badger Blast ice cream—a chocolate base swirled with fudge and dark-chocolate flakes (1605 Linden Dr., babcockhalldairystore.wisc.edu, \$2.50). A fitting end for any locavore dairy tour is the eight-room Arbor House hotel, a self-described "environmental inn" equipped with organic towels and energy-saving fixtures—along with views of the UW Arboretum (3402 Monroe St., arbor-house.com, doubles from \$110).

Game-day tradition: You almost need a manual to keep up with the traditions at Camp Randall Stadium. During the game, be prepared to participate in a finely choreographed version of the wave: first counterclockwise, then in slow motion, again at double-time, then reversed, and finally split into two counter-waves. After the third quarter ends, don't panic if you feel a rumble in the stands—it's just the 80,321 Badger fans taking the song "Jump Around" quite literally. Those with a surplus of team spirit can stick around for the nearly 45-minute postgame Fifth Quarter, a concert of favorites performed by the school's marching band.

Get your tickets: uwbadgers.com, from \$42.

Manoa, Hawaii

University of Hawaii Warriors

Rainbows abound in Manoa, a residential neighborhood in a lush valley just east of urban Honolulu. All around, Pacific Island cuisine and culture rules; exploring the area like a native is the only way to go. A traditional Hawaiian plate lunch will give you a taste of daily life in the islands—at Rainbow Drive-In, meals generally include an entrée plus two scoops of white rice and one scoop of macaroni salad or coleslaw; the loco moco, a beef patty topped with a fried egg and gravy, is a popular order (3308 Kanaina Ave., rainbowdrivein.com, plate lunches from \$5.75, loco moco \$6.75). Any local is likely to cite the [Makapu'u Point Lighthouse Trail](#), a moderate two-mile hike on the southeastern tip of Oahu as a favorite spot to watch the sun rise. The route is filled with sweeping views of the coastline, including Koko Head and Koko Crater, and leads to a lookout above the red-roofed 1909 Makapu'u Lighthouse, where you may even be able to spot a humpback when whale-watching season starts in November. The 72-room Hotel Renew, just a block from Kuhio Beach on the island's south side, has spa-inspired touches like dimmable lighting systems, shoji screens, and kimono robes. (129 Paoakalani Ave., hotelrenew.com, doubles from \$140).

Game-day tradition: Most teams have a pregame warm-up, but at the 50,000-seat Aloha Stadium, the Warriors take it to a new level. Their performance of the ha'a war chant was originally modeled after a dance by a New Zealand rugby team, but the players have since made it their own; the meaning of the words is top-secret. According to Hawaiian superstition, the ti plant brings good luck, so fans wave the glossy, oval-shaped leaves during the game—visitors can pick up a bunch at Tamashiro Market (802 N. King St., 808/841-8047) and most flower shops. Tip: The best seats for day games are located along the shaded Makai sideline; be sure to check the stadium map when buying tickets.

Get your tickets: hawaiiathletics.com, from \$25.

Morgantown, W.Va.

West Virginia University Mountaineers

As a coal town set at the intersection of the Appalachian foothills and the Rust Belt, Morgantown is filled with reminders of its industrial history—but this unassuming city is far from stuck in the past. In Morgantown's Wharf District, a stretch of converted warehouses now hold a riverside bistro, a historic train depot, and the 205-room Waterfront Place Hotel, which overlooks the mighty Monongahela River (2 Waterfront Pl., waterfrontplacehotel.com, doubles from \$139). Just outside the hotel, the city's [Caperton Trail](#) system begins, branching off into six miles of paths along an old railroad route—ideal for a pregame walk. Another reclaimed relic from the city's history is the Seneca Center, a shopping complex built inside the old Seneca Glass Company building, completed in

1896; a small glassmaking museum on-site makes for an educational break from browsing for handmade soap and clothing by independent designers (709 Beechurst Ave., senecacenter.com). Perhaps the tastiest reference to the past can be found at the new Morgantown Brewing Company, where the extensive selection of microbrews includes Zack Morgan's Pale Ale, a copper beer with a citrus aroma and an initial bite of American Cascade hops, named after Morgantown founder Zackquill Morgan (1291 University Ave., morgantownbrewing.com, pint from \$4).

Game-day tradition: About 60,000 people trek into Milan Puskar Stadium for every home game—temporarily making it the biggest city in the state. Since 1972, the marching band has played John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads" before every game—and should the Mountaineers prevail, fans stick around to sing it again, even louder.

Get your tickets: wvugame.com, from \$45.

Oxford, Miss.

University of Mississippi Rebels

With a population of about 19,000, Oxford is a small town with a big Southern heritage—long on literary talent and with a penchant for (tasteful) partying. Visitors can learn about famous son William Faulkner at Rowan Oak, the 1840s Greek Revival plantation house on 33 acres just outside campus that he called home until his death in 1962. Along with Faulkner's actual Underwood typewriter, the outline for his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Fable*, can be seen—scrawled in pencil on the plaster wall of his office (Old Taylor Rd., oldmiss.edu, \$5). Keep it literary by exploring the Southern-author selection downtown at Square Books. Bonus: The indie bookstore has an upstairs café and a 90-foot-long balcony overlooking the Square, where browsers are free to linger as long as they'd like (160 Courthouse Square, squarebooks.com). The no-frills down-home cooking at Ajax Diner, just down the street, hits all the Southern-staple high notes—chicken and dumplings, fried catfish—plus more adventurous offerings like hot-tamale pie and spicy cheese grits stuffed with smoked pork, corn, and tomatoes; the restaurant's generously sized Bloody Marys are garnished with spears of pickled okra (118 Courthouse Square, ajaxdiner.net, entrées from \$10, Bloody Mary \$6). A similar update on old-school style can be found at The 5 Twelve Bed and Breakfast, just east of campus: Set in an antebellum home with 12-foot-high ceilings and a wraparound porch, the hotel's six guest rooms are decorated with colorful graphic Marimekko textiles (the Finnish company has a store in town) and other modern accents (512 Van Buren Ave., the512oxford.com, doubles from \$105).

Game-day tradition: College football games and button-down shirts rarely go hand in hand, but at the 60,580-seat Vaught–Hemingway Stadium, Southern gentility is on display throughout the season; fans are expected to wear their Sunday best (ties for men, heels and dresses for ladies). Even the tailgate party has a classy spin: At the 10-acre Grove—a grassy expanse in the center of campus named for its abundance of oak, elm, and magnolia trees—tents are decked out with chandeliers, candelabras, fine china, lace doilies, and tablecloths. A common saying on the Grove: "We may not win every game, but we've never lost a party." With a catchphrase like that, it's no wonder Oxford is nicknamed the "Little Easy."

Get your tickets: olemisssports.com, from \$25.

