The 15 Friendliest Cities In The South

You won't meet a stranger in these Southern communities.

By **Tara Massouleh McCay** | Published on May 21, 2024

PHOTO: ROBBIE CAPONETTO

Southerners are known for their hospitality, so it's only fitting that our cities and towns are some of the friendliest places on earth. Our mamas raised us to treat guests with the utmost respect, so if you're from out of town, we're rolling out the welcome wagon. You'll never get lost because someone's always around to point you in the right direction (and give you a lunch recommendation). Smiling, friendly faces are the norm rather than the exception—from the clerk at the drugstore to folks just passing by on the street. And we guarantee you'll finish out your trip (no matter how brief) with a couple new friends.

While we like to think that all Southern cities are just as welcoming as the next, there are a few that stand out as being extra gracious. We polled the people who know the South best (that's you–our readers!) to find out which places have made you feel especially warm and fuzzy. Here are the South's 15 friendliest cities. Oh, and before y'all go and get all up in arms that your favorite place isn't included, remember that this list only includes places with a population over 40,000. We've got your friendly small towns in a separate story.

RELATED: The 20 Friendliest Towns In The South

How We Picked This List

An online survey was conducted by third-party agency Proof Insights among Southern Living consumers, asking them to name the friendliest people and places in the South. The survey was fielded from July 12 to August 23, 2023, and had over 20,000 respondents.

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15. Cary, North Carolina

PHOTO: COURTESY OF VISIT RALEIGH

The three cities that make up North Carolina's Research Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill) have earned their keep as favorite Southern destinations, but a new kid on the block nearby has stolen the show as one of the South's friendliest cities. Cary, once a minor suburb, has exploded into a major cultural hub while retaining its small-town character. Readers love the hospitality they receive at the big-city accommodations like the Umstead Hotel and Spa, but also called out devoted longtime residents like Ralph and Daphne Ashworth, who owned Ashworth Drugs in downtown Cary form 1957 through early 2024, for outstanding service.

EXPLORE CARY

14. Bentonville, Arkansas

Local trails provide biking options ranging from smooth rides to adventurous climbs. PHOTO: ROBBIE CAPONETTO

The birthplace of Walmart, Bentonville builds its legacy around more than just the retail giant. Now known for its impressive art scene thanks to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and The Momentary, as well as excellent outdoor activities. With a population around 60,000, readers commented on the city's small-town and community-focused feel.

EXPLORE BENTONVILLE

13. Austin, Texas

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Over the past decade, Texas's capital city has become one of the most sought-after places to live. Locals have always affectionately demanded that Austin be kept weird, but it's the city's "all are welcome" mentality that makes it one of the friendliest places in the South. Weird, lively, laidback, inviting, and genuine are all words readers used to describe Austin. One word you won't catch anyone using to talk about the city: pretentious.

EXPLORE AUSTIN

12. San Antonio, Texas

PHOTO: LOOP IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

The saying may be to "Remember the Alamo", but what people might recall most about San Antonio is how friendly it is. The city gets together over its iconic River Walk, where restaurants, shops, and attractions are all plentiful. One of the city's biggest assets is its diversity and the way it celebrates and welcomes all kinds of cultures. Its annual Fiesta is a 10-day celebration with more than 100 events that celebrates the history and culture of San Antonio.

EXPLORE SAN ANTONIO

11. Chattanooga, Tennessee

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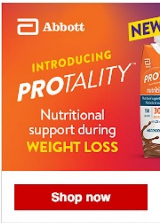

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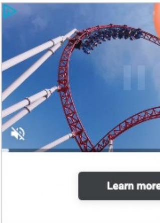

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PHOTO: ROBBIE CAPONETTO

A popular spot for outdoor enthusiasts and our top pick for places to retire in the South, this riverfront city has it all. From Rock City to the Chattanooga Aquarium to plentiful hiking and biking trails. Readers noted that the city has a real sense of community and cited people like the late Luther Massengill, a local radio host, for leading the charge. Each year on his birthday, the town commemorates his incredibly giving legacy with a "Random Acts of Luther Day," in which people demonstrate acts of kindness to others.

EXPLORE CHATTANOOGA

10. Lafayette, Louisiana

PHOTO: PATRICK DONOVAN / GETTY IMAGES

The character and culture of Lafayette are simply unmatched anywhere else in Cajun country. This is a place that's proud of its heritage and isn't afraid to let everyone know it. Every year, the city welcomes thousands of visitors to the three-day Festivals Acadiens et Créoles, which celebrates the music,

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crafts, art, and food of South Louisiana. Said one reader: "They don't care who are you or where you come from, they're still going to sweep you in, give you some food, and talk to you like you've been friends for five years."

MORE ON LAFAYETTE

9. Lexington, Kentucky

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/CHRIS BOSWELL

Kentucky is the second largest city in Kentucky but steals the number one spot as the state's friendliest place. Kindness is a universal virtue here, and its best emulated by locals and businesses devoted to the cause. DV8 Kitchen, a restaurant that employs a primarily second-chance work force, was listed time and time again by our readers as one of the places they love to support because of both its mission and its delicious food.

EXPLORE LEXINGTON

8. Franklin, Tennessee

PHOTO: MATTHEW MAXEY (VISIT FRANKLIN)

Once a quiet suburb just south of Nashville, everyone (or so it seems) has been let in on the secret that is Franklin. Its 16-block downtown is jam-packed with restored Victorian-era buildings now housing chic modern businesses like singer-songwriter Holly Williams's White Mercantile. And Franklin isn't just friendly to two-legged visitors. As the pilot location for the Mars PetCare Better Cities for Pets program, more than 90 local businesses follow a "pet code of conduct" that welcomes dogs inside. Pet-friendly patios are popular across town, too.

EXPLORE FRANKLIN

7. Asheville, North Carolina

PHOTO: ROBBIE CAPONETTO

Though Asheville sees upwards of 12 million visitors a year, at its heart it's still the artsy little mountain town it has always been. The craft beer flows freely, the Friday night drum circle still welcomes everyone to join in, and the vibes are always good. Folks who voted Asheville as the South's friendliest city noted its diversity, community-mindedness, and laid-back feel as some of its biggest strengths. Noted one reader, "It seems like it would be a clash of cultures, but I've never been to another place where everyone seems to be in a good mood all the time."

EXPLORE ASHEVILLE

6. Wilmington, North Carolina

PHOTO: LISA CORSON

We love our 2024 South's Best City on the Rise for a lot of reasons: its scenic riverwalk, laidback beach communities, historic architecture, and wonderful dining scene—just to name a few. But what makes the coastal city truly special is the way it effortlessly blends big city attractions with smaller town charm. Said one reader, "The town is small enough that people still say 'hello', 'good morning', and 'thank you', but sophisticated enough to have the same amenities as cities that aren't so friendly.

EXPLORE WILMINGTON

5. Nashville, Tennessee

PHOTO: PHOTO BY MIKE KLINE (NOTKALVIN) / GETTY IMAGES

Our readers sang the praises of the Music City, citing that though the destination has seen an influx of tourists in recent years (hello, bachelorette parties!), locals don't seem to suffer any tourist fatigue. Said one reader: "We spent three days in Nashville doing the typical tourist things. There wasn't one place that we went that the hospitality wasn't friendly. Everyone wanted to know where we were from. It's nice to walk into a store and be greeted." Plus, there's no easier place to make a friend than on the dance floor of a true Nashville honky tonk.

EXPLORE NASHVILLE

4. New Orleans, Louisiana

COMMANDER'S
PALACE
RESTAURANT

PHOTO: COURTESY OF COMMANDER'S PALACE

"There's a magnetism about New Orleans that grabs you right out of the gate," says *Today* show co-anchor Hoda Kotb about the city that she loves and will forever consider her hometown. Anyone who has ever visited knows the feeling. It's not uncommon to see a brass band marching down the street, folks having an Irish coffee well before noon, and an impromptu dance party breaking out—and that's all on a random Monday. Every day's a celebration in New Orleans and visitors have certainly picked up on the jovial spirit that can't be replicated.

EXPLORE NEW ORLEANS

3. Greenville, South Carolina

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE CITY OF GREENVILLE

Greenville is one of those cities that still feels like a small town, and that's precisely what we love about it. The downtown is walkable and manageable, but still offers plenty to see and explore, from independent bookstores to craft breweries. Falls Park on the Reedy is a gem of an attraction in the center of downtown where locals and visitors come together to enjoy riverside gardens and stunning waterfalls views from a lengthy suspension bridge. Time in the great outdoors is good for the soul, so maybe that's what makes Greenville locals so sunny? A leisurely bike ride along the Swamp Rabbit Trail (with a stop for a treat Swamp Rabbit Café & Grocery) could turn even the deepest of frowns upside down.

EXPLORE GREENVILLE

2. Savannah, Georgia

Forsyth Park, Savannah, Georgia. PHOTO: AMY LUO/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES

There's pure magic to be found in the shady squares and sun-speckled streets of Savannah. Everyone marvels at the majesty of the live oaks in Forsyth Park, but the city's real beauty can be found in the way it fully buys into its title as the Hostess City of the South. The city's public greenspaces and vibrant riverfront, lined with local shops and restaurants, are places that everyone can enjoy. When the weather is mild, don't be surprised to find everyone's front door propped open to let in a breeze from the river—but more importantly welcome guests inside.

EXPLORE SAVANNAH

1. Charleston, South Carolina

PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER SHANE

What more can we say about Charleston except that there's a reason it's been voted as your favorite city in our annual South's Best poll for more years in a row than we can count on one hand. It's the quintessential Southern city. There's beautiful architecture, excellent dining, waterfront views, quaint streets, and an indescribably welcoming spirit that just puts a smile on your face. If a certain mouse hadn't already declared his home the happiest place on earth, we'd venture to say that Charleston might claim the title. This anecdote from one of our readers exemplifies the city's care: "I was walking down King Street with my family, and it started pouring rain. A perfect stranger stopped in his car, handed us an umbrella, said "Welcome to Charleston," and drove away.

EXPLORE CHARLESTON

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