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SAVORING THE SMALL- TOWN LIFE

By Theresa Boehl

A summer trip to a tight-knit community outside of Des Moines, Iowa, was just the break I needed after years exploring urban destinations. I discovered that there's much more to this way of life than meets the eye.

I've always been drawn to the excitement of cities. So, it made sense that when I started my digital nomad journey in 2014 after a decade of living in Chicago, the frenzy and exhilaration of metropolises beckoned to me first and foremost.

Over the course of my nomadic adventures, I spent a winter gallivanting around the Mediterranean, which included a long stay in Barcelona, the hub of culture and food in Catalonia. I took an entire month to soak in the idiosyncrasies of New Orleans. I even hid away for a blissful eight months in Santo Domingo, the Caribbean's largest and most boisterous city. Other stops along the way included Paris, Havana, Amsterdam, and Montreal.

When I finally carved out a week in my busy travel itinerary to visit family in Winterset, Iowa, a Madison County town of about 5,000 residents, I couldn't help but wonder: After having my horizons broadened by international travel, what could a small town surrounded by farmland offer me?

A lot, it turns out. For starters, summer in Iowa is a kind of dream you never want to wake up from. During the warm months, pure blue skies and a sea of rolling emerald

hills have a lulling, hypnotic effect on the body and mind.

Riding with my uncle, aunt, and cousins in a pickup truck to their house on the outskirts of town—accessible only by taking winding dirt roads that curve past vast corn fields, golden wildflowers, and unhurried creeks—I felt completely out of my comfort zone, in the best possible way. Finally, some space to breathe and let my hair down.

Small town with a big spirit

For city folks, there seems to be the belief that if you've seen one small town, you've seen them all. But, as I discovered once I arrived, there are a few features that put this town on the map.

Winterset is the birthplace of Western film star John Wayne, a fact that residents hold dear. Confession: I wasn't familiar with Wayne's movies before I visited, and, to be frank, some of his outdated film personas and past controversial statements don't sit well with me now that I've dug a little deeper. However, I was delighted by the quaint home in which he was born, which is open to the public as part of the John Wayne Birthplace & Museum. Built in 1880, it's a gem with

original woodwork, flooring, and stained-glass windows.

Aside from the John Wayne connection, Winterset residents are fiercely proud of their six historic covered bridges, some harking back to the 1870s. These wood-constructed, brightly painted structures are peppered throughout Madison County, which served as the setting for the languid, steamy affair depicted in the 1995 film *The Bridges of Madison County*, starring Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep.

My aunt dutifully shuttled me to as many of the covered bridges as possible. In stopping to admire them, I realized that they're not just relics of the past. These bridges play an important role in residents' sense of identity—so much so that when one is damaged or vandalized, the whole county rallies to make it right. I came face-to-face with charred and skeletal Cedar Covered Bridge, ravaged by arson for the second time in 20 years, a fact that neighbors lamented. But it didn't stay that way for long. Since my visit, that bridge has been fully rebuilt. You can bet that Winterset residents won't ever let their treasured bridges fall by the wayside.

Opposite:
The outhouse
at North
River Stone
Schoolhouse.



A tight-knit place to gather

It's impossible not to be dazzled by Winterset's village-like downtown area, with its rows of historic Italianate structures repurposed to house modern commercial businesses. I couldn't keep my eyes off the impressive slate-and-cream dome that tops the French Renaissance Revival-style courthouse standing guard over a center plaza.

This Main Street district is home to the usual downtown businesses—an art gallery, hair salons, a flower shop—but there are also a few vestiges of a bygone era.

I stumbled across a soda fountain tucked into a former drugstore, complete with a long counter lined with swivel bar stools. At Northside Café, which bills itself as the oldest restaurant in the state, I posed for a photo with a vintage purse like one that appeared in *The Bridges of Madison County*. And a quick stop to the Iowa Quilt Museum, occupying a space that was a J.C. Penney store from 1931 to 1997, gave me new insight into American traditions that have all but been forgotten.

Without a doubt, there's a real sense of community within these few blocks. Shop owners and



patrons often know each other on a first-name basis.

As my aunt explained, anonymity is not really an option in Winterset. There’s just no way to be incognito when everyone knows each other. Of course, this way of life has its benefits.

One morning, when a sudden “pop” slowed our vehicle to a halt on the way into town, a parade of neighbors—one by one—stopped to ask if we needed help. My aunt knew every person. We waited patiently while a technician from the local shop fixed the flat tire, dust from the dirt road coating his hands and clothes. He said my aunt could stop by the shop to pay whenever it was convenient.

Appreciating the outdoors

In a time when so many kids spend hours hunched over cell phones, I found it refreshing to see my preteen cousins so engaged with nature and the surrounding landscape.

They schooled me on the difference between bees, wasps, and yellow jackets, and stopped to point out poison ivy whenever we saw it. We ate mulberries and they helped me learn how to identify coyote poop. Nothing was “over there,” it was “clear over there.” And there were so many stories—the tree that exploded when it was hit by lightning during a storm, the mean old yellow dog who would chase you down the road if you walked too close to his house.

Since I grew up in the Midwest myself, it was no surprise to me that this area of Iowa is replete with natural wonders. Its parks are spacious, clean, and never crowded. During my glorious week in Madison County, I hiked with my family at Ledges State Park, with neon-green lagoons and 100-foot drop-offs, and climbed the historic Clark Tower, a limestone mini-castle providing panoramic views of the leafy valley below. For

the first time in my life, I felt the thrill of driving through a river—the main draw at Pammel State Park, one of the very first state parks in Iowa.

Best of all, I slept every night at my family’s tree farm in pure silence and pitch-black darkness, with the sense that the entire world was asleep with me. This is a kind of bliss that city dwellers don’t often get to experience, and I relished it. No traffic sounds, no neighbors, no sirens, no locked doors, no drama, no stress. After a week in Madison County, I came to realize that maybe, just maybe, city life isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. **R**

Theresa Boehl is a San Diego-based freelance writer and former digital nomad. After living in Chicago for a decade, she roamed Europe, the Caribbean, and various regions in the United States before setting down roots in Southern California.

Opposite, top: Roseman Bridge, one of six historic covered bridges in the region.

Opposite, bottom: Downtown Winterset boasts a close-knit community.

Above: Driving through a river at Pammel State Park.