

AMAZING AUTUMN SATURDAYS

ARTICLE BY TIM HYLAND

Sure, the football is great. But in America's best college towns, the true game day experience far transcends what happens on the field.



Here's the dirty little secret about college football: It's not really about the football. Or at the very least, it's not just about the football.

Sure, college football fans care about wins and losses. (In some places around this country, they may care a bit too much.) But even the most fanatical of college football fanatics will, when pressed, ultimately admit that their love for their school, and their love for this uniquely American game, is built on a lot more than just the three hours of football they watch each Saturday.

It is a love, rather, that is built on tradition and on rivalry, and, perhaps more than anything else, on a true and abiding sense of place.

Football is the only truly American sport—a game that is played in each and every corner of this country, from the biggest of cities to the most remote rural outposts imaginable. Its fans take true pride in not only what their favorite team accomplishes on the field, but also in the stadiums in which the teams play, and in the towns they call home.

In other words, in college football, a sense of

place really does matter. Which is why from Ann Arbor to Oxford, Lincoln to State College, South Bend to Athens, each and every town in which the game is played offers a truly unique experience—one tied up in local culture, quirky and revered tradition, and nearly 150 years of history.

The East Coast offers a wealth of college football towns worth visiting—enough to keep even the most avid fan and traveler busy for years trying to hit them all—so picking out just a few to highlight is difficult. Suffice to say, then, the towns that made our list are truly special—destinations that, in some way, epitomize what college football is all about, and why college football fans are so downright fanatical about their beloved game (and everything that surrounds it).

GOING BIG

For sheer enormity of college football experience, one can hardly do better than State College, Pa., home to the Penn State Nittany Lions.

The team's mammoth home, Beaver Stadium (1 Beaver Stadium, University Park, Pa.),

consistently ranks among the loudest and most intimidating in the nation. Especially at night games against top opponents, there are few more impressive venues in the game; with fans decked out in all white as part of the program's trademark "White Outs," the stadium literally rocks along with the beat of 110,000 crazed Nittany Lions fans. It's a sight every college football fan ought to experience in person.

As impressive as the stadium is, though, it is the town—and the entire region—that really makes Happy Valley Saturdays special. By mid-October, the mountains surrounding the place are ablaze in autumn color, making for a picture-perfect setting for tailgating. Meanwhile, the quaint town of State College itself, which borders the school's gorgeous and sprawling campus, is the quintessential college town, providing guests with all of the amenities they might expect: quaint coffee shops, divey college bars, funky boutiques and hip restaurants.

At the very confluence of town and campus stands the Hotel State College (100 W. College



Ave.), a stately blue-and-white landmark that serves as the community's de facto living room. The hotel building includes the cozy Corner Room for casual dining, the beautiful Allen Street Grille for upscale dining and Zeno's Pub, for the college dive bar experience (not to mention a phenomenal beer selection). Visitors beware: finding a hotel room on a Penn State football weekend is difficult, and rooms—especially at a highly desirable spot such as the Hotel State College—should be booked at least one year in advance.

Travelers seeking a similarly "big" experience would be well-advised to check out the mammoth gameday scenes at Clemson University in South Carolina (the pregame spectacle of "the most exciting 25 seconds in college football" will give you goosebumps); the University of North Carolina (Kenan Stadium may be the most beautiful in the country, and the town of Chapel Hill is nothing short of lovely); and the University of Virginia (where the football isn't always top-notch, but the Southern hospitality is wonderful).

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