

Examiner.com Travel Writing (2011-2012)

Outer Banks, North Carolina

Home to the Wright Brothers in Kitty Hawk and the first permanent settlement of its kind in the Americas (Roanoke Island), North Carolina's Outer Banks are not only a historical wonder but an example of nature's purest natural beauty. The beaches along the Banks look like painted pictures, with wooden piers and structures jutting out and seagulls flying overhead. In the morning the sunrise is a riveting study in color and when the day ends the shore pulls back and seems to shush itself into silence.

Whether you are there to fish, windsurf, bike, or simply relax on the beach with a book, the Outer Banks offer a location that allows you to get away from it all. If desired, there are many beach shops, galleries and boutiques that can be found in short distance, along with a wide variety of locally owned restaurants. The islands are all connected by a series of bridges so you are never far away from where you want to be.

Of particular note is the upcoming Outer Banks Taste of the Beach on March 15-18, 2012. This four-day festival features wine tastings, cooking classes, special menu presentations, celebrity guest chef appearances, brewery tours, tapas crawls and much more. Coinciding with St. Patrick's Day weekend, the Taste of the Beach will also include, naturally, an Irish culinary theme. The 23rd annual St. Patrick's Day Parade will be held, along with an 8K Race—the Leprechaun—sponsored by Kelly's Outer Banks Restaurant, located in Nag's Head. Sláinte!

To visit the Outer Banks, find a rental space that suits your needs and go. Every season offers a different appeal but this is a location that is to be enjoyed no matter the weather.

Crested Butte, Colorado

The snow is falling in beautiful Crested Butte, Colorado and powder lovers need to pack it up and get on the mountain, pronto!

This former coal mining town (pop. 1,487) is the perfect spot to plan a President's Day weekend escape. Crested Butte Mountain Resort is the place to go, with 13 lifts and 86 trails on 770 acres, and the reports are inviting: 15 inches have come down in the last two days, adding to the foot and a half of snow the mountain has received in the past week. In total, over seven feet of snow has fallen so far this season, creating a very soft and sweet 53-inch base.

Whether you are into extreme sports or just beginning to make your way around a snowboard, Crested Butte offers something for everyone. Uncrowded slopes, diverse terrain and great snow conditions are some of the many reasons it is known as a true Colorado ski town.

Crested Butte prides itself on small town charm and should be celebrated in particular for two truly distinctive traits: there are no traffic lights that man the streets, and chain stores are nowhere to be found. With more gourmet restaurants than any other Colorado town its size and more than 30 bars, the "Butte" prefers an independent approach. The people here get along just fine without super-sizing or big-boxing.

In addition to the many small specialty shops and galleries, Crested Butte stands out for its unique modes of transportation: distinctive hand painted buses operate day and night and, snow or not, the locals love their bicycles. No matter what the weather may be, you can find bikes parked in

front of many shops and bars, usually of the vintage variety. Traffic is not a problem in Crested Butte.

The news continues to get better as snow remains in the forecast for the next few days and temperatures reaching the upper 20s. According to Crested Butte's visitor's site, more terrain may be opening soon as well. Time to ski!

Salt Lake City, Utah

Salt Lake City, Utah, which was founded by Mormon leader Brigham Young, may not be able to hide its secret any longer. With two Mormon Republican candidates for president (Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman), one might circle this mountainous western city as a particularly conservative hotspot, but don't tell that to the readers of *The Advocate*. The gay and lesbian magazine has chosen Salt Lake City as "The Gayest City in America" in its latest issue, which may be a surprising choice for those who know the city only for its Mormon association.

The Advocate's criteria may be subjective—the number of teams entered in the Gay Softball World Series, the presence of a women's NBA team, and Nude Yoga classes were all factors in compiling their list—but lesbian wine bars and packed gay dance clubs cannot be denied when it comes to determining Salt Lake City's gayness.

A big factor in lightening everyone's moods, straight or gay, has to be in part from the new liquor law that Gov. Huntsman passed in 2009. The old arrangement, which required anyone wishing to drink at a bar to be members of a "private club," is apparently no longer enforced, although some searching can reveal many remaining quirks in Utah's laws. The bottom line is, according to the Salt Lake Visitor's Bureau, drinking is no longer the obstacle it used to be in Salt Lake City. Phew!

There are plenty of other things to do in Salt Lake City besides drink at gay bars or hear the Mormon Tabernacle Choir sing. Home to the 2002 Winter Olympics, the city and surrounding area are home to some of the country's finest ski resorts, as well as "The Greatest Snow on Earth" (an actual trademarked distinction). What makes it so great? Well, the warm waters of the Great Salt Lake lie in such close proximity to the Wasatch mountain range that it allows any cold front to produce light, dry and powdery snow—a snowboarders' dream (in Chicago we call that "lake effect" snow).

Lest we forget, nearby Park City will host the Sundance Film Festival, Robert Redford's annual showcase for independent filmmakers, from January 19 – 29 this year (Salt Lake City also hosts theaters and venues during the festival).

Chelsea, Michigan

Chelsea, Michigan is the small town that you hit before Ann Arbor and Detroit on the southeastern side of the state. Roughly four hours from Chicago, Chelsea has a small-town charm that belies its updated status from "village" to "city" (2004).

The people are friendly and the businesses are plentiful in Chelsea. Downtown Main Street buzzes with coffee shops, restaurants, pubs, and the Chelsea Teddy Bear Company, a retail store specializing in all things Teddy Bear. You know you need one!

One of its hometown heroes is actor Jeff Daniels, who grew up here and still resides in the community. As if "Dumb and Dumber" were not enough, Daniels also runs a non-profit theatre

company in Chelsea known as the Purple Rose Theatre Company. His comedy, "Escanaba in da Moonlight," is currently running through the end of the year at Purple Rose.

Another claim to fame is the Chelsea Milling Company, home of Jiffy Baking Mixes. You've seen them in the grocery store since you were little (their origins date back to the early 1800s!): corn bread, frosting, pizza dough, muffins and more, all in those tiny boxes that sell for peanuts.

The Amtrak train line runs right through from Chicago to Chelsea, if you feel like a scenic and relaxing ride through Michigan.