
DESTINATIONS

With tourist spots filled to capacity, vacationers seek out under-the-radar attractions

Christopher Elliott Special to USA TODAY

Published 11:59 a.m. ET Aug. 4, 2021

When Thomas Hall planned a weekend road trip to Blacksburg, Virginia, he added an unusual tourist attraction to his itinerary: the Dairy Market in Charlottesville.

Hall heard about the new food hall in the historic Monticello Dairy Building in downtown Charlottesville and wanted to see it.

"It was new, it was different and it was an easy place to eat new and varied food outside," says Hall, a lawyer from Richmond, Virginia. "We also want to avoid super-crowded destinations this summer, especially with unvaccinated kids."

The Dairy Market is one of thousands of unusual attractions finding their way onto summer vacation itineraries this year. With the most popular places filled to capacity or closed, travelers are turning to alternatives that include quirky museums, rock carvings and street art.

"There are a lot of lesser-known monuments scattered across the country that check the boxes of different, unusual and underrated," says Zander Buteux, a manager at the booking site VacationRenter.

He has been tracking the trend since earlier this year, when his customers began making reservations for summer vacation rentals – some of them in off-the-beaten-path places. And Buteux wondered: What's there?

A lot, actually.

Looking for unusual tourist attractions? Here's your sign

Take the small town of Buellton, California, just north of Santa Barbara. If you blink, you'll miss the exit on U.S. Highway 101. In a small subdivision of ranch-style homes and trailers, you'll find the compound of the almost-famous Mendenhall Museum. It's a fascinating collection of vintage gas pumps, road signs and license plates from the golden age of road travel.

"We're seeing more visitors already with things opening up," says Mark Mendenhall, the museum's owner. "Most of our visitors are saying they are happy to get out and do things again."

The Mendenhall Museum has a few advantages over other attractions. It's largely outdoors, so you don't have to worry as much about social distancing. It's a convenient road stop on your way up the California coast. But mostly, it fits the bill for anyone looking for an unusual tourist attraction. It doesn't get much stranger than a museum for gas pumps.

Outdoor attractions are drawing more visitors this summer

There's lots to see outdoors this summer. In Comfrey, Minnesota, you can admire 7,000-year-old sacred Native American rock carvings. There are more than 5,000 life stories in the Jeffers Petroglyphs with images of humans, and animals such as bison, turtles, elk and thunderbirds. It's the site of one of the oldest continuously used sacred sites in the world. The petroglyphs are about 2½ hours southwest of Minneapolis by car.

If you're in New England, check out Brattleboro's Words Trail, a narrated tour featuring the literary celebrities associated with Brattleboro, Vermont, such as Saul Bellow, Harper Lee and Frederick Douglass. You can find the trail online and download a free app for iOS or Android to guide you on the tour.

If you're more of an art person, you can check out the hundreds of street art murals in Richmond, Virginia, this summer. For an extra-strange experience, explore Mount Trashmore in nearby Virginia Beach. It's a city park created by compacting layers of solid waste and clean soil.

These museums are unusual

If you don't mind venturing indoors, you can stop by the Jefferson Barracks Telephone Museum near St. Louis this summer. It's a small history museum in a historic building.

If your kids have never seen a landline phone, this is the place to take them. You'll find everything from a 1920s operator switchboard to phone memorabilia from the 1880s to today. There's even a telephone pole with the equipment used to climb it.

"We're far away from the hustle and bustle of the big city," says museum spokeswoman Sharon Krist. "Guests can enjoy the surrounding 426-acre Jefferson Barracks Parks, which has lots of wildlife, walk trails and history."

In Johnson City, Tennessee, about a two-hour drive northeast of Knoxville, you can visit the Gray Fossil Site, a museum and outdoor Pliocene-era fossil dig site dating back about 5 million years.

"What makes this site so cool is that the dig site, lab and museum are all at one location – and it's in the middle of town," says Jenna Lafever, a spokeswoman for Johnson City. "Anyone can sign up to be a paleontologist for a day and participate in the museum's dig days." At the moment, the museum is digging up a massive mastodon with 13-foot tusks.

Just because it's weird doesn't mean it's empty

A word of warning about obscure summer attractions: Just because it's a little weird doesn't mean you'll have it all to yourself. Places like the Dairy Market are already seeing an influx of visitors. Dairy Market managers predict that when the nearby

University of Virginia starts classes later this month, it will be as busy as any of Charlottesville's other tourist attractions.

Hall, the lawyer from Richmond who planned a vacation around a visit to the market, says it was worth the wait. His wife and daughters ordered turkey and cheese sandwiches from Take it Away, one of the 13 food vendors. And then they enjoyed an ice cream sundae at the legendary Moo Thru.

"We loved it," he says.

Other nontraditional tourist attractions may also be stretched to the limit this summer. For example, the Corn Palace in Mitchell, South Dakota, is in the middle of nowhere. It's an hour's drive from Sioux Falls in the eastern part of the state. The owners cover the building made in thousands of bushels of corn, grains and native grasses. You have to see it to believe it.

It is also popular. The Corn Palace is world-famous and now attracts more than half a million visitors. Maybe that's the takeaway from the unusual tourist attractions travelers will visit this summer. If enough people come, they won't be so unusual. So experience them now before they end up in every guidebook – or in a story in the largest newspapers in the United States.

How to discover an unusual tourist attraction

Get off the beaten path. Don't be afraid to take the back roads. Be open to discovery. Many – if not most – of these weird and wonderful places are nowhere near an interstate highway.

Ask a local. In an age when everyone consults their smartphone or does an internet search, the best way to find what you want may be to put away that device. Think about it. The reason something is obscure is that no one knows about it. You probably won't find it online.

Be open to ... anything. It's one thing to be tired of museums, theme parks and beaches. But it's another to open yourself to a phone museum, fossil site or food hall. If you keep an open mind and are ready to explore, you'll discover new places and make new memories this summer.