

## VERMONT

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VERGENNES, Vt. — Vergennes made a great first impression. We were traveling north on twisty Route 7, passing rolling farmlands and dairy barns, grazing cows and tall silos. We crested a hill, and the compact “Little City” came into view. From afar, we saw a towering white church steeple and a tight cluster of homes and buildings nestled in a picturesque valley, hugged by mountains. Up close, we discovered a relaxed, nearly idyllic community, Vermont’s version of Three Pines, the charming, fictional town in author Louise Penny’s mystery series. Vergennes (ver-JENZ), held surprises, too. It was serene, tranquil, pretty, but also had top-notch restaurants, a nationally recognized ice cream parlor, one of New England’s best chocolate shops, boutiques, galleries, theater, and more.

“We have old timers, families who have been here for generations, and newcomers from California, New York, and other places, who are choosing to live here,” says Julie Nelson Basol, marketing and development coordinator for Vergennes Partnership. “And they’ve brought a real sense of passion and entrepreneurship.”

Under two square miles, Vergennes is Vermont’s smallest city, and yet has everything you need for a lovely getaway.

## Stay

The sprawling Strong House Inn, once home to Samuel Paddock Strong, sits on 5 acres with views of both the Green Mountains and the Adirondacks ([www.stronghouseinn.com](http://www.stronghouseinn.com)). Strong, the son of General Samuel Strong who directed the Vermont militia at the Battle of Plattsburgh during the War of 1812, built the house in 1834.

There are 14 updated rooms, six located in the Main House and eight in the separate Guest House. Individually decorated Main House rooms have original wine pine floors, historical details, and traditional décor. The spacious Vermont Room is a favorite, with glass doors leading to a private terrace with mountain views.

Rooms in the Rabbit Ridge Guest House are more modern, with larger, contemporary baths, gas fireplaces, and private balconies or terraces. The roomy Adirondack Room is most popular, with an artsy four-poster bed made of tree trunks and twigs, a fieldstone fireplace, soaking tub, and doors leading to a small, private terrace.

We love the public gathering spots at the inn, including the dining room, library, a large living room with a bar, a courtyard, and an expansive yard with paths leading across fields and into the woods.

## Explore

The 1912 Greek Revival-style Bixby Memorial Free Library is a treasure, with stately columns, a marble, double-sided staircase, historic rooms, and a beautiful glass dome ceiling ([www.bixbylibrary.org](http://www.bixbylibrary.org)). Check out the lovely half-

# Who needs a big city getaway when there's Vergennes?



BOB SCHATZ

circle children’s room, with a Lego table, puzzle table, and cozy sitting area with views of the Adirondacks. The library also houses a variety of memorabilia and artifacts, including a collection of Abenaki stone tools, and early Vergennes photographs. The upstairs half-round room contains an exhibit on Stephen Bates, Vermont’s first Black sheriff and chief of police. There’s also an historic marker commemorating Bates at Vergennes City Park in the heart of downtown.

The nearby Rokeby Museum, a stop along Vermont’s African American Heritage Trail, sits on 90 acres and includes an historic 1780s farm that was once an important stop along the Underground Railroad ([www.rokeby.org](http://www.rokeby.org)). Tour the house that was owned by four generations of the Robinson family, who were prominent Quakers, farmers, authors, artists and abolitionists. Check out the museum exhibit following the lives of two fugitive slaves who sought refuge at the Robinson farm. There are also inter-

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pretive trails through fields and forests, including the Red Trail leading to a knoll with expansive views, and a Storybook Trail.

The 1897 Vergennes Opera House was built in 1897 but shuttered in 1974 because of its total disrepair (pigeons in the belfry!). Saved by Vergennes citizens in the 1990s, the historic theater hosts a variety of live concerts, Broadway productions, and other events ([www.vergennesoperahouse.org](http://www.vergennesoperahouse.org)).

Vergennes, centered around Otter Creek with access to Lake Champlain, was a thriving mill town in the early 1800s, and an important shipbuilding center during the War of 1812. A fleet of ships, including the schooner Ticonderoga, the brig Eagle, the 146-foot frigate Confiance, and the 26-gun Saratoga

were built here, and used in the Battle of Plattsburgh on Sept. 11, 1814, defending Lake Champlain against a British invasion. You’ll see remnants of the mills, along with a fine view of Otter Creek Falls, at Macdonough and Falls parks. Both parks are a short walk from the downtown.

If shopping is one of your favorite activities on vacation, Vergennes has a handful of boutiques and gift shops, including MALABAR, with unique housewares, gifts, and accessories ([www.malabarshop.com](http://www.malabarshop.com)); The Joy Shop, with artisan jewelry, vintage clothing, and gift items ([www.facebook.com/thejoyshopvt](http://www.facebook.com/thejoyshopvt)); and Ten Stones Emporium, with artisan works from around the world ([www.facebook.com/Ten-Stones-Emporium-103551905270686](http://www.facebook.com/Ten-Stones-Emporium-103551905270686)).

## Eat

Black Sheep Bistro is arguably the restaurant that first put Vergennes on the culinary map ([www.blacksheepbistrovt.com](http://www.blacksheepbistrovt.com)). This small, rustic restaurant

on Main Street serves a seasonally rotating menu of French-inspired dishes in hefty portions with fair prices. Each freshly prepared meal comes with both a large paper cone filled with French fries and a bowl of soupy, butter- and cream-laden mashed potatoes, because, why not? Try appetizers, like escargot à la Provençal, pork dumplings and venison cigar rolls with maple horseradish aioli, and entrees such as the Thai had-dock with coconut curry sauce, brie and bacon chicken, or a classic bistro steak. Stop by Vergennes Laundry, a sweet little spot for coffee and pastries ([www.vergenneslaundry.co](http://www.vergenneslaundry.co)). If you’re craving a full-size breakfast, 3 Squares Cafe is your place ([www.threesquarescafe.com](http://www.threesquarescafe.com)). Its breakfast paninos, burritos and the banana and maple walnut buttermilk pancakes are great start-of-the-day fare. It also serves sandwiches, burgers, and salads for lunch and early takeout dinner (hence the name).

“I started the brewery in the basement, and it was a mess; a complete demo job and rebuild to get it going,” says Ian Huizenga, owner of Bar Antidote. And at the end of the day, when people got off work, they’d show up just to lend a hand. “There were 15 or so people who came in and worked for free,” he says. “It’s a really caring community.” The brewery and restaurant have since moved and expanded upstairs, offering a selection of handcrafted brews made from Vermont grown hops. There’s summertime outdoor seating and often live music, and a farm-to-table menu of comfort food. The menu changes but expect dishes like ahi tuna tacos, fried chicken baskets and Thai pork meatballs.

There are two more places you absolutely must visit before leaving Vergennes. Nationally recognized lu’lu ice cream (it’s been featured on “Good Morning America”) has small batch, made from scratch, premium ice cream, nearly worth the trip to this tiny northern enclave ([www.luluvt.com](http://www.luluvt.com)). Just down the street is Daily Chocolate, owned by Dawn Wagner, a former New York City off-Broadway and Broadway stage manager, and chocolatier ([www.dailychocolatevt.com](http://www.dailychocolatevt.com)). “I’ve always been involved in chocolate,” Wagner said, while she prepared a tray of hazel and berry bark bars. Wagner, a Vermont native, has worked at Lake Champlain Chocolates, El Eden, a chocolate shop in the East Village, and her own company cocoSNAP! When she returned to Vermont, she worked at Daily Chocolate, before purchasing it in 2020. The chocolates, primarily made with local Vermont ingredients, are rich, complex — wonderful.

Burlington is about a 30-minute drive away; we’d originally thought we’d head there after exploring tiny Vergennes. We nixed that plan, happy to hang in the Little City, enjoying our chocolates.

For more information on Vergennes, visit [www.vergennesdowntown.org](http://www.vergennesdowntown.org).

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