

Survey Reveals the Summer Businesses That Still Take Americans and Canadians Back to Childhood

Advance Funds Network surveyed 3,021 Americans and Canadians aged 45+ to identify the local businesses most closely associated with nostalgic summer memories.

NEW YORK, NY, UNITED STATES, August 13, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Every vacation destination has one: the summer business capable of transporting people straight back to childhood.



The Most Nostalgic Summer Spots in the U.S. and Canada [2026]

It might be the ice cream window visited after a day at the beach, the noisy arcade on the boardwalk, the mini-golf course with slightly faded signs, or the snack shack where everything tasted better because it was eaten in a swimsuit. For others, it is a drive-in theater, a pier-side gift shop, a family-run diner, or the concession stand that somehow became as memorable as the vacation itself.

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People return to these businesses because they offer something a national chain cannot recreate. The food, rides, or souvenirs matter, but so do the memories attached to them.”

Irving Betesh, CRO of Advance Funds Network

[Advance Funds Network](#) surveyed 3,021 Americans and Canadians ages 45 and older to identify the local businesses and attractions most closely associated with nostalgic summer memories.

These were not necessarily the countries' biggest tourist attractions. Instead, respondents chose the places they associated with family trips, sticky fingers, arcade tokens, souvenir shopping, and long drives home.

Californians overwhelmingly chose Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk as their most nostalgic summer spot. Few

places capture California summer quite like the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. Open since 1907,

the oceanfront amusement park has been the backdrop for generations of beach days, arcade games, boardwalk snacks, and rides beside the Pacific. Its Giant Dipper roller coaster, carousel, midway games, and seaside setting give it the feeling of a childhood vacation preserved in motion: salt air, sunburn, tickets in hand, and one more ride before heading home.

Nathan's Famous in Coney Island was New Yorkers' choice. It began in 1916, when Nathan Handwerker opened a nickel hot dog stand near the Brooklyn shore. More than a century later, the original location remains tied to the sound and spectacle of New York summer: boardwalk crowds, beach traffic, fries in paper containers, and hot dogs eaten within sight of the rides. A stop at Nathan's can feel less like a meal than a small civic ritual, especially when the heat rises and Coney Island is at its loudest.

Ohioans voted for Cedar Point, which began as a Lake Erie bathing beach in 1870 and has grown into one of America's best-known amusement parks. Its roller coasters, boardwalk, arcades, beach, hotels, and water park have made Sandusky a summer destination for generations of Ohio families. The first glimpse across the causeway can still feel like part of the ritual: rides rising above the lake, children pointing from the car and the promise of a full day of heat, noise, snacks and one more coaster before heading home.

Over in South Dakota, Wall Drug began in 1931 as a small-town drugstore and became one of America's most famous roadside stops after offering free ice water to travelers crossing the hot South Dakota plains. Today, its cafés, gift shops, billboards, backyard attractions, giant jackalope, dinosaur, souvenirs, and donuts make it a natural pause on the way to the Badlands or Black Hills. For families on a summer road trip, the stop often begins miles before arrival, with children counting signs from the back seat and everyone waiting to see whether the place is as strange and sprawling as promised.

Tennesseans said Dollywood brought them the most nostalgia. Dollywood's roots go back to 1961, when the attraction first opened in Pigeon Forge as Rebel Railroad. Over the decades, it evolved into one of Tennessee's best-known family destinations, with roller coasters, steam train rides, live music, crafts, food, water attractions and a strong Smoky Mountain identity. A summer day there carries the rhythm of a classic mountain vacation: the whistle of the train, the smell of cinnamon bread, families moving between rides and shows, and the hills rising just beyond the park.

And in Missouri, Silver Dollar City emerged in the top spot. It opened in 1960 in the Ozarks and has grown into one of Missouri's defining family attractions. Set near Branson, the park combines roller coasters, water rides, craft demonstrations, live entertainment, cave tours, and old-fashioned storefronts built around an 1880s theme. A summer day there has the rhythm of a family vacation in motion: rides in the heat, shade between shows, food eaten on the move, and children trying to squeeze in one last stop before leaving the park.

North of the border in Canada, Québécois named La Ronde as their favorite summer spot when

it comes to nostalgia. Opened in 1967 as the amusement complex for Expo 67, it remains Québec's largest amusement park. Set on Île Sainte-Hélène, it brings together roller coasters, family rides, games, food stands and views back toward Montréal, giving the city a summer attraction with roots in one of Canada's most famous world's fairs. A visit has the feel of a full warm-weather day: rides above the river, midway noise, children measuring themselves against height signs, and the skyline waiting beyond the park gates.

Centreville Amusement Park in Ontario was the top choice in the province. It opened on the Toronto Islands in 1967, bringing family rides, a miniature railway, farm animals, food stands and a turn-of-the-century village feel to one of the city's favourite summer escapes. The journey is part of the memory: boarding the ferry, watching the skyline pull away, and arriving on Centre Island with the sound of rides and children's voices drifting through the trees.

<https://advancefundsnetwork.com/poll-reveals-the-most-nostalgic-summer-spots-in-the-u-s-and-canada-2026/>

The summer businesses people miss most

When respondents were asked which kind of summer business they most wished was still as common as it had been during their childhoods, drive-in movie theaters led the ranking.

The top responses were:

- Drive-in movie theaters: 22%
- Old-school arcades: 21%
- Family-owned ice cream parlors: 11%
- Local amusement parks: 10%
- Family diners: 10%
- Drive-in restaurants: 8%
- Independent candy stores: 7%
- Mini-golf courses: 4%
- Beachfront snack bars: 3%
- Small-town souvenir shops: 3%
- Lakeside marinas or boat-rental stands: 1%

That nostalgia also appears to carry real financial value. On average, respondents said they would be willing to spend \$41 more at a nostalgic, long-running local summer business than at a national chain.

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