

# COASTAL LIVING

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## Hot Spots

### Charleston, South Carolina

If Charleston were to have just two phrases beneath its city seal, they might well be “please” and “thank you.” Since 1995, the historic South Carolina seaport has been cited by etiquette expert Marjabelle Young Stewart as the “best-mannered” city in the United States.

It’s also one of the country’s most ravishing coastal centers. No matter where you stand, the water is close by. Dozens of bridges connect the town, crisscrossing the Cooper, Wando, Folly, and Ashley rivers—to name just a few. With each bridge comes a glimpse of docked shrimp boats, rich marshlands studded with wooden docks, or the famous steeple-lined skyline. Only minutes away, the barrier islands of Kiawah and Seabrook offer a taste of Lowcountry coastal life, and Folly Beach and Sullivans Island top the list of favorite getaways.

These seaside towns boast miles of stunning beaches, so regardless of how many friends and neighbors head to the shore on a given weekend, there’s enough shoreline for everyone.

The sea has always figured prominently in the city’s long history. By 1861, when the bombardment of Fort Sumter in the harbor ignited the Civil War, the town was nearly two centuries old. Prior to 1800, it was one of the largest cities in North America. Early in the 20th century, Charleston became a cradle of the nascent historic preservation movement. If you seek to understand the city, sign up for the Preservation Society of Charleston’s spring homes tour. Many of the finest residences are clustered in the city’s old peninsular quarter, which narrows toward the Battery where, as an old chestnut has it, “the Ashley and the Cooper rivers meet to form the Atlantic Ocean.” (Bostonians claim that honor for the Mystic and the Charles, but Charlestonians aren’t too polite to challenge them.)

For all its antebellum mansions, Charleston isn’t merely a languorous, jasmine-scented museum. This city has brought its seafaring tradition into the 21st century, muscling into position as the fourth-largest North American container seaport and a major cruise ship terminal. High-tech jobs abound, as do biotech and medical research facilities. The city also hosts one of the nation’s most prestigious performing arts events, the annual, 17-day Spoleto Festival USA. Founded in 1977, Spoleto’s opera, classical music, and drama presentations are a counterpart to the “Festival of Two Worlds” held each year in Spoleto, Italy, Charleston’s sister city.

With all those resources, do longtime residents welcome newcomers?  
In the best-mannered city, there's no need to even ask.

**what the locals know**

"Most people have heard of the Spoleto Festival," says Amy Ballenger-Guest of the Charleston Convention and Visitors Bureau, "but many aren't aware that the area's arts and entertainment spotlight burns year-round, particularly in May prior to Spoleto's opening.

"The North Charleston Arts Festival presents performing arts and visual arts displays in locations throughout the city of North Charleston. And the little-known Piccolo Spoleto Festival highlights local and regional talent with an array of musicals and comedies, plus stagings by avant-garde theatrical groups."

Population: 118,492  
Median Home Price: \$314,600  
For More Info: [charlestoncvb.com](http://charlestoncvb.com)

**Sarasota, Florida**

Lots of Northerners head to Florida for the temperate climate. But transplants to Sarasota, located on the Gulf Coast some 60 miles south of Tampa/St. Petersburg, take advantage of the cultural climate, as well. It's unlikely that any other city this size—especially among destination cities for cold-weather refugees—boasts as sophisticated an arts environment.

The city is home to the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, famed for its Old Masters; the highly respected Sarasota Opera, Florida West Coast Symphony, and Sarasota Ballet of Florida; several theater and choral organizations; and annual festivals dedicated to cinema and blues.

Although many Sarasotans choose to live on the mainland, the barrier islands strung between the bay and the Gulf of Mexico prove equally alluring. St. Armands Key has a self-contained shopping district; Siesta Key claims the whitest-sand beaches in the world. All of them, including exclusive residential Longboat Key, are connected by causeways to each other and to the mainland.

And with so much west-facing shoreland, the nightly sunset-watching ritual remains popular. Whether residents wander to the beaches or just to the edge of the deck on their boat, few can resist trying to catch the flash of green many claim to see just before the sun slips below the horizon.

**what the locals know**

Dick Pfaff, a Sarasota kayak instructor, likes to paddle the mangrove tunnels of busy Lido Key, across the bay from downtown. "The water is calm, shallow, and warm," says Dick, "and as you paddle, you can observe shorebirds, ospreys, and bald eagles. Heading back toward open water, you'll often see a pod of dolphins glide by as they feed with the incoming tide."

Population: 54,000  
Median Home Price: \$320,000  
For More Info: [sarasotafl.org](http://sarasotafl.org)

**Toronto, Ontario**

Fans say that Toronto is what New York would be like if it were run by the Swiss. But clean streets, a low crime rate, and a splendidly efficient system of subways and streetcars are only part of the lure of

this Lake Ontario metropolis. Toronto's great achievement has been to remain a city of neighborhoods, and to have seamlessly integrated public, private, and commercial spaces.

Is Toronto a true coastal city? One look from the top of the CN Tower, the world's tallest freestanding structure, and you'll know the answer is "yes." The views of Lake Ontario are expansive and awe-inspiring, and the nearest large city, Rochester, New York, is miles across the lake and all but invisible. Need further proof? If you keep your boat at a downtown marina or in the nearby Toronto Islands, it's easy to access the St. Lawrence Seaway, which connects the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean.

Like other big cities that grew up along the Lakes, Toronto put its waterfront to work, eventually isolating a drab, utilitarian shoreline from the rest of downtown with elevated expressways. Happily, this central district has been reclaimed and now sparkles with luxury residential high-rises. But the real attraction, for Torontonians who want to be close to the water, is a neighborhood called the Beach, a onetime weekend cottage colony that the city reached eastward to embrace. It's a leafy residential quarter tucked between the shops and bistros of lively Queen Street and the boardwalk that hugs an apron of parkland along Lake Ontario. Six hundred lucky souls also live out on the islands, a 20-minute ferry ride from downtown, but don't count on landing one of those coveted 99-year leases.

Now Canada's largest city, Toronto hosts the Canadian Opera Company, the National Ballet of Canada, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and the Royal Ontario Museum, one of the world's great troves of fine arts and antiquities. They're all just a short ride from the Beach, on a shiny red streetcar.

#### **what the locals know**

Longtime Toronto resident and guidebook author Helen Lovekin looks forward each spring to the opening of the Riverdale Farmers' Market, an urban agricultural oasis tucked into the former site of the Toronto Zoo in the city's compact Victorian Cabbagetown neighborhood. "This is the place to buy the best vegetables, preserves, cheeses, honey, even bread from local bakers," says Helen. "It's all organic, and all produced within 100 kilometers [62 miles] of downtown. Some produce is even grown on site. And kids love to visit the farm animals." The market is open Tuesdays, May through October.

Population: 2.6 million

Median Home Price: \$299,000 Canadian; about \$250,000 US

For More Info: [toronto.ca](http://toronto.ca)

#### **New Orleans, Louisiana**

Move to a new city and the neighbors might stop over with a plate of cookies or banana bread. But it isn't every day that you're greeted with a hug.

That's the reaction reported by at least one recent arrival in New Orleans. Because many more people have left the city than relocated here since Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, locals value and appreciate each and every transplant. And while a lot of the newcomers have family or other connections in the Big Easy, a new brand of urban pioneer is arriving solely to take part in the rebuilding process—what one resident calls "a great time to be here."

The Crescent City, as it's known, is coastal to the core. Because it's bordered by the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, the sounds of foghorns and boat engines saturate the air. So much of New Orleans' history and culture comes from the water that even neighborhoods are defined by their proximity to waterways. You may live in Uptown (up river), West Bank, Lakeshore, or Riverside.

On dry land, time-honored attractions still draw newcomers: music, food, and a unique street culture in an atmosphere that—at least for the time being—resembles a compact collection of neighborhoods, rather than the once and future subtropical metropolis. New Orleans may not have bounced all the way back from Hurricane Katrina, but the comeback has definitely begun.

#### **what the locals know**

Native New Orleanian Kim Sunée recommends taking a nap on Thursdays, then staying up late and heading to Vaughan's Lounge (800 Lesseps Street) in the historic Bywater district. The location may require street smarts, but the journey's definitely worth it. At 11 p.m., Kermit Ruffins & the Barbecue Swingers perform their signature brand of New Orleans Jazz whenever they're in town. Don't head home before the end of the first set—that's when Vaughan's gives away red beans and rice to satisfy any appetite.

Population: 155,000 (485,000 pre-Katrina)

Median Home Price: \$215,000

For More Info: [neworleansonline.com](http://neworleansonline.com)

#### **Evanston, Illinois**

When you live next door to the City of Big Shoulders, it helps to have something going on in your town.

Evanston has enough going for it to avoid being written off as just a Chicago suburb, even though it hugs the same lakeshore 15 miles north of the Loop. With a progressive, racially diverse, and highly educated populace, it's always had admirers, but in recent years the city's become downright hot.

Evanston has 86 parks and six Lake Michigan beaches—more than almost any Chicago-area community its size. Lighthouse Beach, with its historic beacon, is a local favorite, as is Dog Beach, where canines can romp off leash. As a pleasantly strenuous alternative to the fast but ho-hum Purple Line on the "L," a bike and foot path extends from Northwestern University's campus on the lake, all the way into Chicago. Kayakers who prefer calmer, more intimate surroundings than Lake Michigan can paddle the Sanitary Canal, also more appealingly known as the North Shore Channel, a branch of the Chicago River system. Yes, it really is sanitary—so much so that it's not uncommon to surprise a great blue heron around the next bend.

Arts events abound, headed by the annual Fountain Square Arts Festival, featuring open-air sales and displays of paintings, glassware, jewelry, and pottery. South Evanston has an urban feel—funky, locally owned shops and galleries line the blocks along Dempster Street, and the rejuvenated downtown has movie theaters, a flourishing public library, bookstores, and nearly 100 restaurants. One stroll past the lake and the fabulous historic houses and you'll agree that folks in Evanston have plenty of reasons to stay home. If the White Sox and

the Cubs ever move north to this burb, there's a good chance no one will ever leave.

#### **what the locals know**

Peg Boggs has lived in Evanston for 30 years, and has never found a quieter, more secluded corner than Northwestern University's Shakespeare Garden. Planted nearly a century ago by the Garden Club of Evanston, the greens contain more than 50 types of flowers, trees, shrubs, and herbs mentioned in Shakespeare's plays. "It's hidden behind tall hedges near the Howes Memorial Chapel," says Peg, "a wonderful, private place for quiet contemplation."

Population: 74,360

Median Home Price: \$369,900

For More Info: [cityofevanston.org](http://cityofevanston.org)

#### **Santa Barbara, California**

The Franciscans liked Santa Barbara so much, they stayed.

Of all the missions established along California's El Camino Real during Spanish colonial days, only Mission Santa Barbara has been run by the Franciscan fathers since its founding. The city (sometimes called the American Riviera), has grown a good deal more worldly since 1786, with a campus of the University of California, an international film festival, and an eclectic group of residents ranging from artsy writers, renowned academics, Hollywood refugees—even migrating gray whales.

In a nod to the sea, Santa Barbara still manages to float a modest fishing fleet, which heads out of port for everything from salmon to sea urchins. Nostalgia for fresh West Coast seafood just might have been part of the draw for the late Julia Child, a California native who retired to this coast after spending most of her life on New England's chillier shores.

The setting is incomparable. The four northernmost portions of the Channel Islands National Park dot the Pacific, drawing divers, snorkelers, sea kayakers, and visitors who come to view spring wildflowers and colonies of elephant seals. The Santa Ynez Mountains tower in the distance, and the semiwild Parma Park offers miles of unmarked trails through rugged foothills. (A more formal counterpart is the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, hosting 1,000 native California plant species.) A short drive up the coast, the beaches of Goleta and the unlikely Danish community of Solvang await.

Santa Barbara Harbor is home to about 1,000 pleasure and commercial craft, and the oldest working wooden wharf in the state. Another treasure, perhaps a surprise for anyone who maintains that California's vineyards exist only in Napa and Sonoma counties, is Santa Barbara County's wine region, which ranges to the northwest. More than 21,000 acres are planted in vines, and the county is home to some 100 wineries. (You've probably seen a few of them, in circumstances whimsically bittersweet: The movie *Sideways* was filmed here.)

#### **what the locals know**

Writer, editor, and longtime Santa Barbara resident Joan Tapper likes to introduce newcomers to Casa del Herrero, on East Valley Road. "It was the home of George Fox Steedman, who commissioned noted architect George Washington Smith to re-create an Andalusian

farmhouse," says Joan. "The home and gardens—and Steedman's fascinating workshop—are basically unchanged since the place was completed in 1925. Touring it is a treat."

Population: 90,473

Median Home Price: \$1 million

For More Info: [santabarbaraca.com](http://santabarbaraca.com)

### **Portland, Maine**

Portland managed to pull it off. Like so many small American cities in spectacular coastal locations, it reinvented itself in the last decades of the 20th century, turning a drab, decaying downtown into a destination center of boutiques, bistros, and brewpubs. But unlike so many communities, Portland could never be mistaken for a theme park. Its liveliness is a sign of life, not mere window dressing.

When Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was born here in 1807—and for many years before and since—Portland made its name as a seafaring city. It's still the largest port in New England in terms of tonnage, but by the 1970s its waterfront and adjacent downtown blocks were looking like they had been out in the weather too long. Worse, the commercial heart of the city along Congress Street had begun to feel the sting of suburban malls. There was a port, but was there still much of a Portland?

The revival gathered speed in the early 1980s, working inland from the docks. Before long, old ship chandleries jostled against block after block of restored brick structures housing shops, offices, and—though the statistic is hard to prove—what's said to be the highest number of restaurants per capita of any city in the United States. Dozens of galleries enliven the downtown arts district, crowned by the Portland Museum of Art (with a building designed by I.M. Pei & Partners). At the downtown piers, a high-speed ferry transports residents with weekend travel in mind to Bar Harbor or Nova Scotia.

Best of all, though, Portlanders don't turn off the lights at five and go home to the suburbs. The city has recently been rated as the best place in the nation to build a small business, and its neighborhoods are thriving. Residents take special pride in picturesque quarters such as Munjoy Hill, ringed by Eastern Promenade, with its bay and lighthouse views; and in parks such as Deering Oaks, with its Saturday farmers' market, skating pond, and rose garden. Out on Casco Bay, Peaks, Great Diamond, and several smaller islands are part of the city, linked to the mainland by ferries, yet they maintain strong community identities of their own.

Portland is also home to the Fish Exchange (where fishermen unload their daily catch and offer it to chefs, processors, and market owners), and the astounding Browne Trading Company, which supplies fish and caviar to cooks and connoisseurs across the country. You can visit their retail location in the Old Port.

Whatever you do, make sure to crack open a lobster while you're here. The succulent crustaceans play a big role in the state's economic health, and take center stage on most restaurant menus. Just one claw and you'll know why.

**what the locals know**

According to writer and longtime Portland resident Wayne Curtis, the more interesting bistros and small restaurants are no longer clustered entirely around the city's restored waterfront. "Head out into the neighborhoods," Wayne says. "Check out the West End, Woodford's Corner, and Munjoy Hill, where the Blue Spoon is a local favorite."

Population: 63,000

Median Home Price: \$274,900

For More Info: [ci.portland.me.us](http://ci.portland.me.us)

**Seattle, Washington**

It's the northernmost major American city, but notable for its mild climate. It's on the opposite side of the country from where the sun rises, but famous for a commodity that gets everyone up in the morning. It's the birthplace of grunge music, but home to the most-hyper-urbane characters in TV sitcom history. In little more than three decades, it's progressed from a recession-plagued city (where someone once quipped that the last one to leave "should turn the lights out") to a symbol of the 21st century's dynamic Pacific Rim economy. And its two most enduring symbols are a sky-piercing tower and an elevated train, souvenirs of yesterday's vision of the future.

The city, of course, is Seattle, where the coffee comes from, where you can ride the Monorail to the Space Needle—both left over from the 1962 World's Fair—and where, despite what you may have heard, it doesn't really rain all the time (the urban area gets only about 38 inches of rain a year, less than many eastern U.S. cities).

Perched in a spectacular location on island-strewn Puget Sound, Seattle has a combined total of 200 miles of shoreline—that's 147 miles of freshwater and 53 miles of salt water. With surroundings like these it's no wonder the city consistently ranks among the nation's top 10.

Once a lumber port and gateway to the Alaska of Gold Rush days, it later prospered as an aerospace capital. Dark days for the industry (and for local titan Boeing in particular) led to that early 1970s remark about turning off the lights, but the bounce back has been tremendous—for Boeing, which moved its front office to Chicago but maintains seven production facilities in and around the city, and for Seattle's economy in general. Among the metro area's stars are Microsoft, Starbucks, Nintendo of America, and Amazon.com, along with retailers such as Costco and Nordstrom and established behemoths such as UPS and Weyerhaeuser.

In the midst all of this highly caffeinated economic activity, Seattle's arts scene thrives. The Seattle Symphony has been a local fixture for more than a century, and the renowned Seattle Opera and Pacific Northwest Ballet are now at home in spacious McCaw Hall. Minutes away, visitors can explore historic districts, Pike Place Market (which deserves every bit of its legendary status), and the Mariner's Safeco Field, next to the bustling port.

Plan your calendar in advance and—in addition to ball games—you can catch a weeklong boat show in January, the Seattle Maritime Festival in May (including "the country's largest tugboat race on Elliot Bay" and

a chowder cook-off), a seafood festival in July, and the Christmas Ship Festival throughout December.

For the truly adventurous, the San Juan Islands, located only 80 miles north, are known as a "kayaker's dream." Home to an orca whale population, bald eagles, sea lions, and, like any good coast, gorgeous sunsets, the islands are close enough for day trips. For more cautious paddlers, guided tours are available.

**what the locals know**

Sue Sanem, owner of Portage Bay Goods in Seattle's Fremont neighborhood, says that the official motto of her neighborhood is "Delibertus Quirkus" (freedom to be peculiar). As you enter Fremont, which describes itself as the "center of the universe," via a drawbridge, the first sight you'll see is a 53-foot rocket that appears poised for takeoff. Nearby, a two-ton ferroconcrete troll lurks under the Aurora Bridge. The area includes microbreweries, a chocolate factory, art galleries, an underground antiques mall, and several vintage clothing shops. On Sundays, there's a flea, craft, and farmers' market.

Population: 573,000

Median Home Price: \$429,000

For More Info: [seattle.net](http://seattle.net)

**ALSO:**

[Read about some lesser-known but equally alluring coastal cities.](#)

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