

# TRAVEL & CULTURE

YOUR GUIDE TO THE SOUTH NOW

THE GUIDE

## Smartest Places To Retire

Historic architecture, pristine landscapes, and cultural riches make these college towns ideal for your second chapter

BY **LOGAN WARD**

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is known as much for its beauty and culture as its academia.







## Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Retirement is easy once you find a great place to do it

**AMONG THE FIRST** things my wife and I noticed after moving to Chapel Hill last year were all the attractive older people. I say this with humility as a guy on the far side of 50 who's earnestly taking notes. Sure, plenty of these 60- and 70-year-olds were fit and well dressed, but what struck us most as we explored our new town's coffee shops, restaurants, and farmers' market was how happy—and engaged—they seemed. Now that we've settled into our community, I can understand the connection between a great Southern college town and the ability to age gracefully.

These days, many retirees are looking for what Chapel Hill and its more bohemian next-door neighbor, Carrboro, have to offer—walkability, great eating and drinking establishments, educational opportunities, art galleries, museums, and performing arts venues, plus easy-to-access outdoor recreation.

The sense of place is palpable. From the grand homes fronting East Franklin

Street in Chapel Hill to Carrboro's rehabilitated mill-worker cottages a few miles west, this place feels rooted in history. And it is: Chartered in 1789, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was America's first public university to begin teaching classes.

Chapel Hill has long been referred to as the "Southern Part of Heaven," which may account for the real estate prices. With a median home listing price of \$465,000 (*realtor.com*), they are the highest among the towns and cities mentioned here. But you get what you pay for, including a

stunning public library, proximity to a top-ranked university medical center, and a fare-free bus system with 31 routes that weave together Chapel Hill, Carrboro, and the university at the center of it all. The population of 64,051 makes it big enough but not too large.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a decade from now, one in five Americans will be 65 or older. My wife and I aren't far behind that cohort. We ended up in Chapel Hill because she took a job at the university, not because we were thinking of it as a place to retire—a prospect we tend to dodge. But knowing we've landed in a good spot to grow older makes facing that reality much easier.

Population:  
**64,051**

College:  
**THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL**

Median home price:  
**\$465,000**

**From left:** Eat at the legendary Crook's Corner in Chapel Hill. The Old Well is a replica of an 1897 structure built to cover the original campus well, dug in 1795.

PREVIOUS PAGE: COURTESY TOWN OF CHAPEL HILL; THIS PAGE: ROBBIE CAPONETTO





## Oxford, Mississippi

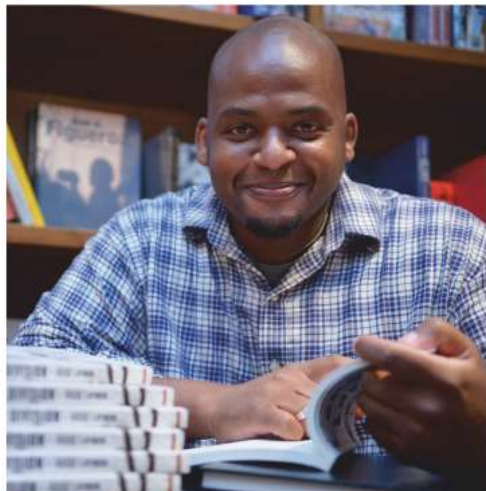
The home of Hotty Toddy is the toast of Southern letters

**TUCKED INTO THE HILLS** of North Mississippi, this town was named after Oxford, England, in hopes of attracting the state university. It worked: The University of Mississippi opened its doors in 1848, and today Oxford is the region's quintessential college town, celebrated as a literary wellspring and an SEC sports powerhouse.

"Ole Miss is a huge partner for our community," says Rosie Vassallo, director of retiree attraction with the Oxford-Lafayette County Economic Development Foundation. "The university opens its calendars to welcome all residents. And when you're surrounded by young people, you feel young yourself."

The heart of the town is The Square, where the Lafayette County Courthouse—an 1872 Greek Revival-Italianate structure—towers over a funky collection of boutique shops, restaurants, bookstores, and (of course) bars. One of the South's oldest department stores, Neilson's—"where trends meet tradition"—has kept its doors

**From left:** Running into writers like Kiese Laymon, a professor at Ole Miss, and visiting Square Books is a bibliophile's dream.



FROM LEFT: VALLERY JEAN/GETTY IMAGES; ROBBIE CAPONETTO

open since 1839. When John Currence started City Grocery in 1992, the pioneering chef (who cut his teeth in Chapel Hill!)

helped turn the tradition of Southern cooking into a trend that has swept the country. Today, the James Beard Award-winning chef's "dine-asty," as he calls it, includes three other Oxford eateries and two catering companies.

This is such a gregarious place. The

Population:

**23,112**

College:

**THE UNIVERSITY  
OF MISSISSIPPI**

Median home price:

**\$241,500**

Oxford Newcomers group, launched 21 years ago to welcome retirees moving to town, recently evolved into Oxford Newcomers

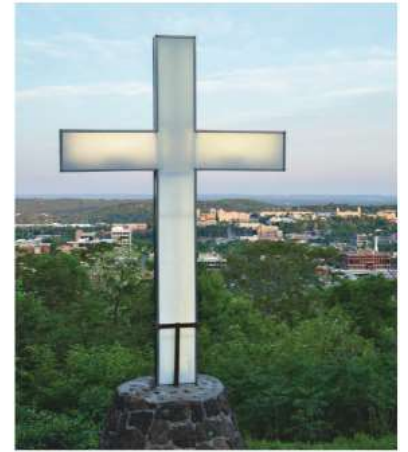
and Friends so longtime locals of all ages could join in. "For a small community, we have what a lot of large cities offer in the way of Southern arts and culture," Vassallo says. "The quality of life here is outstanding. Oxford sells itself."







**From left:**  
New burbs in town; Mount Sequoyah Cross



## Fayetteville, Arkansas

The Athens of the Ozarks

**LIKE OTHER RETIREES** who moved to Fayetteville, Barbara and Jackie Clements discovered the city's charms when their two daughters attended the University of Arkansas. Jackie still remembers the first time he spied the school's white buildings while driving up from the south. "It looks like a city on a hill," says the former shoe designer who spends his free time painting and writing fiction. "I've seen that view many times, and it's still striking."

Nestled among seven hills in the ancient Ozark Mountains, Fayetteville provides a Goldilocks climate, not too hot and not too cold, with the mountains blocking many of winter's arctic blasts—and easy access to both culture

and nature. Beaver Lake, about an hour's drive to the northeast, is a clear-water reservoir with limestone bluffs and nearly 500 miles of shoreline.

As for culture, this area has benefited from the largess of the Walton family, founders of Walmart, based in nearby Bentonville. The world-class Walton Arts Center in downtown Fayetteville exists in large

part to make the arts accessible by offering many free or reduced-price tickets to events. Opened in 2011, the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (founded by Alice Walton and

located 25 miles north in Bentonville) presents art intertwined with nature through a compound of buildings

Population:	87,590
College:	UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS
Median home price:	\$299,500



Local business owners Luke and Natalie Freeman of Freckled Hen Farmhouse

designed by renowned architect Moshe Safdie.

Jackie, an artist, is a regular visitor to Crystal Bridges. Fayetteville is a barbecue town, largely inspired by Memphis-style 'cue, and that makes him feel at home, because he spent half of his childhood in Memphis. "The quality of life here comes from so many aspects, from the topography to the arts," he says. "It's a great place to live."

TOP: WESLEY HITT (2); PORTRAIT: NIKKI TOTH PHOTOGRAPHY/FRECKLED HEN FARMHOUSE





From top: An REI Outdoor School paddleboard class and a mural celebrate San Marcos' waters.



## San Marcos, Texas

The Hill Country oasis chills between two vibrant cities

**THE NUMBER ONE** selling point for San Marcos is its location. A gateway to the Hill Country, this Central Texas college town is sandwiched between two of the most desirable cities in the U.S.—Austin and San Antonio. Thousands of years ago, prehistoric people came here, no doubt for the blue-green, spring-fed river and the mild climate, which combined to sustain a plenitude of life.

The pristine San Marcos River runs through more than 130 acres of town parkland, providing many sites for

swimming, snorkeling, and paddling. The source, Spring Lake, is on the campus of Texas State University, where The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment offers glass-bottomed boat tours. The headwaters are a nature lover's paradise, providing habitat for eight rare aquatic species, including the San Marcos fountain darter, a blind salamander, and a variety of wild rice.

Population:	<b>64,776</b>
College:	<b>TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY</b>
Median home price:	<b>\$280,900</b>

With more than 38,000 students, Texas State University (home of the Bobcats) keeps the community young and vibrant. The school is a hub for the arts and boasts a fine performance center.

“Over the past 25 years, I’ve met countless prospective new residents,” says Jason Mock, president of the San Marcos Area Chamber of Commerce.

“I’ve learned that older people want to be where young people are. They tell me, ‘I’m retired from nine-to-five, but I want to stay engaged in the community.’ San Marcos allows for that.”

Another benefit of moving here: Texas is one of only seven U.S. states that don’t have an income tax. But the word is out about San Marcos. In 2016, the large North American developer Brookfield Residential chose this as the site of Kissing Tree, a 3,000-home community catering to those who are 55 and up.

TOP: COURTESY THE MEADOWS CENTER FOR WATER AND THE ENVIRONMENT; INSET: JADE BROADUS





Shopping local is one of the pleasures of living in this small Virginia town.

## Lexington, Virginia Shenandoah Valley Shangri-la

**ALTHOUGH IT'S SMALL**, this Shenandoah Valley burg has big appeal, starting with its postcard-perfect Main Street. Even on a gray December day a few years ago, the white church steeples and historic brick buildings

twinkling with lights and fellowship sold Valerie and John Thomas. After a five-year search for a new home as they wound down two decades in the Washington, D.C.,

Population: **7,446**  
Colleges:  
**WASHINGTON & LEE UNIVERSITY, VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE**  
Median home price: **\$375,000**

suburbs, the empty nesters chose Lexington. It checked all the boxes.

Topping the list was walkability. "We were tired of getting into the car to go buy a quart of milk," John says.

"We bought an old home in the center of town and are two or three blocks from banking, restaurants, church, civic activities, museums, and two college campuses."

Lexington is a mountain town with a river running through it. The Maury River spills down from Goshen Pass and burbles past the back of both Washington & Lee University and the Virginia Military Institute (VMI). The broader James River isn't far away. Also nearby are the Appalachian Trail and Blue Ridge Parkway.

Downtown Lexington has become a haven for farm-to-table dining. Set off down the country

roads near town, and you'll find wineries and historic villages that once served as stage-coach stops. Snowshoe Mountain, with some of the best skiing conditions on the East Coast, is 100 miles away. The Roanoke-Blacksburg Regional Airport, 50 miles down I-81, offers about 40 scheduled flights per day.

For the Thomases, a strong sense of community was a major draw. "There's a certain energy about Lexington that's hard to pin down, but you can feel it when you're

here," Valerie says. "It's very friendly. People wave to you. They hang out on front porches."

"We like the energy of the college students," John adds. He said that last year, the community embraced his idea to invite Georgetown University's Muslim chaplain, Imam Yahya Hendi, to town for a series of talks. "The VMI cadets cheered him," he says. "Lexington welcomes new ideas. This is a do-it-yourself town."



The Front Lawn at Washington & Lee University

COURTESY CHRIS WEISLER/LEXINGTON & ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY AREA TOURISM





# Tallahassee, Florida

## Retirees in this sunny city play a vital community role

**THE BIGGEST PLACE** on our list is home to a large community college and two major universities—Florida State and Florida A&M, one of the leading Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Along with lots of high-level sports from both of Tallahassee’s big colleges, locals enjoy something extra from Florida A&M—performances by the Marching 100, one of the world’s most innovative and influential marching bands.

Both universities and the community college offer classes, events, and other opportunities for enrichment to those with free time and a desire to grow and learn. And the learning goes both ways. The AARP recently partnered with a shared workspace named Domi to create an innovation incubator program called Third Act, which taps into the expertise of people 50 and older.

Despite a population nearing 195,000, Tallahassee has a small-town feel, thanks to its Panhandle location away from the sprawl of Central and South Florida. The climate is mild year-round, the Gulf’s white-sand beaches are just 40 minutes to the south, and golfers here can always get a tee time.

Given these and other

selling points (including the fact that, like Texas, Florida has no state income tax), Tallahassee has always been a popular place to retire, but the city and its civic leaders are pouring energy into attracting aging baby boomers. “We have one of the nation’s best parks-and-recreation departments,” says Gregg

Population:  
**194,500**  
Colleges:  
**FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY, FLORIDA A&M UNIVERSITY**  
Median home price:  
**\$250,000**



Railroad Square Craft House is part grub pub, part entertainment venue.

Patterson, who’s executive director of Choose Tallahassee, a nonprofit organization promoting the city as a relocation destination. “You can play pickleball and also take free lifelong-learning classes.”

You’re more likely to find Patterson taking a stroll than playing pickleball. He and his wife have walked across Spain, Portugal, and Scotland, and he leads Move Tallahassee, a thriving local walking group. He says he’s nearing retirement himself and is happy he won’t have to move. “I came here to go to Florida State in the 1970s and never left. After four children and four grandchildren, I’m here for good,” he says. **SL**

Alfred B. Maclay Gardens State Park attracts visitors with serene vistas like this one.



Leon County, home to Tallahassee, has a number of “canopy roads” that are now protected by law.

FROM TOP: LYDIA BELLE; MICHAEL TITUS/FLORIDA STATE PARKS; JEFFREY ISAAC GREENBERG/ALAMY