

1. CARMEL, IND.
- ★ 2. MCKINNEY, TEXAS
3. EDEN PRAIRIE, MINN.
4. NEWTON, MASS.
5. REDMOND, WASH.
6. IRVINE, CALIF.
7. RESTON, VA.
8. COLUMBIA/ELLCOTT CITY, MD.
9. OVERLAND PARK, KANS.
10. CHAPEL HILL, N.C.



COOLING OFF IN TEXAS:
The Talbot family of McKinney, our No. 2 place,
takes a break from the summer heat by digging
into some Snowballs, a popular local treat.

Money ★ COVER STORY

100 BEST PLACES TO LIVE IN AMERICA

Like selecting a soulmate, finding a great place to live can't be done just by the numbers. This year, MONEY set out to find America's best small city (pop. 50,000 to 300,000). Using data from Onboard Informatics and other sources, we identified locations with economic strength, quality health care, low crime, great schools, and lots to do (see page 75). Then reporters visited 29 top-scoring places to assess what the numbers can't tell you—whether a town is a true community.

BY ZAIN ASHER, BETH BRAVERMAN, VERONICA CREWS, ANNE LEE,
JESSICA LEVINE, SARAH MAX, VANESSA RICHARDSON, AND DONNA ROSATO

Photographs by DAVE LAURIDSEN and PAT MOLNAR



Distance from city	Population	Price of a typical single-family house	Estimated annual property taxes	City unemployment rate
16 MILES from Indianapolis	79,200	\$221,800	\$4,200	4.5%
PROS: Booming economy, affordable homes, low taxes, great schools, bike paths everywhere, plenty of arts		CONS: No public transportation, not much racial diversity		

FIVE
GREAT
PLACES
TO...

...GET A
BRAND-
NEW JOB



The county rate of unemployment (May)

1	BISMARCK, N.D.	2.3%	4	ARLINGTON, VA.	3.3%
2	FARGO, N.D.	2.8%	5	IOWA CITY, IOWA	3.6%
3	GRAND FORKS, N.D.	3.2%			

NOTES: Unemployment rates are limited to one place per county. SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics

THE SEARCH
FOR NO. 1

HOW MONEY FINDS
THE BEST PLACES
TO LIVE IN AMERICA

START with data provided by OnBoard Informatics on all U.S. towns with populations of 50,000 to 300,000.



744

SCREEN OUT PLACES with a median family income of more than 200% or less than 85% of the state average; those with more than 95% of one race; and those with poor education and crime scores.



401

EXCLUDE RETIREMENT COMMUNITIES AND TOWNS WITH MAJOR JOB LOSSES. Rank the rest based on job growth, home affordability, safety, school quality, health care, arts and leisure, diversity, and several ease-of-living criteria.



360

FACTOR IN MORE DATA on the economy (including the fiscal strength of state and local governments), plus jobs, housing, health care, and happiness. Give the most weight to economic data.



100

VISIT TOWNS AND INTERVIEW RESIDENTS; assess traffic, parks, and gathering places; and consider intangibles like community spirit.



29

SELECT THE WINNER based on the data and reporting.



CARMEL INDIANA

FIVE YEARS AGO Carmel was a quiet, upscale bedroom community that offered an easy 20-minute commute to downtown Indianapolis. How times change. While some once-top-notch towns on the Best Places list lagged during the recession, this formerly sleepy burb—which clocked in at No. 14 on our list two years ago—has transformed itself into the ideal place to work and play.

How? First, the employment outlook: Thanks to midsize health care and tech firms and large companies like Delta Faucet and Conseco Insurance, Carmel's business district now has the second-largest concentration of office workers in Indiana and an unemployment rate that's a little more than half the national average. In 2010 the city welcomed the Indi-

ana Design Center, 82,000 square feet of facilities for design professionals and showrooms open to the public.

As for play, there's the new performing arts center, part of a development with a 1,600-seat concert hall and a 500-seat multiuse theater, made possible by about \$500 million in private investment

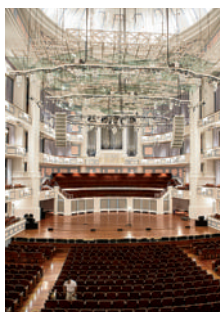
and \$175 million of city money through new commercial tax funding. "We don't have the Pacific or mountain views," says the fifth-term mayor, James Brainard, "so we have to work a bit harder on cultural amenities."

Carmel also has excellent schools, a big sports and recreation center, roundabouts to keep traffic flowing, wide bike lanes, and an off-street bike path with a direct route through the center of town. All that, plus a variety of housing options ranging from older homes to new subdivisions, and you have an irresistible draw for families. Jeff and Deanna Gilbert, 49 and 55, moved with their kids from a neighboring suburb in 2010. "My family and I were already driving to Carmel for the water park, restaurants, concerts—pretty much everything," says Jeff, the president of a software company.

All too often, great places and great expenses go hand in hand. Not so with Carmel. Thanks to the sizable



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Homes on the west side of town; high school freshman practice football at Carmel Stadium; the Gilberts enjoy lunch at Bub's Burgers & Ice Cream; the new Center for the Performing Arts



commercial tax base the town has built, taxes have stayed low. That fact wasn't lost on Larry and Theresa Patterson, both 44, who moved to Carmel when their eldest child, Emily, now 20, was in kindergarten (kids Nick and Olivia are 16; Jake is 14). "We could get the right amount of house for our money," says Larry, an executive at a popcorn company. Adds Theresa, a nurse: "We fell in love with a little neighborhood, and now it's a world-class destination."





30 MILES
from Dallas



136,700



\$170,000



\$4,200



6.1%



PROS: Affordable homes, beautiful downtown, good access to outdoor activities



CONS: Construction, schools have growing pains, lack of big-name retailers

FIVE
GREAT
PLACES
TO...



...PURCHASE A CHEAP HOUSE

Median family income
as a percentage of 2012
home price

- 1 FLORISSANT, MO. 94%
- 2 CORAL SPRINGS, FLA. 75%
- 3 TROY, MICH. 67%
- 4 RIVERVIEW, FLA. 65%
- 5 BOLINGBROOK, ILL. 61%

SOURCE: OnBoard



CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP: The Martin
family at the Mom
& Popcorn shop
downtown; the
weekly farmers'
market in
Chestnut Square;
longhorn cattle
grazing on an
area farm



chose McKinney over closer sub-
urbs when they moved from the
Hartford, Conn., area with their
son, Jack, 8, and daughter, Julia,
2, last year. Says Val: "The pools,
parks, and bike trails fit the life-
style we want to lead."



McKINNEY TEXAS

ESTABLISHED IN 1849, McKinney is one
of northern Texas' oldest towns.
Stroll around downtown, and you'll
see cotton mills and feed stores
transformed into hip boutiques and

art galleries; restaurants from
steakhouses to tapas bars line the
streets of Courthouse Square (the
old courthouse is now a performing
arts center).

Today, however, McKinney
(ranked No. 5 in 2010) is focused on
the future. Low taxes have lured
companies with white-collar jobs in
technology and energy (defense and
aerospace firm Raytheon has 3,700
employees here), a new hospital
opened in July, and a conference cen-
ter and hotel complex is in the works.
As early as middle school, students
are offered college-prep mentors,
and career-focused high school
courses include accounting, engi-
neering, and veterinary medicine.

Recent McKinney transplants say
that old-timers welcome newcomers

with open arms. Kimberly Stute-
ville, 34, a regional sales manager
for an appliance maker, remembers
when her neighbors brought over a
case of bottled water when her fam-
ily was hauling their belongings into
their new home on a sweltering day
three years ago. "McKinney still has
that small-town feel," she says.

The population boom comes
with downsides, of course. While
McKinney's schools are highly
ranked, residents say some aren't
quite as strong as those in nearby
suburbs. And construction crews
are everywhere, working on widen-
ing highways and building entire
new neighborhoods. On the plus
side, the city offers plenty of hous-
ing options, from \$115,000 starter
homes to old Victorians near down-



STAYING IN SHAPE: Bikers ride through the
downtown on a weekday afternoon.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE LAURIDSEN; OPPOSITE PAGE: STYLING BY
KASHA HARPER; HAIR AND MAKEUP BY SAM MASTROPOLO



12 MILES
from Minneapolis



61,200



\$380,000



\$5,200



4.3%



PROS: Lots of outdoor activities,
extremely safe, great schools



CONS: Frigid winters; the
downtown is basically a large mall.



EDEN PRAIRIE MINNESOTA



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The scene at Bryant Lake; the Sampat family enjoying the Eden Prairie Community Center; the Smith Douglas More House, a restored 19th-century farmhouse turned coffee shop



NOT MUCH has changed in Eden Prairie lately, and that's a good thing. It still has the heady combination of terrific employment prospects, natural beauty, and a well-educated workforce that cinched its perch at the top of the Best Places list two years ago. But the upsides don't stop there. Home to major firms like *Fortune* 500 trucking company C.H. Robinson and Starkey Hearing Technologies and big branches of Dell and Cigna, Eden Prairie is posi-

tioning itself for further expansion with a light commuter rail project in the works for 2018 and new corporate offices under construction. Perfectly natural for a place that's kept a healthy budget surplus of 2% for the past two years.

Families come for the jobs and stay for the lifestyle. "It's just so safe here," says Falguni Sampat, 44, an administrative assistant, who moved to Eden Prairie with

her husband, Chandrahas, 47, an executive at Best Buy, in 2002.

You have to look hard to find downsides, but there are a few: winters are long and cold, and there's not much of a downtown besides a mega shopping mall. "A small price to pay compared to the benefits of living here," Falguni says with a shrug.

10 MILES
from Boston


85,200



\$680,500



\$7,600



3.8%


PROS: Great schools; easy for kids to get around and lots for them to do

CONS: Expensive even for the pricey Boston area; no cohesive city center
FIVE
GREAT
PLACES
TO...

...MAKE YOUR DOLLAR STRETCH FURTHER

Based on the cost-of-living index; 100 is the national average

 1 ROGERS, ARK.
86.5

 2 MANSFIELD,
TEXAS 87.7

 3 FLOWER
MOUND,
TEXAS 88.4

 4 FRANKLIN,
TENN. 89.3

 4 HENDERSONVILLE,
TENN. 89.3

SOURCE: OnBoard

15 MILES
from Seattle


54,000



\$450,000



\$5,000



7.1%


PROS: Access to tons of parks and hiking trails; public art galore

CONS: Wet winters, economy closely tied to the tech sector


REDMOND WASHINGTON

REDMOND MAY BE HOME to one of the largest companies in the world, but life in the city is anything but a grind. With Seattle just 15 miles to the west, the Cascade Mountains a short drive to the east, and more than 90 wineries to the north, Microsoft's hometown is an ideal base camp for exploring the

Northwest. Meanwhile, there's plenty to do right in Redmond, where historic buildings, quirky shops, eateries, and brewpubs mingle in colorful condo and retail developments with public art and giant evergreens.

"We tend to stay in Redmond every weekend," says Gillian Walsh, 39, who recently moved there from a nearby town with husband Ronan, 40, a managing director at a consulting firm, and their three young children. Redmond's picturesque neighborhoods, low crime rates, and stellar schools were a major part of the attraction. "We wanted to live in a real community with a big yard and streets where the kids could go play," says Gillian, who is a communications manager at Microsoft. The couple initially avoided living in Redmond, fearing it was too much of a company town. But once they had spent many a Saturday riding bikes along the 11-mile Sammamish River Trail and exploring the 800-acre Watershed Preserve or the 640-acre Marymoor Park, they realized they were more likely to run into wildlife than into bleary-eyed programmers.



LEFT: A rock climber at the Derby Days Kids Zone/Kids Activity area. BELOW: Grass Lawn Community Park



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE CITY OF REDMOND

NEWTON MASSACHUSETTS

FROM THE NUMBERS, you could be forgiven for thinking that folks in Newton are obsessed with education. The city is divided into 13 villages, which are built around elementary schools, making it easy for children to walk to school amid the city's lush greenery. When the kids move on to the high schools, they attend either Newton South or the two-year-old Newton North, both of which are known for special programs, such as an innovation lab that worked with Whole Foods to turn old grocery bags into outdoor grill covers. Being close to prestigious universities adds even more benefits—MIT has partnered with the innovation lab on a project to convert algae into fuel, for example, and Boston College committed to donating \$300,000 for technology for Newton schools over three years.

But excellent schools aren't Newton's only draw. The large property-tax base has helped keep the city's finances strong. There's a wealth of activities, from swimming at Crystal Lake to browsing the boutiques in



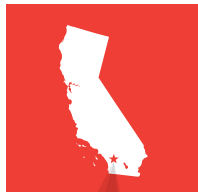
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Larsons soaking up the sun at the Newton Centre Playground; inside the Newton Free Library; the Jackson Homestead and Museum



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAT MOLNAR

Newton Centre to partaking in celebrations like the Taste of Newton and the fall Harvest Fair. Though housing prices are high, families say the perks are well worth it. Jodi and Erik Larson, 43 and 47, both went to college in the area and decided to

raise their family in Newton when they returned from the West Coast eight years ago (Emma is 9, and twins Kate and Sophie are 7). "We can enjoy all the urban amenities without actually being in a city," says Erik.



40 MILES
from Los Angeles



223,000



\$540,000



\$5,000



7.5%



PROS: Relaxed vibe; easy access to Southern California leisure activities



CONS: Unemployment is on the high side; homes are pricey.



IRVINE CALIFORNIA

WHEN IRVINE NATIVES Tolga Tarhan, 30, and Jackie Williams, 28, decided to buy a townhouse there earlier this year, the decision wasn't just a practical one. Sure, their nonexistent commutes were part of the equation (they both work nearby), as were Irvine's nationally recognized schools. But the big reasons for staying put were the 44 miles of bike trails, the



BIRD'S-EYE VIEW: The Ferris wheel at the Irvine Spectrum Center, a large outdoor shopping mall

20,000 acres of parks and preserves, and a beach 10 miles away. "Irvine is a big city that doesn't feel big at all," says Tarhan.

Chalk it up to smart planning.

The 40-year-old community is divided into 40 "villages," and a minimum of five acres of park space is added for every 1,000 newcomers. While high home prices remain a barrier to entry, recent development on the 5,000-acre decommissioned El Torro Marine Corps Air Station is creating more affordable options. Anywhere else such growth might cause overcrowding. In Irvine, it simply means new schools, bike paths, and green spaces.



RESTON VIRGINIA

RESTON MAY BE a planned community, but don't expect cookie-cutter homes here. Thanks to famed master planner Robert Simon, all shapes and sizes sit next to one another. Activities in Reston come in all stripes too, from an über-urban downtown to 55 miles of bike paths, 52 tennis courts, and 15 pools. "In seven seconds, we can be



22 MILES
from Washington



62,000



\$408,700



\$4,400



3.7%



PROS: Great downtown, lots of outdoor activities



CONS: Heavy traffic, planned community restrictions, and fees



in the forest," says Reston resident and small-business owner Radhika Murari, 41.

Unfortunately, many Restonites probably don't get as much time for leisure as they'd like: Because of its growing reputation as a technology hub near Washington Dulles International Airport, major firms such as BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin, Oracle, and Unisys have large offices here. Those who do commute to D.C. contend with traffic, but next year's completion of the Washington Metro's extension to Reston will help alleviate the pain.



13 MILES
from Baltimore



163,000



\$337,000



\$3,400



4.7%



PROS: Great schools, diversity, a mix of historic and modern areas



CONS: Ellicott City has some less than desirable homes; traffic



12 MILES
from Kansas City



175,000



\$230,000



\$2,570



5.3%



PROS: Great schools and amenities and a down-to-earth feel



CONS: One major employer; scorching hot summers



COLUMBIA/ ELLICOTT CITY MARYLAND

ERIC LEWIS, 34, LIVES on the border of Columbia and Ellicott City, but his loyalty isn't divided: "We get the best of both worlds," says the bank executive. That would be a charming, historic downtown with plenty of restaurants (Ellicott City) and a thoughtfully laid-out planned community with tons of big-box

LOCAL CHARM: *An antiques store on Main Street, downtown Ellicott City*

stores and a giant arena (Columbia). All the families in these unincorporated cities (MONEY combines them because they share a school district as well as many county services) get to enjoy living in a community with a diverse population, reasonable housing costs, terrific schools, miles of hiking trails, and a new development, Blandair Park, which will include 200 acres of forest, wetlands, meadows, and a historic farm complex.

Though some parts of Ellicott City look a bit rundown, there's no



THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPH BY PAT MOLNAR; OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY OF CITY OF OVERLAND PARK

lack of job opportunity: Howard County has had the lowest unemployment rate in the state for 64 of the past 70 months.



OVERLAND PARK KANSAS

KICKING BACK: *Locals enjoy a music performance at the Santa Fe Commons Park.*

THERE'S NO LACK OF TOWN SPIRIT in Overland Park, a place where independent shops line the streets of downtown and residents rave about their friendly neighbors. "Parents are so eager to be involved in the schools," gushes Hye Jin Lee, 43, who moved here from California with her family three years ago. Residents and visitors alike flock to Overland Park's biweekly farmers' market, known as one of the best in the area, and enjoy the 300-acre arboretum, world-class soccer fields, and a re-created turn-of-the-century family farm.

The biggest knock on the city is that its fortunes depend heavily on its largest employer, Sprint. There have been no layoffs lately, however, and a half-dozen midsize firms moved to town in



...RELAX AND SMILE

These five places had the highest "ease of living" score, which includes commute time, population density, happiness, and emotional well-being.

1 ST. GEORGE, UTAH

2 OREM, UTAH

3 BISMARCK, N.D.

4 EDEN PRAIRIE, MINN.

5 SOUTH JORDAN, UTAH

SOURCES: OnBoard, Gallup, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

the past year, filling vacant space on the Sprint campus. Nightlife is a little skimpy, but Kansas City is nearby.

AMERICA'S 100 BEST SMALL CITIES

These places score well in factors that families care about most. The icons show where each town stands out.

KEY TO ICONS

- Health
- Economy
- Art and leisure
- Employment
- Education
- Home affordability

NOTES ON 100 LIST: See page 86.

- 1 CARMEL, IND. *pop. 79,200* 🏭
- 2 MCKINNEY, TEXAS *136,700* 🏠
- 3 EDEN PRAIRIE, MINN. *61,200* 📖
- 4 NEWTON, MASS. *85,200* 🏠
- 5 REDMOND, WASH. *54,000* 📖
- 6 IRVINE, CALIF. *223,000* 📖
- 7 RESTON, VA. *62,000* 🏭
- 8 COLUMBIA/ELLICOTT CITY, MD. *163,000* 🏠
- 9 OVERLAND PARK, KANS. *175,000* 🏠
- 10 CHAPEL HILL, N.C. *57,400* 🏭
- 11 WOODBURY, MINN. *63,600* 🏠
- 12 FISHERS, IND. *78,600* 🏠
- 13 ALLEN, TEXAS *83,700* 🏠
- 14 EAGAN, MINN. *64,700* 🏡
- 15 PARSIPPANY/TROY HILLS, N.J. *53,200* 🏠
- 16 CASTLE ROCK, COLO. *52,500* 🏠
- 17 CENTREVILLE, VA. *72,900* 🏭
- 18 SOUTH JORDAN, UTAH *52,700* 🏡
- 19 LAKEVILLE, MINN. *56,700* 📖
- 20 WALDORF, MD. *69,400* 🏠
- 21 HIGHLANDS RANCH, COLO. *95,900* 🏡
- 22 MAPLE GROVE, MINN. *61,800* 🏡
- 23 GAITHERSBURG, MD. *63,400* 🏠

- 24 GERMANTOWN, MD. *88,000* 🏭
- 25 FRANKLIN, N.J. *62,600* 🏠
- 26 TROY, MICH. *80,300* 🏠
- 27 CUPERTINO, CALIF. *58,700* 📖
- 28 MANSFIELD, TEXAS *59,000* 🏭
- 29 GREENWICH, CONN. *62,100* 🏠
- 30 ASHBURN, VA. *59,800* 🏭
- 31 BROOKLINE, MASS. *59,100* 🏠
- 32 FLOWER MOUND, TEXAS *69,300* 🏭
- 33 GILBERT, ARIZ. *216,400* 🏠
- 34 CHINO HILLS, CALIF. *74,600* 🏠
- 35 CLARKSTOWN, N.Y. *85,800* 🏠
- 36 BELLEVUE, NEB. *51,800* 🏠
- 37 WEST BLOOMFIELD, MICH. *64,600* 🏠
- 38 FRAMINGHAM, MASS. *68,800* 🏠
- 39 O'FALLON, MO. *80,400* 📖
- 40 BELLEVUE, WASH. *124,300* 🏡
- 41 DIAMOND BAR, CALIF. *57,200* 🏠
- 42 YORBA LINDA, CALIF. *65,800* 🏠
- 43 PFLUGERVILLE, TEXAS *56,700* 🏭
- 44 WHITE PLAINS, N.Y. *57,500* 🏠
- 45 ARLINGTON, VA. *210,000* 🏭
- 46 DALE CITY, VA. *68,300* 🏠

- 47 ABINGTON, PA. *55,700* 🏠
- 48 AMHERST, N.Y. *122,900* 🏠
- 49 CENTENNIAL, COLO. *107,900* 🏡
- 50 CHANDLER, ARIZ. *247,100* 🏠
- 51 SANDY, UTAH *96,700* 🏡
- 52 FRANKLIN, TENN. *62,600* 🏭
- 53 NAPERVILLE, ILL. *152,600* 📖
- 54 HAMDEN, CONN. *61,300* 🏠
- 55 OREM, UTAH *93,300* 🏡
- 56 CARY, N.C. *145,900* 🏭
- 57 OLATHE, KANS. *127,400* 🏠
- 58 RIO RANCHO, N.M. *93,100* 📖
- 59 RAMAPO, N.Y. *130,000* 🏠
- 60 BOULDER, COLO. *97,700* 🏡
- 61 BOLINGBROOK, ILL. *71,800* 🏠
- 62 ST. GEORGE, UTAH *74,800* 🏠
- 63 WESTON, FLA. *65,300* 📖
- 64 FAIRFIELD, CONN. *59,600* 🏠
- 65 RIVERVIEW, FLA. *73,500* 🏠
- 66 HENDERSON, NEV. *263,300* 🏠
- 67 ROGERS, ARK. *56,700* 🏠
- 68 MERIDIAN, IDAHO *79,100* 🏠
- 69 BROKEN ARROW, OKLA. *92,900* 🏠

- 70 FORT COLLINS, COLO. *147,000* 🏡
- 71 ST. CHARLES, MO. *67,200* 📖
- 72 WEST HARTFORD, CONN. *63,600* 🏠
- 73 EDMOND, OKLA. *83,300* 🏠
- 74 BISMARCK, N.D. *62,400* 🏠
- 75 HAMILTON, N.J. *88,200* 📖
- 76 FLORISSANT, MO. *52,200* 📖
- 77 MOORE, OKLA. *59,400* 🏠
- 78 SHELBY, MICH. *74,300* 🏠
- 79 FARGO, N.D. *93,500* 🏠
- 80 WHEATON, ILL. *54,500* 🏠
- 81 WEST DES MOINES, IOWA *58,300* 🏠
- 82 CHEYENNE, WYO. *60,900* 🏭
- 83 WAYNE, N.J. *54,700* 🏠
- 84 MACOMB, MICH. *80,100* 🏠
- 85 BENSELEM, PA. *60,600* 🏠
- 86 HENDERSONVILLE, TENN. *51,900* 📖
- 87 WEYMOUTH TOWN, MASS. *54,000* 🏠
- 88 IOWA CITY, IOWA *68,600* 🏡
- 89 AUBURN, ALA. *56,100* 🏠
- 90 AMES, IOWA *58,000* 🏠
- 91 GRAND FORKS, N.D. *53,100* 🏭
- 92 NORMAN, OKLA. *113,800* 🏠

- 93 NASHUA, N.H. *86,600* 🏠
- 94 CORAL SPRINGS, FLA. *125,800* 🏠
- 95 MILLCREEK, PA. *52,900* 🏭
- 96 HILLSBORO, ORE. *93,600* 🏡
- 97 WEST CHESTER, OHIO *61,300* 🏠
- 98 BEAVERTON, ORE. *91,800* 🏡
- 99 WAUKESHA, WIS. *71,700* 🏠
- 100 ANN ARBOR, MICH. *114,400* 🏡



TABLET
EXCLUSIVE

BONUS BEST PLACES!

Now on the iPad, NOOK Color, and other tablets. Extended write-ups, photos, videos, and more of the entire 100 Best Places to Live list. Download today at money.com/getdigital and iTunes. Free for subscribers.

29 MILES
from Raleigh

57,400



\$342,000



\$5,300



5.1%

**PROS:** Good schools, plenty of natural beauty, mild climate**CONS:** Lots of young college kids, some vacant stores downtown

CHAPEL HILL

NORTH CAROLINA

LOCALS AREN'T EXAGGERATING when they refer to Chapel Hill as a "town within a park." The roads wind through tunnels of arching trees, and the area has a rain-forest-like charm. But Chapel Hill isn't just a pretty face. The town, which houses the nation's oldest public university, is part of the state's Research Triangle, which has one of the highest numbers of Ph.D.s per capita in the U.S. Education is a priority for families. The county receives the highest per-pupil funding in the state, and interesting educational opportunities abound. "Our daughter is in a dual-language Chinese program, and at age 10 is fluent in Mandarin," says 41-year-old resident Keith Minton.

The main drawbacks? Parts of the downtown aren't in great shape, and some areas feel over-run by students. That said, while some university towns have an uneasy relationship with the school, this one's a real partnership: The University of North Carolina subsidizes the transit system, making buses free for everyone, and the town's fire trucks are "Carolina blue" to honor the university's team colors. **M**

HIGHER EDUCATION: UNC's Carroll Hall, located on the main campus quad



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NOTES ON 100 LIST: Jobs based on income growth, county unemployment, and projected job growth. Economy based on purchasing power, foreclosure rate, tax burden, and state's fiscal strength. Housing affordability based on median price-to-income ratio and average property taxes. Education based on test scores and percentage of kids in public schools. Health based on number of doctors and hospitals in the area and health of residents. Arts and leisure based on activities in the town and surrounding area, including movie theaters, museums, zoos, and sports venues.

SOURCES: OnBoard Informatics, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Moody's, Standard & Poor's, RealtyTrac, National Conference of State Legislatures, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, National Cancer Institute, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Gallup