



Money names St. Augustine best place to live in Florida; Ponte Vedra named to top 20 by Coastal Living

By Stuart Korfhage
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Reflecting the area's 30-year surge in population growth, two St. Johns County communities were recently selected as being among the best places to call home.

Both St. Augustine and Ponte Vedra Beach were featured in recent media lists of the best places to live.

St. Augustine was chosen as the overall best city in Florida to live in by Money.

Meanwhile, Ponte Vedra was chosen as one of the 20 Best Places to Live on the Coast in 2018 by Coastal Living.

That kind of recognition has led tens of thousands of people to move near St. Augustine and Ponte Vedra in the last several decades. With developments big and small filling the region, the county has seen its population go from about 84,000 in 1990 to an estimated 235,000 in 2016.

While some residents are probably tired of their gem being discovered by more potential movers, there are some distinct advantages to having their towns land on lists like these, according to Melissa Glasgow, St. Johns County director of economic development.

"These accolades do help us generate interest in economic development, and we promote them on through our marketing materials and our webpage to communicate that message," Glasgow said in an email to The Record. "There is significant competition for new corporate headquarters and manufacturing locations around the world, so anything we can do to help positively stand out from other communities is beneficial."

For St. Augustine, Money gave the city of about 14,000 high marks for economic growth. It reported that Moody's projects job growth of 18 percent from 2016 to 2021. That ability to grow jobs is integral to the city's continued vitality.

“In economic development, the main premise is to position your community as a viable place for businesses to succeed,” Glasgow said. “It helps that a viable place is also a pretty place with a wonderful quality of life and abundance of natural amenities like parks and beaches, and we certainly have that going for us.”

One of the other positive aspects of St. Augustine is its walkability — which is particularly important considering the scarcity of parking in some places. Money said St. Augustine has an “average commute time of 18 minutes, with more than 14 percent of residents walking or biking to work regularly.”

That opportunity is one of the reasons St. Augustine Vice Mayor Todd Neville chooses to live and maintain his accounting business in the city. He said the firm, Neville Wainio CPAs, has operated out of a handful of different locations over the past two decades, but the spot on Arredondo Avenue has been the best.

“One of the things that drew us to the office that we now own is we wanted to have a location where our staff and ourselves we could walk to lunch and was also centrally located for our clients,” Neville said. “Being in the city of St. Augustine ... our clients liked that location better than any other place we’d been. It’s a great location to work.”

As a former resident of Anastasia Island in a more typical residential development, Neville said he also enjoys the increased level of interaction with his neighbors that comes with a more densely populated environment.

“I live really close to the core (of downtown), and on busy nights or weekends, we’ve got cars parked in front of our house and stuff like that, but for myself, it adds to it,” he said. “Instead of feeling like you’re in a small, sleepy town, it has the vibrancy of a city. To me, that’s great.”

Mayor Nancy Shaver, who has lived in several parts of the country, like many other St. Augustine residents, echoed Neville’s love of the energy of the city.

She added that she enjoys meeting those who have moved here from so many different backgrounds as well as those who have spent their entire lives here.

“It’s a pretty eclectic group of people who live here,” Shaver said. “When I go on neighborhood walks, that’s what I see: It’s a collection of genuine neighborhoods. And I think what’s wonderful is people really do look out for each other.”

For Ponte Vedra, there is a much different vibe, but it’s equally appealing for those desiring a different kind of living experience.

The site of several high-end resorts, Ponte Vedra is known for its beaches as well as top-notch golf and tennis opportunities.

Coastal Living noted Ponte Vedra’s proximity to the Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve that “will connect you to this wild and crucial part of the coastal environment.”

Coastal Living didn’t ignore St. Augustine. It published WalletHub’s 2017 Best Beach Towns to Live in, which featured St. Augustine among its six Florida selections (fifth overall).