

Best Places to Live 2009

By Luke Mullins

With the decade winding to a close, Americans have grown increasingly reluctant to gas up their moving vans. Last year, the Census Bureau's national mover rate--which represents the percentage of Americans 1 year and older who moved within the past year--hit its lowest level since 1948, when the bureau began tracking the data. And who can blame us? In the face of a terrifying banking crisis, a historic housing crash, and a grueling recession, relocating to a new city isn't exactly on the to-do list. **But despite the uncertain economy, the nation's diverse topography presents an enviable menu of great places to find work, retire, or just change your scene.**

In selecting our Best Places to Live for 2009, U.S. News took a thrift-conscious approach: We looked for affordable communities that have strong economies and plenty of fun things to do. The cities we selected are as distinct as America itself--ranging from a quaint suburb to a live-music mecca. But whether you prefer hiking through the Rocky Mountains, pulling a fish out of the Atlantic Ocean, or grilling hot dogs at a college football tailgate, here are 10 places that will fill up your daybook without emptying your wallet.

[Albuquerque, New Mexico](#)

Along the banks of the Rio Grande, with the Sandia Mountains in the background, is the beautiful city of Albuquerque, N.M. The sunny climate and endless landscape have long drawn writers, poets, and artists to this spot, which includes an unconventional mix of American Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo cultures. But it's not just freethinkers who drift to this Southwestern city of 511,000. Kirtland Air Force Base, Sandia National Laboratories, and Intel Corp. have helped develop the area into a manufacturing and research hub. They provide a stable anchor for the local economy.

Albuquerque's clear skies, calm winds, and abundant sunshine present plenty of opportunities to explore its natural splendor. Each October, the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta fills the sky with more than 700 colorful hot-air balloons. Fourteen area golf courses are open year-round and allow duffers to tee off against spectacular backdrops of volcanoes and mountain peaks. Meanwhile, Albuquerque's foothills and network of trails make the area a wonderful destination for biking. Still, "it's kind of undiscovered at the same time," says Will McConnell of the Albuquerque Bicycle Center.

[Auburn, Alabama](#)

For Southern charm with collegiate vigor, consider Auburn, Ala. This diamond on the eastern Alabama plains has a population of just under 50,000 and is home to Auburn University. On football Saturdays, when die-hard fans arrive in droves to cheer their beloved Tigers, Auburn swells to the state's fifth-most-populous city. And as Auburn's largest employer, the university also plays a starring role in the local economy.

With mild winters and hot summers, the city offers no shortage of outdoor recreation opportunities. Find a nice hiking trail in the 696-acre Chewacla State Park before cooling off with an afternoon swim. Take a stroll through the Donald E. Davis Arboretum, located on the Auburn University campus.

Golfers can head to nearby Grand National golf course and wend their way through the state along the beautiful Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail. "Once you have been there, you just want to come back," says John Cannon, president of SunBelt Golf Corp., which manages the trail.

[\[See a slideshow of the 10 best places to live.\]](#)

[Austin, Texas](#)

If you're a free spirit, music junkie, or barbecue lover--or if you simply have what it takes to "keep Austin weird"--Texas's state capital is for you. Considered ground zero for live music, this city of 716,000 residents is home to legions of musicians and nearly 200 performance venues. In addition, Austin hosts the always popular South by Southwest festival. Since its inception in 1987, the event has mushroomed from a local gathering to a 1,800-band, 80-stage extravaganza of music, filmmaking, and interactive activities featuring performers from all over the world. Austin is also a high-tech hub, with companies like Dell and IBM, which employ thousands of residents.

The city's warm climate offers plenty of sunshine, while the open green spaces don't provide any excuse for staying indoors. Head over to Lions Municipal Golf Course for an inexpensive round. Wander through the 351-acre Zilker Metropolitan Park until you find Barton Springs Pool, a 3-acre water source fed by underground springs that keep its temperature around 68 degrees all year long. To escape the city, head for the nearby Hill Country. "It's rolling hills cut with lots of little creeks and streams," says Tom Beach, a sales clerk at Austin Canoe & Kayak. "It makes for a nice road trip."

[Boise, Idaho](#)

Although often overlooked, Boise, Idaho, is a terrific destination for those looking to escape out West. With a high-desert climate of sunshine, clear skies, and four distinct seasons, this city of 200,000 makes a perfect base camp for exploring southwest Idaho's dramatic panorama. Choose from the many nearby parks, which total some 2,700 acres, cast a fishing line into the Boise River, or head over to Boise State University for a Broncos football game.

High-tech companies Micron Technology and Hewlett-Packard are among the area's leading private employers. To hit the thriving local arts scene, cruise downtown. Boise's free "Alive After Five" concert series brings musicians and other entertainers to the Grove Plaza each Wednesday during the summer. "It's harder to find a parking space after 5 than it is before 5," says Paul Hiller, the executive director of the Boise Valley Economic Partnership. "It's one of the most vibrant downtown areas you've ever seen."

[Durham, North Carolina](#)

Once a tobacco town, Durham, N.C., has evolved into a world-class center of all things advanced. This city of 206,000, located halfway between the Atlantic coast and the Great Smoky Mountains, is called the "City of Medicine" because of its expansive healthcare industry. And although widely known as the home of prestigious Duke University, it's also a thriving technology hub. At the same time, Durham's mild climate allows residents to get out and explore the region's abundant outdoor attractions. Consider hiking one of the many distinct trails and greenways or heading over to the Durham Bulls Athletic Park for an afternoon baseball game.

[La Crosse, Wisconsin](#)

With a population of about 50,000, La Crosse, Wis., is a great staging ground for exploring the natural wonders of the upper Mississippi River area. Although winters can be bitterly cold, friendly Midwesterners and the nearby ski slopes will keep your spirits high. The spring opens an active outdoor culture of camping, hiking, hunting, and fishing that brings more than a million visitors to the area each year. Explore the mighty Mississippi on a riverboat tour, or try your luck with the northern pike in Lake Onalaska. "Great people, fun town," says Dave Lueck, a 36-year-old graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. "It's not too big, not too small." And with a 2008 median home sale price of \$113,000, it's also an affordable destination.

[Learn more about our [methodology in choosing the best places to live.](#)]

[Loveland, Colorado](#)

Located just outside the breathtaking Rocky Mountain National Park, Loveland, Colo., is considered the "Gateway to the Rockies." But while it has 27 public parks and nearly 16 miles of recreation trails, it's Loveland's affection for man-made beauty that sets this community of 56,000 residents apart. Thanks to its Art in Public Places program, more than 300 pieces of sculpture and two-dimensional works are on display throughout the community. And with a 2008 median home sale price of \$186,000, the area's real estate market is relatively affordable.

Loveland has also achieved acclaim for its Valentine remaining program, in which 200,000 cards are sent to the city to receive a special cachet stamp. "We've got a waiting list of over 50 people that are waiting to be stampers," says Kathryn Roth of the Loveland Chamber of Commerce.

[San Luis Obispo, California](#)

Tucked into California's sweeping Central Coast region is lovely San Luis Obispo, Calif. Its warm, gentle climate, with temperatures rarely surpassing 90 degrees, is perfect for hitting nearby beaches or touring local vineyards. In addition, California Polytechnic State University, which is located in town, infuses the community with intellectual energy.

Although area home prices have fallen by as much as 35 percent over the past two years, the national housing bust may have also created another reason to make San Luis Obispo your home, says John Day, a local real estate broker. "There are just plain good deals" in the current market, he says.

[St. Augustine, Florida](#)

As the nation's longest continually inhabited European-founded city, St. Augustine, Fla., considers itself the oldest city in the United States. Founded in 1565 by Spanish Adm. Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, this community of 13,000 residents on Florida's northeastern coast has managed to maintain its colonial charm. Take the Castillo de San Marcos, for example. This remarkable stone-and-mortar fort is located right in the heart of St. Augustine's cobblestoned historic district. And even though 300 years of violent storms and enemy firepower couldn't penetrate its walls, visitors can enter the 20.5-acre monument site today for just \$6.

But St. Augustine's appeal extends beyond the history books. With a highly educated workforce, world-class golfing nearby--the immaculate TPC Sawgrass course is located just up the road--and that refreshing Atlantic breeze, this "ancient city" offers enough activities to satisfy even the most fanatical outdoor sports enthusiast. "Fishing, kayaking, boating--we have just about everything," says Donald Edwards, a clerk at the Avid Angler fishing shop. "I wouldn't live anywhere else."

[Upper St. Clair, Pennsylvania](#)

For a quiet residential option, consider Upper St. Clair, Pa. This quaint town of fewer than 20,000 residents is located in the hilly woodlands outside Pittsburgh, where the Whiskey Rebellion of the late 1700s was centered. The median home price of this family-oriented community was \$240,000 in 2008. And its school system is superb: Ninety-eight percent of its high school graduates go on to college, and the Upper St. Clair school district currently boasts 10 federal government blue-ribbon "Excellence in Education" awards.

After the spring thaw, residents head outside to enjoy the region's abundant greenery. "Pennsylvania is a fairly robust and rich place in terms of resources, if you just look a little bit," says Ed Di Gangi, the president of the Upper St. Clair Fly Fishing Club. In addition to fishing, popular outdoor activities include hiking, cycling, golf, and bocce. And with Pittsburgh about 10 miles away, residents of this small town are never too far removed from big-city comforts. "From here to a Pirates [baseball] game or here to a Penguins [hockey] game, it's 30 minutes or less," Di Gangi says.

Here's our list of the 10 best places to live:

1. [Albuquerque, N.M.](#)
2. [Auburn, Ala.](#)
3. [Austin, Texas](#)
4. [Boise, Idaho](#)
5. [Durham, N.C.](#)
6. [La Crosse, Wis.](#)
7. [Loveland, Colo.](#)
8. [San Luis Obispo, Calif.](#)
9. [St. Augustine, Fla.](#)
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