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Am I Ready to Retire?

Wisconsin, Idaho, and Georgia may not sound like paradise. But maybe you just haven't looked

By Gregory Hafkin

Retiring shouldn't have to mean packing your bags and schlepping to new digs in Florida or Arizona. A growing number of people are spending their golden years in places off the beaten track. Whether you're into skiing, shooting, or Shakespeare, you can get away from it all and still have a well-balanced life. So before you book the tickets to Boca or Tucson, check out a few places where you might never have considered spending your retirement years.



Your Own Private Idaho



County population: 40,908 (up 54% since 1990)

Drive to Seattle: 5 hours, 30 minutes

Median house price: \$220,000 (up 81% since 2002)

It might sound like the middle of nowhere, but this funky community in the Idaho panhandle pretty much has it all. Sitting on the shores of picturesque Lake Pend Oreille, the town is just 12 miles away from the Schweitzer Mountain ski resort. Attracted by the low-altitude, small-town atmosphere and affordable real estate prices, retirees from all over the West are moving to Sandpoint, which also hosts numerous art galleries and this year inaugurates the Idaho Panhandle International Film Festival.



PHOTO BY BOB RIHA, JR.

Downtown Sandpoint faces the lake, and some of the restaurants even have a dock, so boaters can sail to dinner instead of driving. At an altitude of about 2,085 feet, Sandpoint is lower than many other Western mountain towns, making the air easier to breathe.

Beyond Florida And Arizona



Storybook villages, quaint harbors, and a thriving arts community make Door County, Wis., a cozy spot for retirees. But for adventurous people like David E. Nevalainen, there's lots more: plenty of land -- Nevalainen built a 3,000-square-foot log home on 70 mostly wooded acres with two private ponds -- opportunities to indulge such hobbies as blacksmithing and target-shooting, and intriguing folks with whom to socialize.

Nevalainen, 62, and his wife, Jean Barrett, 55, moved to this bucolic peninsula jutting out into Lake Michigan in 2000, two years after he retired from his post as a scientist with Abbott Laboratories ([ABT](#)). They began vacationing in the area in 1986, bought their land for \$150,000 in 1997, and built their home two years later. "We designed a house for two people to grow old in," the PhD hematologist says. The county, a five-hour drive north of Chicago, offers Nevalainen enough privacy for "skinny-dipping in the pool" and enough civilization to please a fan of symphonies and Shakespeare. For Minnesota-bred David and urban New Englander Jean, "it's an ideal combination."

Vacationers from the Midwest have long been drawn to Door County's boating, golf, and hiking, as well as such novelties as fish boils (featuring whitefish cooked the way Scandinavian settlers liked it over a century ago). Summer vacationers can triple the population to more than 84,000. Now more retirees are finding it a choice spot, too, whether they come only for the warm months or hunker down for the winters.

Year-round, there's no shortage of things to do. Want to learn about ravioli-making, wood carving, or Nordic music? Take a class at The Clearing folk school ([theclearing.org](#)), a 71-year-old educational facility on a forested 130-acre site. In warm weather you can choose from concerts conducted by Victor Yampolsky, director of orchestras at Northwestern University, or a play by the Bard at Door Shakespeare. You can hike through five state parks, or check out 300 miles of shoreline, 10 lighthouses, and 11 golf courses ([doorcounty.com](#)).

For many retirees, such activities take a back seat to community-minded pursuits. Jim Kinney, 60, a former bank chief financial officer who dabbles in real estate, is involved with a land trust group to preserve open space.

While property costs have shot up in recent years -- land goes for \$3,000 to \$4,000 an acre -- a spate of condo development has put more real estate within reach. Condos can be had for under \$300,000, although waterfront views can jack up prices above \$1 million. Apartments for the elderly as well as assisted-living facilities can also be found in Sturgeon Bay and Sister Bay.

By Joseph Weber

SANDPOINT, IDAHO

First-time visitors to Sandpoint realize they have entered another world when they cross the bridge that spans the glacier-blue expanse of Lake Pend Oreille. It's there they catch a glimpse of the charming town nestled beneath the mountains of northern Idaho. "It's like turning back the clock 40 years," says mortgage broker Steve Kirby, who moved from San Diego to Sandpoint last year and plans to retire there soon.

Irritated by rampant growth in California, Kirby chose Sandpoint for its natural beauty and recreational opportunities. He now has a waterfront home, which he could never have afforded in San Diego. "The town itself is a real town," Kirby says. "It's not like a Tahoe that was created as a resort."

Sandpoint outgrew its roots in timber and mining and fully embraced tourism several decades ago. With the Schweitzer Mountain ski resort just 12 miles away and a lake that offers boatloads of recreational opportunities, Sandpoint has long attracted outdoor enthusiasts. It has been northern Idaho's one relatively liberal, funky outpost, in contrast to the right-wing militias and neo-Nazis who once hunkered down in nearby Hayden Lake.

Affluent retirees and second-home owners from the West and as far away as Louisiana have begun flocking to the town and surrounding Bonner County. "Most of the influx is from California, and what brings us up here is the price of housing," says semi retired Stephen Hoag, 56, who left Paso Robles, Calif., for Sandpoint in 2004, when the last of his kids turned 21. His three-bedroom, 3,000-square-foot house sits at the bottom of the mountain and overlooks the town and lake. It cost him \$340,000 three years ago; he says he could sell it now for \$420,000.

This appreciation is part of a trend all around Sandpoint. The median house price is \$220,000, up from \$121,500 in 2002, according to the Selkirk Association of Realtors. Since 1990 the county population has increased by more than 50%, to about 41,000. Two golf courses are being planned, and golfer Jack Nicklaus is buying a resort just east of town and turning it into a private club. Another group is trying to improve the airport so it can better handle landings in bad weather, while a new Chamber of Commerce committee is working with local merchants to make their services more elder-friendly by improving access to shops.

While retirees don't often seek cold climes, the locals jokingly refer to upper Idaho as the "banana belt" on account of its low altitude and relatively mild climate (average January high: 32, annual snowfall: 70 inches). "We're in late middle age, and living at 2,000 feet is a lot easier than living at 9,000 feet," says Doris Sanger, 55, a former Denver resident who, with her husband Ken, had considered the Colorado Rockies before opting for Sandpoint.

More than just a town for nature lovers, Sandpoint also offers classic car shows, art galleries, restaurants, wine tastings, and plays and movies at the historic Panida Theater, which will host the first Idaho Panhandle International Film Festival next month. "There's almost always something happening that's culturally interesting," Sanger says. "When you get here, it's like going to a giant house party." And everyone is invited. *By Stanley Holmes and Greg Hafkin*

SEA ISLAND, GEORGIA

Lazy Atlantic ocean waves lap its wide beaches. Mansions dot its winding lanes. Residents and guests often sip cocktails at its renowned hotel, The Cloister, designed in the 1920s by architect Addison Mizner, who built Palm Beach, Fla. When retirees aren't socializing here, they might be slipping out for target practice at the shooting range or playing a round of golf at one of three world-class courses.

For retirees with deep pockets, Sea Island could be Mecca. For decades the five-mile-long fingerlet halfway between Savannah and Jacksonville, Fla., has been known as "Millionaire's Island." The residents of its 700 "cottages" include a hefty share of CEOs, politicians, and artists who can afford the \$3 million average price of a home. Last year the former home of playwright Eugene O'Neill, a 6,000-square-foot Mediterranean-style villa, sold for \$20 million. "This place has a civility and genteel nature about it that I don't think you can find anywhere else," says J. David Everett, president of Sea Island Co., which owns the island and 800 yet-to-be-developed acres on neighboring St. Simons Island. (If developed, Sea Island Co. says it will build low-density residential communities.)

Residents say retiring to Sea Island keeps both the mind and the body active. On the first Monday of each month, 20 longtime residents attend the invitation-only Sea Island Roundtable to discuss finance, politics, books, and current events. It is one reason Sea Island is a cut above traditional retirement locales, says Reg Murphy, 72, vice-chairman of the National Geographic Society and a member of the Roundtable. "It's the kind of place people come to who don't want to retreat into golf, television, and laziness."

Such stimulation helped entice Scott Ledbetter, 55, to head south permanently after vacationing on Sea Island for years. In 2004, nine years after selling his Greenwich (Conn.) cable company, Columbia International, to TCI (later acquired by Comcast) for \$580 million, Ledbetter and his wife, Gail, 53, built a 6,000-square-foot, four-bedroom home in Sea Island's Ocean Forest neighborhood. Now, Ledbetter, who says he is not retired but living "a new chapter," spends his outdoor time running on the beach and sailing, while indoor time is dedicated to private investing. "Every morning my wife and I wake up in what seems like an earthly Garden of Eden," he says. It's a garden where the apples are tasty -- but expensive. *By Brian Grow*