



*If You're Thinking of Retiring In...
The Hills Are Alive...*

Yes, with the sound of music and a growing art colony in Abingdon, Va.

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ABINGDON, VA. -- Jim Parks already had settled on retiring in Arizona, after a five-year search, when a Nature Conservancy meeting in this southwest Virginia hamlet made him change his mind.

Mr. Parks, a 62-year-old telecommunications retiree from northern Virginia, knew he wanted to live in a small town with good hiking and scenery, along with a good dose of culture.

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After a few days here, he decided that Abingdon, with about 8,000 residents, fit the bill. Now, he can see Mount Rogers, the state's tallest peak, from his 32-acre farm, which he and his wife bought about four years ago. A 10-minute drive puts them on the doorstep of the town's historic Barter Theatre, which started Gregory Peck's career, or its Cinemall, a multiplex with weekly art-house movies.

There's an unexpected bonus, as well: The foothills surrounding Abingdon are a spawning ground for traditional country music. Nearby are a handful of music venues, including the Carter Family Fold (as in the family of Johnny Cash's wife, June Carter) and the Ralph Stanley Museum (one of the haunting voices in the film "O Brother, Where Art Thou?"). Many people grew up here plucking and singing bluegrass and still know how.

"It's often that you'll go to a party, and someone will whip out a banjo," Mr. Parks says.

The combination of breathtaking views, a small-town feel and cultural depth are drawing retirees to this hardscrabble part of Virginia. New students are swelling the rolls at the local College for Older Adults, the Abingdon Newcomers Club is getting bigger, and two-story brick homes are starting to spring up alongside cow pastures.

Halfway Back

Some of the more recent arrivals are classic "halfbacks" -- retirees who moved to Florida, realized they missed the four seasons, and moved "halfway" back north. It gets cold here in the winter, but Abingdon is tucked in a valley formed by the Holston River in the Blue Ridge Mountains; thus, the town is sheltered from harsher temperatures and snowstorms that batter the peaks above.

Charles and Carolyn Barry lived for a time in Arizona and Florida after Mr. Barry retired from International Business Machines Corp. in 1993. But the couple found themselves searching for a cooler spot to plant roots. During a stay in Johnson City, Tenn., they happened to visit Abingdon's Barter Theatre. Two years ago, they decided to look Abingdon over again, and "we really fell in love with it," says Mr. Barry, age 66.

ABINGDON AT A GLANCE



Population: **7,938**
Population, Washington County: **51,103**
Median age: **42.4**
Median household income: **\$30,976**

Area: **8.3 square miles**

Elevation: **2,265 feet**

Average July temperature: **73 degrees**

Average January temperature: **31 degrees**

Average annual rainfall: **45 inches**

Average annual snowfall: **15 inches**

Median home price: **\$150,000**

New homes built in 2004: **33**

Average cost of a new home in 2004: **\$163,500**

Property taxes: **About \$1,300 a year in town and county taxes for a \$150,000 house**

Downtown blocks listed on National Register of Historic Places: **20**

Golf courses: **6**

Closest major airport: **Tri-Cities Regional Airport, 34 miles**

Nearest city with population 50,000-plus: **Johnson City, Tenn., 38 miles**

Television stations: **1**

Bed-and-breakfasts: **14**

Trout-fishing waters: **8**

Sources: *Census Bureau; Abingdon Convention & Visitors Bureau; City-data.com; Southwest Virginia Board of Realtors; VAflyfish.com*

One caution from Mrs. Barry, who is 63: Homes aren't as affordable as one might imagine in this quiet corner of Virginia. "It took us a year to find something to buy," she says. "We wanted a \$300,000 home for \$100,000, and we never found it." Still, after refinishing the floors and redoing the kitchen in the 1970s house they bought last summer, they're happy with their half-acre find -- particularly when deer and the occasional fox entertain them in the backyard.

Bob Carlson and Janet Lee Nordin, longtime Chicago residents, originally retired to Lighthouse Point, Fla., to own and run a motel. But after several years, the couple tired of the hot summers and crowds. In 1997, they bought a house on 23 acres about seven miles outside Abingdon. After buying an adjacent 30 acres, the pair decided to start growing grapes after reading a local newspaper story about the area's first winemaker.

The Barrys spend much of their time at the Barter Theatre, where they work as volunteer ushers four or five nights a week. A chilly Friday evening in November found the couple in matching vests and bow ties, leading theatergoers into a performance of "The Scarlet Pimpernel," while also peeking out the front windows to see the local Christmas parade.

The Barter, one of the oldest professional theaters in the country, got its start in 1933, during the Depression, charging 35 cents or the "equivalent in produce." Tradition has it that by the end of the first season, the company had cleared \$4.35, two barrels of jelly and 300 pounds in collective weight gain. Playwrights including Noel Coward and Tennessee Williams were paid royalty fees with Virginia hams.

The theater itself, built in 1831 as a church, is one of the newer structures on Abingdon's Main Street. In 1760, when Daniel Boone camped here, wolves emerged from a cave and attacked his dogs. He gave the town its first name, Wolf Hills. It was soon renamed Black's Fort for a fort that would hold as many as 600 people. Finally, in 1778, Abingdon was incorporated as a town, named for Martha Washington's ancestral English home.

The 20-block historic district that makes up the town's center features colonial buildings along with Victorian and Federal-style homes, originally built by coal-mining executives and lawyers



Abingdon's oldest restaurant.



trying cases in the town's federal courthouse. The Tavern, built in 1779 as a watering hole and inn for stagecoach travelers, is building and still functions as a

Arts Center

An old train station has been turned into the Arts Depot, home to artists in residence, gallery space and classes. The William King Regional Arts Center, housed in the former Abingdon Male Academy on a hilltop, houses national exhibits of noted painters, a sculpture garden and more studios. With the town now serving as a hub for craftsmen, state officials in October selected Abingdon as the home for what will be called the Southwest Virginia Artisan Center. At a cost of \$4.1 million, the 40,000-square-foot facility will feature studios, a store, cafeteria, conservatory and visitors center, all on the campus of Virginia Highlands Community College.

Already, the campus's Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center, where several Virginia universities offer night classes to local students, houses the College for Older Adults. Here, people age 50 and older take classes taught by volunteer instructors at a cost of \$35 for a six-week session, in which they can take as many courses as they can handle. (Students also can buy a \$10 pass to see local performances and movies.) Recent offerings include courses on stock-car racing, biofeedback, the history of coal towns, and digital-photo editing. Since the program started in 1999, enrollment has hit a record with each session, most recently with 309 students last fall.

Keep Learning

Jim and Phyllis Marshall moved to a 13-acre spread here in 2000 after living 10 miles outside Washington, D.C., for four decades. They came to Abingdon seeking open spaces and relief from traffic congestion, and frequently take two- to three-hour drives to drink in the scenery -- often without seeing another car on the road for an hour at a time. But they have become big fans of the College for Older Adults, as well. "This is such an important dimension of this time of life. We should not stop learning," says Mr. Marshall, a 78-year-old retired defense-industry consultant who recently has been reading books about Albert Einstein.

Another draw for retirees: the Virginia Creeper Trail, a 34-mile-long trail created from a former railroad bed that links Abingdon to nearby Damascus, then runs to the North Carolina border. The passage offers a safe, relatively flat spot to walk or bike (though the grade becomes steeper beyond Damascus, as the trail makes its way up Whitetop Mountain, which is 5,540 feet high). Relocated retirees help maintain the trail's dozens of trestles, as well as retired train cars.

Other nearby natural resources: the Appalachian Trail; the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, with more than 300 trails, including some used for cross-country skiing; and the forks of the Holston River and South Holston Lake -- havens for trout fishing.

Spiritual Community

Along the Virginia Creeper Trail, one of the country's first "elder co-housing" communities, the ElderSpirit Community, is under construction. It will have 29 cluster homes, apartments and a common house where residents will be able to eat together.

he effort is being spearheaded by a group of former nuns working in Appalachia who split off from the Catholic Church in the 1960s to continue their work in mountain communities as laypeople. Now, the original members of that group, along with recruits from as far away as California, are building a trailside development designed for older people interested in living in a faith-based setting -- so far including a number of religious beliefs. The goal: to provide companionship and care from the early years of retirement to death.

"We're offering spirituality and mutual support, with spirituality meaning people's personal journey -- what their lives have meant to them and what they mean before they die," says Dene Peterson, one of ElderSpirit's founders. "The fact that Abingdon is attractive to live in was a big deal to us, and it's very affordable." Plus, it should be an easy walk to many of the town's amenities from the community's new homes, all of which have been sold or rented.

Despite Abingdon's many offerings for its small size, retirees here still encounter a few limitations, among them a dearth of shopping. Aside from specialty stores, there's no major mall. Still, some retirees who have settled here say they prefer to live where there's little traffic. Instead, they shop every few months when traveling, often to visit children.

"I know where to get things in D.C.," says Mrs. Marshall, 73, "but I don't have to deal with all the traffic every time I leave my house."

--Ms. Greene is a staff reporter in The Wall Street Journal's Atlanta bureau