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# Which city is the jewel of the Sunbelt?

Bizjournals - November 6, 2006 by G. Scott Thomas

The Sunbelt is an economic magnet. It's attracting new residents and jobs, as well as political and economic power.

But which of the region's metropolitan areas offer the best blend of comfortable lifestyle and warm weather?

Bizjournals analyzed the quality of life across the Sunbelt - defined as the area south of the 37th parallel -- and ranked Huntsville, Ala., No. 1 on its list of Hot Spots, America's most attractive warm-weather metropolitan areas.

It takes a newcomer just one glance to discover that Huntsville is not your typical Sunbelt community. The 36 Saturn V rocket towering above the skyline is a clue to the city's high-tech economy.

Banking, tourism and other service industries are driving economic growth in most Sunbelt metros. But Huntsville, proclaimed Rocket City -- is different.

The engineers who launched America's space program, led by Wernher von Braun, were installed in the north after World War II. They were followed by military and aerospace contractors, biotechnology firms and telecommunications companies.

This high-tech base has given Huntsville several advantages that are reflected in its No. 1 ranking:

- Forty percent of Huntsville's jobs are classified as professional or management positions, a large number of them in the engineering field. Only four Sunbelt metros enjoy a higher concentration of these desirable jobs.
- Thirty-one percent of its adults hold bachelor's degrees, putting Huntsville among the study's top six in the category of higher education.
- Per capita income in the Huntsville area has risen by more than 20 percent since 2000, far exceeding the Sunbelt average of 16 percent.
- Aiding its economic strength is the fact that Huntsville's property taxes are among the lowest in all of the Sunbelt.

Second place on the Hot Spots list belongs to Naples, an affluent metro on Florida's southern Gulf Coast. Its per capita income of \$44,458 is easily the highest in the Sunbelt.

A strong commitment to education has pushed Raleigh into third place. It's both the state capital of North Carolina and a major university center. Thirty-eight percent of its adults hold college degrees, a figure topped by just one Sunbelt metro, Durham at 39 percent.

In fourth place is Fayetteville, Ark., which also has a strong collegiate presence. The Fayetteville region is the home of the University of Arkansas, as well as the headquarters of Wal-Mart Stores Inc., the largest retailer in the world.

The second Florida entry in the top five is Sarasota-Bradenton, which is northwest of Naples along the Gulf Coast. Its employment base has expanded by 21.5 percent since 2000, adding almost 900 new jobs every month.

Rounding out the top 10 in the Hot Spots rankings are Cape Coral-Fort Myers and Palm Bay-Melbourne, both in Florida; Durham, N.C.; Phoenix; and Tallahassee, Fla.

## Hot Spots -- the jewels of the Sunbelt

- [Main story](#)
- [10 comfiest cities](#)
- [Rank for all Sunbelt metros](#)
- [Methodology](#)

Bizjournals compared the performances in 10 statistical categories of 77 Sunbelt metropolitan areas south of I-95, which passes about 10 miles north of Virginia Beach and about 30 miles south of San Jose. The 10 communities with the highest scores have been designated as Hot Spots, indicating that they offer an outstanding mixture of warm weather and quality of life. ([Click here for profiles of the 10 Hot Spots.](#))

The study's aim is to identify the areas that would be most attractive to people who might be considering a move to the Sunbelt.

The highest scores go to well-rounded places with steady growth, strong economies, moderate traffic, affordable living, and first-rate educational systems. ([Click here for the study's methodology.](#))

Communities from 17 states have been included in the study, which was limited to metropolitan areas with more than 250,000 residents. ([Click here for top-to-bottom rankings of all 77 Sunbelt metros.](#))

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## 10 Comfiest

### 5 Sarasota-Bradenton, Fla.

#### Three strengths

1. High income levels compared to the national average
2. Steady growth in the number of job opportunities
3. Excellent high-school graduation rate

#### Two weaknesses

1. High property taxes compared to most Sunbelt metros
2. Fairly slow expansion of personal income since 2000



Image courtesy of [Picture](#)

#### Quick stats

Metro population (2005): **673,035**

Income growth since 2000: **13.1%**

Population growth since 2000: **14.1%**

Employment (2005): **299,700**

Per capita income (2005): **\$40,112**

Employment growth since 2000: **21.5%**

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## Rank for all Sunbelt metros

<http://www.bizjournals.com/specials/pages/43.html>

1-20 [21-40](#) [41-60](#) [61-77](#)

Metropolitan Area	Quality of Life Score	Rank	Population (2005)	Per Capita Income (2005)	Avg. Annual Employment (2005)	Population Growth Since 2000	Per Capita Income Growth Since 2000
Huntsville, Ala.	7.34	1	368,661	\$33,119	197,900	7.6%	20.1%
Naples-Marco Island, Fla.	6.27	2	307,242	\$44,458	128,300	22.2%	12.8%
Raleigh-Cary, N.C.	6.08	3	949,681	\$35,186	463,200	19.2%	4.6%
Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers, Ark.-Mo.	5.35	4	405,101	\$27,806	198,300	16.7%	21.8%
Sarasota-Bradenton-Venice, Fla.	4.79	5	673,035	\$40,112	299,700	14.1%	13.1%
Cape Coral-Fort Myers, Fla.	4.22	6	544,758	\$34,059	221,900	23.6%	17.4%
Palm Bay-Melbourne-Titusville, Fla.	3.53	7	531,250	\$31,359	211,200	11.6%	16.5%
Durham, N.C.	3.53	8	456,187	\$34,099	269,900	7.6%	11.7%
Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, Ariz.	3.34	9	3,865,077	\$32,536	1,787,400	18.9%	14.7%
Tallahassee, Fla.	3.30	10	334,886	\$29,026	172,100	4.6%	17.1%
Little Rock-North Little Rock, Ark.	2.70	11	643,272	\$32,399	333,800	5.4%	20.2%
Jackson, Miss.	2.60	12	522,580	\$30,830	256,200	5.1%	21.3%
Oklahoma City, Okla.	2.46	13	1,156,812	\$31,630	554,600	5.6%	19.4%
Austin-Round Rock, Texas	2.39	14	1,452,529	\$34,005	693,300	16.2%	4.5%
Columbia, S.C.	2.38	15	689,878	\$30,927	352,200	6.6%	15.2%
Killeen-Temple-Fort Hood, Texas	2.25	16	351,528	\$28,907	117,200	6.3%	28.6%
Albuquerque, N.M.	2.23	17	797,940	\$30,477	377,800	9.4%	17.9%
Charlotte-Gastonia-Concord, N.C.-S.C.	2.22	18	1,521,278	\$36,151	792,300	14.3%	12.3%
Montgomery, Ala.	2.22	19	357,244	\$31,083	172,300	3.1%	21.7%
Charleston-North Charleston, S.C.	2.11	20	594,899	\$30,514	279,800	8.4%	20.6%

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