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November/December 2013

Genteel Charm
On the East Coast
In Wilmington, NC

8 Novel Destinations

Literary Locales to Love

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Oregon Boasts
Picturesque
Trio of Cities

PROFILE: GREATER WILMINGTON, NC

Tales of America's past, colorful azaleas, film studios and beaches are all abundant in this North Carolina coastal area on the Cape Fear River.

> BY JIM KERR



“We enjoy having downtown Wilmington nearby, with its mix of great restaurants, theater and plenty to see and do, as well as lots of young people around.”

—Lisa Myers

FULL OF HISTORY AND GENTEEL SOUTHERN CHARM, the riverfront city of Wilmington, NC, has found a niche as Hollywood East — or Wilmywood as some like to call it — where film studios have been reeling out feature films and TV programs since 1983. But as recent retirees have learned, this town, beautified by magnolia trees and azalea bushes, also is a gateway to miles of beaches, golf communities and a lifestyle that is both sophisticated and laid-back.

“We checked out the usual suspects along the East Coast, including Hilton Head, Charleston and Savannah; Wilmington was not on our A-list,” remembers Jeff Mays, 63, a retired consultant and lobbyist who had worked 33 years in the Washington, DC, area before cutting back his workload and moving to the Jersey shore with his wife, Jill, in 2005. When friends urged them to consider Wilmington, the couple spent a weekend here four years ago and then made several more trips to the city, located at the eastern terminus of Interstate 40. “We came back again and again over the next two years and each time we liked it more and more,” Jeff says.

They drove for miles around the city, looking at a number of golf communities — a priority for Jeff, an avid player with a 14 handicap. Jill had never picked up a club in her 61 years but wanted to learn.

Their Jersey shore house sold in one day in April 2011, and in June

they took up residence in Landfall, a 2,200-acre gated golf community just 10 minutes from the beach and 15 minutes from picturesque and entertaining downtown Wilmington. The backyard patio gate of their single-story, four-bedroom, four-bath, 2,800-square-foot home is a mere pitching wedge from the practice area of a Jack Nicklaus golf course, one of three courses — including a classic Pete Dye-designed layout — that wind through the roughly 1,500-home community and along the Intracoastal Waterway.

Jill, now 63, who worked as a special education teacher in Montgomery County, MD, for more than 30 years, finds her life

here more active than ever. “It’s a very open and friendly place,” she says of Landfall and Wilmington, “and we’re into so many things it keeps us busy all day.” Once intimidated by the thought of swinging a golf club, she was won over by Landfall golf pro Sara Bush, whose Golf 101 course starts with “just showing up,” and nonintimidating initial instructions such as “how to unload your clubs in the parking lot.” Off the ▶



Dinner cruises, kayak trips and sunset sails all can be found on the Cape Fear River, the only North Carolina river to flow directly into the Atlantic Ocean.

Population: 109,922

Location: Wilmington, North Carolina's largest coastal city, is located at the eastern terminus of Interstate 40, roughly 130 miles southeast of Raleigh, the state capital, and about 330 miles southeast of Asheville in the western mountains. Metro Wilmington extends into three counties: New Hanover, Brunswick and Pender.

Climate:

January: High 57° / Low 36°

July: High 90° / Low 73°

Average relative humidity: 70%

Rain: 58 inches annually

Cost of living: Average

Housing cost: The median sales price of single-family homes in Wilmington was \$181,279 from January through July, according to the Wilmington Regional Association of Realtors.

Sales tax: 7% (2% on groceries)

Sales tax exemptions: Prescription drugs

State income tax: For married couples filing jointly, the rate is graduated from 6% of taxable income up to \$21,250 to 7.75% on income more than \$100,000. For single filers, the rate is 6% of taxable income up to \$12,750 to 7.75% on income more than \$60,000.

Income tax exemptions: Social Security benefits are exempt. Residents can exclude up to \$2,000 of private pensions and up to \$4,000 of federal, state and local government pensions per person; the total exemption claimed cannot exceed \$4,000 per individual.

Estate tax: North Carolina repealed its estate tax in July of this year. The repeal is effective for deaths on Jan. 1, 2013, and later.

Inheritance tax: None

Property tax: The tax rate is \$1.083 per \$100 of assessed value, with homes assessed at 100% of market value. Annual taxes on a \$181,279 home would be around \$1,963, without the exemption below.

Homestead exemption: The state excludes from taxes the greater of \$25,000 or 50% of appraised value of a permanent, owner-occupied residence for residents age 65 or older who meet certain income requirements. For details, contact the North Carolina Department of Revenue, (877) 308-9103 or DORNC.com.

Personal property tax: Motor vehicles, boats, motorcycles, recreational vehicles, trailers and some other craft are taxed at the same rate as homes and assessed at a state-determined market value.

Religion: More than 100 churches of every Christian denomination can be found in Greater Wilmington. The city also has four synagogues and three mosques.

Education: The University of North Carolina

Wilmington has more than 13,500 students and is recognized as a top public undergraduate institution and one of the best values in the country. While the school is known for its natural science programs, high-profile programs in the arts, creative writing and film studies are popular. Business programs also are strong, and the school's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute offers short, noncredit courses, seminars, lectures and travel programs. Other area schools include Cape Fear and Brunswick community colleges, Shaw University and Mount Olive and Miller-Motte colleges.

Transportation: The recently renovated Wilmington International Airport has daily nonstop service to Atlanta; Charlotte, NC; New York; Philadelphia; Washington, DC; and Orlando, FL. The city is largely dependent on automobile transportation, but the Cape Fear Public Transportation Authority (Wave Transit) offers routes throughout the city and into portions of New Hanover County from transfer points downtown. Adult fares start at \$2 with free transfers. Students and seniors ride for half-fare.

Walk Score: Wilmington has an overall walkability rating of 44 out of 100, or "car dependent," according to WalkScore.com. Neighborhoods will vary.

Health care: The 628-bed New Hanover Regional Medical Center, the area's leading health-care facility, has three locations and emergency services. The nonprofit is the ninth largest health-care center in the state with roughly 5,000 employees, 600 physicians and 800 volunteers. Cape Fear Hospital, with 133 beds, serves as the regional hospital's home for orthopedic care, and Pender Memorial Hospital, with 86 beds, provides a wide range of services.

Housing: The Wilmington area real estate market is highly diverse and covers many square miles as well as four centuries. Historic mansions and bungalows are in leafy, quiet neighborhoods in the city, and many condos are downtown, some in restored buildings or above businesses in the heart of the action. The old suburbs of **Carolina Heights** and **Forest Hills** were streetcar communities developed in the 1920s, where long-defunct rail lines delivered commuters to work downtown. New suburbs include gated golf communities such as **Brunswick Forest**, (888) 371-2434, with homes from the \$300,000s, and **Landfall**, (800) 227-8208, where homes start in the \$300,000s and others along the Intracoastal Waterway go up into the millions. Developments within 30 minutes of downtown include **St. James Plantation**, (800) 245-3871, in Southport; **Porters Neck Plantation**, (800) 423-5695,

north of the city; and **River Landing**, (888) 285-4171, about 45 miles north off I-40 at Wallace. In the heart of Wilmington, options include stately period homes, such as one formerly owned by a 19th-century sea captain priced at \$1.8 million, and one- to three-bedroom downtown condos ranging from \$69,000 to \$365,000. In Wrightsville Beach, the median price for homes is \$650,000. Carolina Beach has single-family homes and condos oceanside as well as vintage cottages and condos inland with resale prices starting at \$100,000. Kure Beach has many old-style cottages as well as new construction. Two- to three-bedroom cottages 6 to 8 blocks off the beach run in the high \$100,000s. Homes closer to the beach can go up into the millions, but one-bedroom resale condos at older complexes start at about \$100,000. **Rentals:** Wilmington has plenty of long-term rental properties, from affordable one-bedroom apartments to condos, townhomes and single-family residences. Monthly rents range from about \$600 for a one-bedroom apartment to \$3,000 or more for a five-bedroom home. Headwaters at Autumn Hall, (910) 392-1222, a 236-acre complex minutes from downtown, is perfect for outdoor lovers, with walking trails and a kayak launch. Monthly rents begin at \$1,029 for apartments.

Visitor lodging: Downtown Wilmington offers a wide variety of accommodations, with options ranging from historic bed-and-breakfast inns to sleek hotels. The well-located Wilmingtonian has 26 suites with kitchens or wet bars starting at \$79, (800) 525-0909. Or step back in time at the Rosehill Inn Bed and Breakfast, which dates to 1848 and is nestled in Wilmington's beautiful historic district. Rooms range from \$119 to \$199, (800) 815-0250. Beach accommodations offer a vacation feel and vary widely in price depending on the season. Enjoy a commanding view of Carolina Beach and its old-time boardwalk from the 144-room Courtyard Carolina Beach by Marriott, from \$79, (910) 458-2030. At Kure Beach, the mom-and-pop Admiral's Quarters Motel offers 37 rooms, most oceanfront, from \$70, (855) 276-6835.

Information: Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, (910) 762-2611 or WilmingtonChamber.org. Wilmington and Beaches Convention and Visitors Bureau, (877) 406-2356 or WilmingtonAndBeaches.com. Wrightsville Beach Visitors Center, (800) 650-9106 or VisitWrightsvilleBeachNC.com. The Pleasure Island (Carolina and Kure beaches) Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Center, (910) 458-8434 or PleasureIslandNC.org. Town of Kure Beach, (910) 458-8216 or TownOfKureBeach.org. ►



The Wilmington Downtown Riverwalk bustles with bistros and shops aplenty. Plans call for the walkway to be extended to reach the two major bridges in the city.

course, Jill tutors adults as a volunteer for the Cape Fear Literacy Council. Jeff volunteers in a career mentoring program at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, and on slower days, the couple often bike to Wrightsville Beach for a swim.

Located a few miles away, across the Intracoastal Waterway, Wrightsville Beach is the most heavily visited and populated of three distinctly different beaches near Wilmington; the other two are Carolina and Kure (pronounced CURE-ee). Since Highway 74 is the only way to get to Wrightsville Beach, traffic can back up for several miles, especially in summer months — one reason why Jeff and Jill prefer to ride their bikes.

Multimillion-dollar homes and pricey condos abound in this beach community. During a four-day stay in fall 2010, Lisa and Wayne Myers bought a lot at Brunswick Forest, a gated golf community near Wilmington. Exactly six months later, they moved into a three-bedroom, three-and-a-half-bath home that Wayne designed himself. “We enjoy having downtown Wilmington nearby, with its mix of great restaurants, theater and plenty to see and do, as well as lots of young people around,” Lisa says.

When Wayne, 63, retired 11 years ago as a news photographer for the CBS affiliate in Washington, DC, the couple first moved from their home in Fairfax, VA, to Rockledge, FL, near Cocoa Beach, to be closer to Wayne’s parents. But after his parents passed away in 2010, the couple looked north for someplace closer to their two sons, who lived in northern Virginia. Their Brunswick Forest home has plenty of guest rooms, plus an office from which Lisa, 58, still telecommutes in information technology services.

Wayne has found his niche here as well. He’s an avid golfer and former president of the North Brunswick Kiwanis Club. He volunteers as a tutor in elementary schools and he has gone back to playing the drums in a local band. Wilmington, a Colonial city that dates to 1739, still is a major port on the Cape Fear River, which flows into the Atlantic at Southport, about 30 miles away. Capturing this strategic Confederate town and Fort Fisher, which guarded it downriver, was crucial in ending the Civil War. The city itself was spared major damage, and today it holds one of North Carolina’s largest collections of historic buildings and homes in a National Register Historic District that spans 230 blocks. Several remarkably preserved examples, including some that date back almost three centuries, are open for tours, along with ever-blooming gardens that flourish in Wilmington’s mild year-round climate.

In early morning hours, long before the lunchtime crowd arrives at the riverside and garden restaurants, downtown Wilmington can be a quiet and contemplative place. Conductors of horse-drawn trolleys water their magnificent Percherons and a few visitors stroll along the Wilmington Downtown Riverwalk. Across the water looms the mighty USS North Carolina, the country’s most decorated battleship, which fought in every major battle in the Pacific during World War II and today is a popular year-round



Strong Percheron horses pull trolleys touring Wilmington’s downtown and historic districts.

museum. Visitors can tour the sailors’ bunks, mess hall and gun turrets. As noon approaches, the Riverwalk area fills with tourists, workers and residents shopping and having lunch. The downtown area also includes the Cape Fear Museum of History and Science, Thalian ▶

Hall Center for the Performing Arts and Wilmington Railroad Museum. Every April, when Wilmington holds its popular North Carolina Azalea Festival, several downtown streets jam with vendors and thousands of visitors.



Jill and Jeff Mays found their retirement haven at Wilmington's Landfall golf community, which is a bike ride away from the beach.

On a normal day, however, Wilmington reflects the ambience of a medium-size Southern city, although now-welcome Yankees continue to advance in ever-increasing numbers, and further growth is inevitable. According to data from the city's chamber of commerce, metro Wilmington, with more than 370,000 residents in New Hanover, Brunswick and Pender counties, is projected to grow 5.8 percent from 2012 to 2017. That means 8,800 new households.

Major employers in the area include New Hanover Regional Medical Center with about 5,000 employees, GE Wilmington, the University of North Carolina Wilmington and PPD, a pharmaceutical and biotech company. The growing film industry, which started here at Orton Plantation with the 1983 filming of Stephen King's "Firestarter," has produced more than 11 TV series and 300 feature films. EUE/Screen Gems Studios now is one of the largest production companies east of Hollywood with 10 sound stages, and hundreds of retirees in the Wilmington area have participated as extras in these productions. Spotting film and TV actors in local restaurants



Area residents have been flocking to Wrightsville Beach since 1887 when Shell Road, now known as Wrightsville Avenue, was built to connect the serene shore to the mainland.

has become a pastime.

While Wilmington takes the spotlight, its three area beaches also are star attractions in the region. Wrightsville is about 5 miles from downtown Wilmington and 130 miles from Raleigh. Carolina and Kure beaches to the south are a 10- to 20-minute drive from downtown Wilmington, with populations of about 5,800 and 2,000, respectively. Both towns are known for relaxed lifestyles and quaintness of character, although each has seen significant growth in recent years with new hotels, houses, condos and commercial establishments, most catering to the resort casual set. Carolina Beach has a major hotel and a 761-acre state park with camping, nature trails and a boat ramp. The even more laid-back Kure Beach, a town with only one stoplight, features a long fishing pier, new municipal park, swimming pool and a Civil War museum at Fort Fisher, a National Historic Landmark. The fort also is the home of the North Carolina Aquarium, which recently underwent a \$15 million renovation and expansion.

In Kure Beach, "there's a lot of opportunity for cultural, recreational and conservation activities," says M.L. Smith, 69, a retired college administrator from Indianapolis who first visited in 2004 with his wife, Sara, when they joined with several other couples in buying a condo. "We love the Kure Beach lifestyle, with the nearby ocean, aquarium and overall historic nature of

the area," M.L. says. In April, the group sold the Kure Beach condo, and in May the Smiths bought a townhome as their permanent retirement home in this quiet beach town.

"I'm really the beach person," says Sara, 65, a former administrator at a technical community college. "As kids growing up in the Northeast outside Boston, we shared the beaches with 100,000 of our 'best friends.' Here it's not at all crowded and the people who come here really are our best friends."

"Calm" is a word Sara uses to describe Kure Beach. Traffic does pick up from April to November, but the rest of the year, when dogs on leashes are allowed on the beach, tranquility prevails here.

Soon after Sara and M.L. moved to Kure Beach, they had a moment that stopped them in their tracks. "We realized we actually owned property in a town with one stoplight!" Sara says with a smile. "Where else in the country will you find a beach town with one stoplight?" **W**

Jim Kerr is a Raleigh, NC-based freelance writer who loves exploring the history and culture of the North Carolina coastline.



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