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## *Preface: Region overview*

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# Boomtowns, coolness & geeks

**N**ew Orleans is booming; Bay St. Louis is cool, and the Crestview-Fort Walton Beach-Destin metro area is full of geeks. And that means variety - a good thing for any region.

Economic development professionals know you can provide all the information you want about the benefits of a particular area for a business, from incentives to site availability to taxes. But if it's not a place where people want to live, it doesn't matter.

A few years ago the *Harvard Business Review*, citing U.S. Census Bureau research, reported that nearly two-thirds of college-educated 25- to 34-year-olds said they first picked a place where they wanted to live, then starting looking for a job. That's important for a business that wants to attract top talent.

While economic development officials in the Gulf Coast can point to a cost of living that's generally lower than the nation as a whole and weather that's mild year-round, the lifestyle choices between New Orleans and Northwest

Florida may be the strongest selling point. There's something for everyone.

The region's largest city, New Orleans, is among the top 12 American boomtowns, according to a 2013 Bloomberg article. Two years earlier, Forbes magazine had New Orleans No. 1 on a list of America's Biggest Brain Magnets for luring young college graduates.

Like smaller towns? The Budget Travel website ranks Bay St. Louis, Miss., as the third coolest small town in America. Further to the east, Ocean Springs, Miss., in 2013 won the "Great American Main Street Award" for historic preservation and downtown revitalization.

In Florida, the Crestview-Fort Walton Beach-Destin metro area came in 20th in 2011 on a Forbes list of America's Geekiest Cities. Family oriented? Parents magazine named Gulf Shores, Ala., among the 10 Best Beach Towns for Families in America in its June issue.

The numerous awards for a variety of traits all underscores the fact that the Gulf Coast region between Southeast Louisiana and Northwest Florida has a mix of urban and rural areas to suit just about every taste.

It's a region that features urban centers and their bedroom communities and suburbs with

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*By Tom McLaughlin*

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familiar-looking strip malls, fast-food joints and big box stores. But there are also wide expanses of undeveloped or rural land dotted with small towns boasting personalities all their own.

There are eight contiguous metropolitan areas along the Interstate 10 corridor: Baton Rouge, La.; New Orleans-Metairie, La.; Gulfport-Biloxi-Pascagoula, Miss.; Mobile, Ala.; Daphne-Fairhope-Foley, Ala.; Pensacola-Ferry Pass-Brent, Fla.; Crestview-Fort Walton Beach-Destin, Fla.; and Panama City, Fla. They have a combined population 3.9 million people and gross metropolitan product of \$191 billion (pre-2013 metro definitions with fewer counties/parishes).

The military is a huge economic driver in the region, with 47 sites between New Orleans and the Panama City area. Tourism also creates thousands of local jobs. Many in the region make a living off shore, either in the oil and gas industry or through the seafood industry and sport fishing. There are major ports operating along the Gulf Coast, and their role in the spread of commerce is sure to increase with the expansion of the Panama Canal.

Culturally, common traits are the warm weather, Mardi Gras, an appetite for seafood and critters called “crawfish,” a strong patriotic tilt and support of all things military. And during hurricane season, it’s common for threatened residents to head east or west to a coastal area not directly under the gun.

### Beach/coastal communities

The first image that comes to mind when thinking about the Gulf Coast may be the beach. Tourism officials promote that concept with

images showing people lounging in chairs on sugar white beaches while watching the emerald waters that serve as a backdrop.



*Pensacola Beach, Fla.*

The number of beach communities is large and the cost of living along the shoreline or close to it runs the gamut. There are lesser known communities off the beaten path and there are ritzy planned communities. The beach communities include Mississippi’s Waveland, Long Beach, Gulfport and Biloxi, and spread east to Alabama’s Orange Beach, Gulf Shores and Perdido Beach before moving into Florida, where the beach communities wrap around the entire state.

In Northwest Florida alone there’s Pensacola Beach, Navarre Beach, Fort Walton Beach, Destin, Sandestin, Grayton Beach, Mexico Beach, Panama City Beach and many areas in between. Many visitors are amazed that it’s still possible to find secluded stretches of beach.

Pensacola Beach, once filled with relatively inexpensive block houses, has remade itself over the years. It now sports more expensive homes and high-rises but remains family-oriented, much like Navarre Beach further to the east. The two beaches are separated by miles of undeveloped shoreline thanks to the Gulf Islands National Seashore.

Further to the east is Fort Walton Beach and Destin, two areas that are also separated by undeveloped shoreline. Destin bills itself as the “World’s Luckiest Fishing Village,” but its most notable feature today is the skyline of high-rise condos and hotels. Further to the east is Sandestin, best known for its resort that serves as a venue for corporate functions.

One of the most heralded beach communities may well be the planned community of Seaside in south Walton County. It’s the poster child for an entire category of development that harks back to the days before the automobile dictated how cities and towns would grow.

Developed by Robert Davis in the 1980s, it uses a concept advanced by urban designer Leon Krier. Seaside is reminiscent of a simpler time when all the services one might need are confined to a quarter-mile radius - the walkable community. The idea was to develop a town

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designed around people, not automobiles, roads and highways.

Importantly, the beach itself was deemed off-limits for most buildings so residents could have a generally unobstructed view. Seaside includes a town square with office, town hall, shops and common areas for outside events. Seaside has won numerous architectural awards and been featured in national publications. It's so picture perfect, "The Truman Show" was filmed here.

Other residential communities have blossomed near Seaside, and the Walton County Tourist Development Council works to market the area to celebrates the individuality of each.

To the east of Seaside is Panama City Beach, best known as a party destination for students who stream in for spring break. And beyond Panama City Beach are more quiet beach communities, like Mexico Beach and Cape San Blas.

### Coastal cities/metro areas

Not everyone is enamored with the sand and the sound of waves hitting the shore. Most of the population lives in the metropolitan areas in and around the



*New Orleans*

core cities that dot the coast. The largest is New Orleans, the only metro area in the I-10 corridor covered in this book with more than 1 million residents. By contrast, the smallest metropolitan area is Panama City, Fla., with under 188,000 residents spread over two counties. In fact, there are two even smaller metro areas just outside the I-10 region: Dothan, Ala., and Hattiesburg, Miss., both to the north.

New Orleans has a city population of just under 344,000 but an eight-parish metropolitan area of 1.2 million. It sits astride the Mississippi River and most of the city is below sea level.

One of the oldest cities in the United States, there are distinct neighborhoods that include

the Garden District and the French Quarter. Downtown, the smell of Cajun-inspired foods is pervasive, and the air is filled with the sound of music, from jazz on one end of the street to zydeco or country on another.

Topless bars, trinket shops, voodoo art shops and eateries seem to fit together effortlessly in a city with a noticeable European flavor.

A poll conducted by "Travel and Leisure" magazine ranked New Orleans as America's first favorite city in ten categories, including stylish boutique hotels, live music/concerts and bands, cocktail hours, antique and vintage shops, people watching and more.

New Orleans is also an educational center, home of Tulane University, the Louisiana State University Medical Center, the University of New Orleans, Loyola University and more.

The National Football League New Orleans Saints play at the New Orleans Super Dome and the city also has the Hornets, a professional basketball team.

Along the Mississippi River front is the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas, and New Orleans is also home to a World War II museum.

Bloomberg news service listed New Orleans among its "Top 12 American Boomtowns," citing the city's population recovery from Hurricane Katrina.

"Tourism is booming, and the New Orleans area gained more residents than any other in the U.S. from 2007 to 2011. The population rose to 1.2 million in 2012," the article said.

To the east of New Orleans, the largest coastal cities in South Mississippi are Gulfport, Biloxi and Pascagoula. Gulfport, with a population of nearly 68,000 is home of the state port and commercial airport, while Biloxi, with a population of just over 44,000, is best known for its casinos. Pascagoula, with a population of just over 22,000, has the largest port in Mississippi and is best known as home to major ship-building operations, including Ingalls.

While the central city populations are relatively small, the three-county Gulfport-Biloxi-

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Pascagoula metropolitan area has a population of more than 379,000. One of the more interesting if not large coastal cities is Bay St. Louis, with a population of just over 9,000. While small, it is not far from NASA's Stennis Space Center, where rocket engines are tested.

Although New Orleans has received kudos for being a boomtown, many see Mobile, Ala., as particularly vibrant. With a city population of over 195,000 and metropolitan area of almost 414,000, Mobile is one of the largest cities in Alabama. Add neighbor Baldwin County and the two-county population tops 600,000.

Mobile is a major economic engine for South Alabama and the Gulf Coast. It's home to one of the most active ports in the region, and is also a financial center. Over the past few years the city and county have scored multiple economic development wins, including landing an Airbus final assembly line.

It's also a cultural hub for the region, home to the Mobile Museum of Art, a Saenger Theatre arts center, the Mobile Civic Center, the Arthur C. Outlaw Convention Center, the Mobile Symphony and the Mobile Opera. The city also hosts minor league baseball and hockey teams.

Mobile offers both public and private school education and is home to the Alabama School of Mathematics and Science, an educational facility dedicated to advancing the education of the state's best and brightest students in those areas of achievement.

The University of South Alabama, the University of Mobile, Spring Hill College and Faulkner University are all located in Mobile, as is Bishop State Community College, the University of Mobile and Fortis College.

Florida's western-most city, Pensacola has a city population of about 52,000 people, but is the central city of a two-county metropolitan area of over 461,000 people. In 1559 it became the first European settlement in today's United States, but the settlement was wiped out by a hurricane and the area was not settled again until 1698. Pensacola highlights its history through

the preservation of forts Barrancas and Pickens. The Seville District in the vibrant downtown is filled with historic homes.

The city today is remaking itself with a facelift of much of its waterfront on Pensacola Bay. One highlight of the revitalization has been the creation of Maritime Park, featuring a new stadium that in 2012 became home to the AA baseball Blue Wahoos.

Pensacola, the "Cradle of Naval Aviation," last year celebrated the 100th anniversary of Naval flight training. It is home of the Blue Angels and a world-class National Naval Aviation Museum. It also offers community theatre, opera, ballet, symphony and art galleries.

### Inland towns/rural areas

There are multiple smaller cities that are not near the Gulf of Mexico that would look right at home in the nation's Midwest.



*Village of Tradition, Miss*

They include towns just north and south of Interstate 10, including Mississippi's Diamondhead, Tradition, Saucier and D'Iberville, Alabama's Foley, Daphne, Robertsdale, and Bay Minette, or Florida's Milton, Crestview, DeFuniak Springs and Marianna.

One of those inland cities that could be considered part of the Gulf Coast aerospace corridor is Tallahassee. It's home to the Florida Center for Advanced Aero-Propulsion and the National High Magnetic Field Laboratory.

In 2007, the city of Crestview in north Okaloosa County, surpassed Fort Walton Beach to become the county's largest city. Crestview is the largest of several communities in more rural areas north of the massive Eglin Air Force Base reservation. Acreage for farming and hunting remain available in the communities of Milton, Holt and Baker and some of the most pristine waterways in the Southeast, the Blackwater, Yellow, Shoal and Choctawhatchee rivers, run through the northern county areas.

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Northwest Florida’s DeFuniak Springs is built around one of only two naturally occurring circular lakes in the world. It has a haunted hotel, winery and more than 200 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Gulf Coast is a place of diversity, where bikini clad spring breakers are as common as

people in uniform, where pickups share the road with Mercedes and where historic homes are found just a short jump from modern casinos. Urban or rural is at home here. It has something for everyone.

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# Redrawing the region’s map

The federal government in early 2013 re-defined what counties make up the nation’s metropolitan areas, and that meant some changes for the Gulf Coast region.

One of the biggest changes is in that the one-county Daphne-Fairhope-Foley micropolitan area became a full-fledged metropolitan area. The population went from 186,830 to 190,790 between July 2011 and July 2012.

Another big change occurred in Mississippi with the return of the three-county Gulfport-Biloxi-Gulfport metropolitan area. Under the new definition, the metro area is composed of Hancock, Harrison and Jackson counties with a population of 379,582, up from 375,911. Prior to the new definitions, South Mississippi was split into two metro areas, and included two rural counties to the north.

In Northwest Florida, the Crestview-Fort Walton Beach-Destin metropolitan area is no longer composed of just one county, but two. It now includes, in addition to Okaloosa County, Walton County to the east. Its 239,021 population in July 2011 grew to 247,665 by July 2012, an increase of 3.6 percent.

Further east, the Panama City metropolitan area also expanded from one county to two. Now, in addition to Bay County, the metro area includes Gulf County. The population of 185,500 in July 2011 grew to 187,621 a year later.

The Gulf Coast region is home to the third fastest growing and 21st fastest growing metropolitan areas in the nation. The third fastest-growing metropolitan area in the nation is Flor-

Gross Metropolitan Product 2011	
Metropolitan area*	millions
New Orleans-Metairie-Kenner	\$80,154
Baton Rouge	\$46,949
Mobile	\$16,421
Pensacola-Ferry Pass-Brent	\$14,463
Gulfport-Biloxi	\$10,487
Crestview-Fort Walton Beach-Destin	\$9,674
Pascagoula	\$6,511
Panama City-Lynn Haven-PC Beach	\$6,464
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$191,123</b>
* pre-2013 metro definitions Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis	

ida's Crestview-Fort Walton-Destin, and the 21st is Alabama's Daphne-Fairhope-Foley.

Other metropolitan areas in the region also showed some substantial growth. Pensacola-Ferry Pass-Brent is 78th fastest growing, Panama City is 91st and New Orleans-Metairie is 95th fastest growing among the nation's 381 metropolitan areas.

Larry Sassano, director of Florida's Great Northwest, told the *Northwest Florida Daily News* while discussing the third-place ranking for Crestview-Fort Walton-Destin that it's always good for marketing an area to show the population is growing. A factor for companies considering relocating is an expanding workforce.

– David Tortorano

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Region's Metropolitan Areas							
Population estimates (as of July 1, 2012)		Change, 2011 to 2012		Ranking			
				Population estimates (as of July 1, 2012)		Change, 2011 to 2012	
2011	2012	Number	Percent	2011	2012	Number	Percent
<b>New Orleans-Metairie, La.</b> (Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, St. John the Baptist, St. Tammany parishes)							
1,213,488	1,227,096	13,608	1.1	46	45	38	95
<b>Baton Rouge, La.</b> (Ascension, East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Iberville, Livingston, Pointe Coupee, St. Helena, West Baton Rouge, West Feliciana parishes)							
808,713	815,298	6,585	0.8	69	69	68	140
<b>Pensacola-Ferry Pass-Brent, Fla.</b> (Escambia, Santa Rosa counties)							
455,458	461,227	5,769	1.3	110	110	78	78
<b>Mobile, Ala.</b> (Mobile County)							
413,145	413,936	791	0.2	125	127	231	269
<b>Gulfport-Biloxi-Pascagoula, Miss.</b> (Hancock, Harrison, Jackson counties)							
375,911	379,582	3,671	1.0	139	138	119	118
<b>Tallahassee, Fla.</b> (Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon, Wakulla counties)							
371,029	375,371	4,342	1.2	141	140	99	88
<b>Crestview-Fort Walton Beach-Destin, Fla.</b> (Okaloosa, Walton counties)							
239,021	247,665	8,644	3.6	187	186	52	3
<b>Daphne-Fairhope-Foley, Ala.</b> (Baldwin County)							
186,830	190,790	3,960	2.1	223	221	108	21
<b>Panama City, Fla.</b> (Bay, Gulf counties)							
185,500	187,621	2,121	1.1	224	224	151	91
<b>Dothan, Ala.</b> (Geneva, Henry, Houston counties)							
146,651	147,620	969	0.7	276	275	214	178
<b>Hattiesburg, Miss.</b> (Forrest, Lamar, Perry counties)							
145,262	146,766	1,504	1.0	278	278	186	104
<i>Source: Office of Management and Budget, February 2013</i>							

Photos in this section courtesy of the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce, New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau; Village of Tradition