

The O'Neal Bridge is one of two bridges crossing the Tennessee River and leading to the city of Florence.



Florence

Some may prefer the fast track, but life in this **picturesque** town seems to be buzzing along at just the right pace.

BY AMANDA KUHNERT



AT A GLANCE

(CNNMoney.com, 2007):

Population.....	34,100
Median age.....	38.2
Married.....	46.6%
Median home price.....	\$133,556
Median family income.....	\$43,463
Median commute time.....	13.8 minutes
Annual rainfall.....	55.80 inches
Average temperature	
High (July).....	90.6° F
Low (January).....	30.7° F

Tucked into the corner of northwestern Alabama, the charming community of Florence embodies the best of small-town living, without the sacrifices.

Little League games, bird-watching outings, and fishing tournaments bring neighbors together during the day. And after the sun goes down, those same people are likely to cross paths at a theater production, a local eatery, or a sports event.

"It's a good place to live," says Charlene Isbell, co-owner and broker at Real Estate Masters, Inc., in Muscle Shoals. It only takes a glimpse of the lifestyle here to understand why she's right.

Going Downtown

If you're searching for southern charm, Florence's business district serves it up right. Wide sidewalks make for a pleasant stroll, and flowering crepe myrtles provide a colorful foreground to storefronts and restaurants. Historic neighborhoods surround the downtown, and the University of North Alabama,

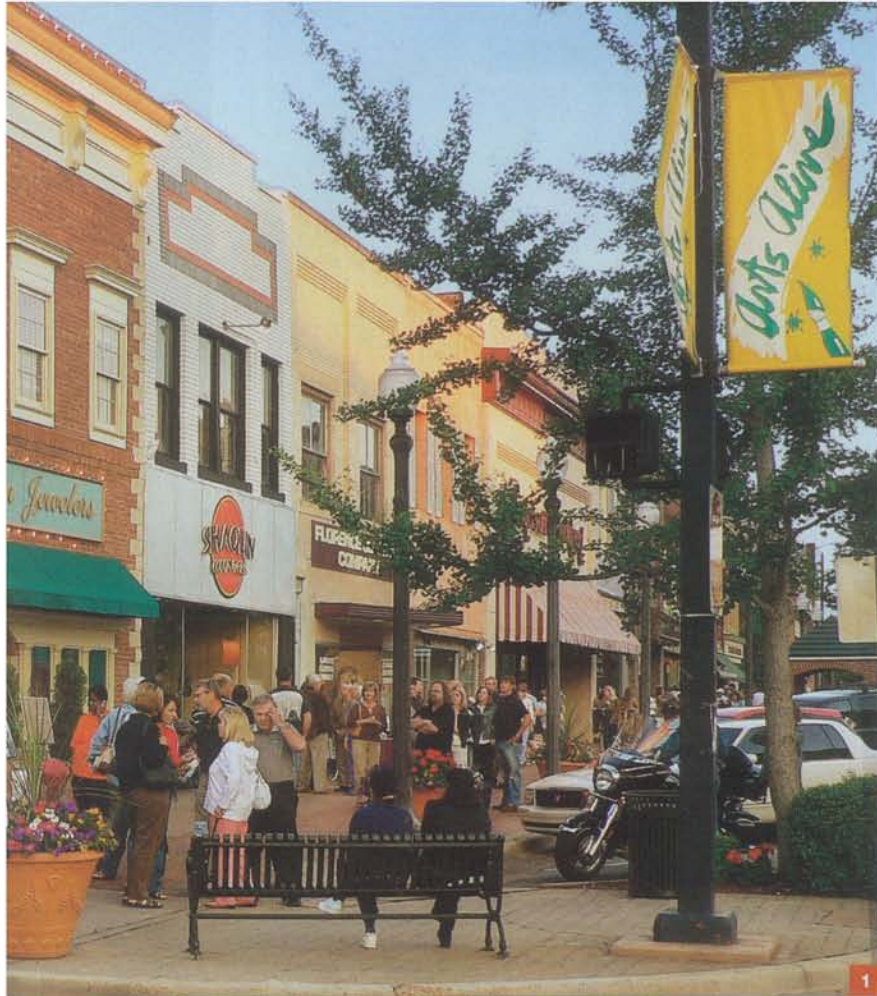
whose campus is integrated into the city center, lends a youthful vibrancy and stateliness to the area. An impressive public library is home to a 3,400-square-foot children's section and even a coffee shop.

The city borders the Tennessee River, so residents can swim, ski, fish for smallmouth bass, and enjoy all the water has to offer. Situated between downtown and the river, McFarland Park has playgrounds, a beach area, fishing piers, and a driving range.

Encouraging Economics

"On the outskirts of town, we have a large mall with good shopping," Isbell says. "We also have movie theaters and just about every kind of restaurant you can think of." She grew up nearby and has watched the retail options expand over the years. "That keeps us from having to drive to Huntsville, Birmingham, or Nashville," she explains.

New industry coming to the area has positively affected the local economy. In 2009, National Alabama Corporation plans to open a railcar manufacturing



1. Arts Alive, an arts and crafts festival, draws thousands to the downtown area every May.
2. The Wood Avenue Inn and many other houses in Florence are on the National Register of Historic Places.
3. Wilson Park is a downtown attraction for visitors and residents alike.
4. Florence's Rosenbaum House is the only structure in Alabama designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

plant in neighboring Colbert County. And Florence's appeal has not been overlooked by the hospitality industry. Marriott Shoals Hotel & Spa opened its doors several years ago, and two championship Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail courses are just a short drive away. The heavy barge traffic along the river is yet another solid indication of Florence's current and future economic vitality.

Moving In

"We have a lot of people who are moving here from up north to retire," Isbell explains. It should come as no surprise that Florence is appealing to those who are ready to exchange long commutes or anonymity for a more community-focused and convenient way of life. "We don't have the hustle and bustle of the big city, but we aren't so rural that there isn't anything to do," she says. "We also have our natural surroundings—trees, flatlands, mountains, lakes."

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When deciding where to live in Florence, you'll have your choice. The downtown neighborhoods have a wide selection of historical homes, some dating to the 1800s and the early 1900s. For those who prefer newer construction, the developments just outside town offer quite a few affordable options, starting in the \$100,000s. And if wide-open spaces are your preference, the rural areas provide plenty of acreage and fresh air. Isbell points out the convenience of all these communities—you'll probably never have more than a 20-minute drive to work or play.

"Over the past five years, the number of homes sold and the average selling price have increased," she says. "Our housing stats improve every year. It's still a buyer's market here. There's a lot to choose from."

Isbell exemplifies the hospitality for which small southern towns like Florence are known. "When someone calls about moving to the area, I'll just invite them to come down, and I'll show them around," she says. "I tell them, 'You're going to fall in love with it.' And they do." 🏡



PHOTO 1: DAVID MESSER; PHOTOS 2-4: COURTESY OF THE CITY OF FLORENCE, AL