

Business

Quality of life makes Greater Baltimore the place to be

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Over the past decade, Greater Baltimore has rapidly emerged as one of the nation's most vibrant and livable regions.

Of course, we all want to tout our communities as the best places to live, but quality of life is difficult to quantify. However, for Baltimore, telling this story is even easier because our region has received rankings and accolades from national policy groups and associations, consultancies and media publications. We continue to gain worldwide attention for our vibrant city, cultural destinations, natural resources, and other quality-of-life indicators.

In fact, Places Rated Almanac, the most comprehensive quality-of-life guide covering North America, rated Greater Baltimore the 12th best place to live in its 2007 guide. In addition, five towns in the Greater Baltimore region were ranked among Money magazine's 100 best places to live in 2007, including Olney (17), Elkridge (42), Catonsville (49), Eldersburg (56) and Crofton (72).

Downtown Baltimore is a destination in itself and has emerged as one of the nation's strongest and most vibrant downtowns. It ranks eighth among U.S. cities for both population density and high-earning households (those with incomes of \$75,000 and greater) within a one-mile radius of the city center.

Downtown also sees more than 20 million visitors to its attractions annually, according to the Downtown Partnership. And since 2003, Baltimore has added more than 3,000 hotel rooms — with more planned.

Arguably the most defining feature of Greater Baltimore's quality of life is the expansive coastline along the Chesapeake Bay. Covering 2,500 square miles, the bay is the largest estuary in North America. It provides a wide array of recreational opportunities, including boating, fishing, crabbing and swimming.

Greater Baltimore's urban waterfront is one of the most recognized and emulated in the world. Coastal Living ranked the harbor third nationally. And in February 2007, the Project for Public Spaces gave Baltimore's waterfront an honorable mention in their "Great Waterfronts of the World" list. The winners were in Sweden, Italy and Finland. Baltimore kept company on the list with such cities as Chicago, Montreal and San Francisco.

The Chesapeake is one reason that Baltimore is increasingly recognized as a great place to visit, especially as summer approaches. Many would be surprised to learn of a 2005 ranking by Frommers that put Baltimore among the best in the world as a "Top 10 Destination for Summer Travel."

Just last year, MSNBC's Sherman's Travel placed Baltimore at No. 1 on its list of "Top 10 Underrated U.S. Cities," which shows that we're just starting to realize our potential as a tourist destination.

The region's location also provides convenient access to a diverse mix of getaway spots, from Ocean City and Deep Creek Lake to Washington, D.C., and New York City. There are countless area festivals during the warmer months that bring large numbers of visitors and dollars to the region, including Artscape, Preakness, the AST Dew Tour, and a variety of annual national boat shows.

The city also performs well in arts and culture and was ranked seventh in American Style magazine's "Top 10 Arts Destinations" in a readers' poll in 2006. Fells Point was ranked 10th by the Project for Public Spaces "Best North American Neighborhoods 2007" based on its architecture, history, waterfront location, human scale and walkability.

Last year, The New York Times published an article entitled "36 Hours in Baltimore," and the writer cited our "wonderful seafood restaurants, Colonial history, quaint waterfronts, and other tourist-ready attractions." The writer added, "but Baltimore's renaissance has also cultivated cool restaurants with innovative cuisine, independent theaters that showcase emerging talent and galleries that specialize in contemporary art." Indeed, one only needs to take a walk from downtown north on Charles Street to see Baltimore's vibrant cultural district in action.

Perhaps most important of all, the region works hard to maintain the unique historical flavor that attracts many of its visitors (and residents, for that matter). Maryland ranks among the top states for recognized historic districts and has a wide variety of programs to support preservation and revitalization.

The state's Heritage Preservation Tax Credit is one of the nation's most generous, offering up to a 20 percent tax credit on approved projects. The tax credit is largely recognized as a key driver in the revitalization of neighborhoods and districts, primarily in the industrial areas of Baltimore City. There are over 40,000 national register and locally designated historic properties in Greater Baltimore.

The region also has done an effective job at limiting sprawl, ranking eighth among the top 25 U.S. metro areas for controlling sprawl. More than 21 percent of land in Maryland is now permanently preserved through a wide variety of state programs.

Altogether these factors combine to show a region that has redefined itself as a destination with substantially developed quality-of-life indicators comparable to those in other highly desirable metro areas. As Greater Baltimore continues to gain recognition for its accolades, the old "Natty Boh" slogan — "From the land of pleasant living" — rings truer with each passing year.

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