

MEN'S JOURNAL

New Orleans, Louisiana: 50 Best Places to Live in America

New Orleans cannot be understood without grasping its relationship to alcohol — but that's probably the most misunderstood thing about the place. While the city may always be best known for a few drunken, bead-grabbing blocks of Bourbon Street, no one moves to New Orleans for Bourbon Street. Post-Katrina, the city has evolved into something more than a party town: It's become a magnet for young entrepreneurs and a haven for those fleeing pricey, work-obsessed towns with none of NOLA's inimitable flavor.

Although you don't have to be sauced to embrace life here, the city still embodies the best qualities of drunkenness: total abandon, a resistance to sound judgment, a casual warmth. Spend just a few weeks in town and you'll find yourself part of a community; an afternoon yoga class leads to a backyard crawfish boil, where you meet the crew you end up marching with in a second-line parade the following day. (New Orleans celebrates just about everything — from local produce and po'boys to funerals — with brassy, ragtag parades.) "We've got all the dynamism of a big city but on a human scale," says Pableaux Johnson, a photographer, writer, and 15-year resident, whose Monday-night red-beans-and-rice dinners pull together a wide cross section of the city — actors, chefs, artists, activists, musicians, you name it. "People forget how small we are because we cast such a big shadow," Johnson says. The population stands at just over 340,000.

The latest wave of newcomers includes postgrads starting food-truck empires, filmmakers taking advantage of Louisiana's generous tax credits, and self-employed 30-somethings lured by housing stock that is both majestic (wrought iron balconies, tropical gardens) and affordable (a 150-year-old Creole cottage can be had for about \$350,000). As always, New Orleans has the nation's highest density of dive bars. But now there's a gallery scene along St. Claude Avenue, a slew of inventive pop-up restaurants, an organic food co-op, and even a burgeoning tech community fueled by Launch Pad, a well-regarded start-up incubator.

The Big Easy is not so easy in a number of ways — the crime rate remains high enough that no one walks alone at night, the public school system is a shambles, and steady jobs can be hard to find — but it's still a place of rare charm and opportunity. "The things that once made places like Austin and San Francisco such bohemian draws are possible here," says Laura Stein, who moved from Brooklyn four years ago and now runs [Dancing Grounds](#), a dance studio (which doubles as a community outreach center) in the resurgent Bywater neighborhood. "To do what I've done here in New York, I'd have to be a trust fund millionaire."