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Why Small Cities Rock

Forget New York and San Francisco. With beautiful scenery, skilled workers, and affordable housing, smaller cities are luring companies in droves.

By: Delore Zimmerman

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They may not make a big splash nationally, but small metro areas continue to dominate the top ranks of Inc.com's Best Cities rankings. This year, for example, 18 of the top 25 cities are small metros.

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BOOKMARK

We decided to take a look at what makes these places tick by focusing on one of them. St. George, Utah, has a lock on first or second place for the third year in a row.

St. George is the bustling population and commercial center of Utah's Dixie, a nickname given to the area when Brigham Young persuaded Mormon pioneers to grow cotton and wine grapes and harvest silk for export to the Civil War-torn northern states.

The cotton plants, grapevines and mulberry bushes largely are gone, but the area overall is thriving. Nestled near Zion and Bryce National Parks, St. George has been attracting visitors and retirees for decades. But increasingly, the new houses lining the red-bluffed valleys are not occupied by those at the end of their productive lives; they are being snatched up by younger people and families anxious to take advantage of economic opportunities in a lovely setting. The population has doubled every decade in the last three.

But it's not just scenery that attracts. This is a community with a strong sense of pride and connection with its past. And unlike many attractive communities, this one still wants to grow — and has done so by appealing to companies from giant Wal-Mart (which has a distribution center here) and Skywest to entrepreneurial firms who are filling the spacious, orderly industrial parks in the region.

St. George also is taking advantage of its location. With easy access to I-15, between Salt Lake City and Las Vegas, notes Scott Hirschi, director of the Washington County Economic Development Council, it's within a day's semi-truck ride from almost the entire West Coast. At its current pace, Washington County is expected to grow to between 600,000 or 700,000 people by 2050.

In some small metros, as shown by the dominance of Texas cities in the overall rankings, the resurgence is due to the fact that the pillars of the economy — food, energy, and manufacturing — are in high demand in the global economy. For others it's the presence of a university or college, the beautiful scenery and abundance of recreation activities, the proximity to a large metro area, or the position within a multi-polar urban complex. In places like Bend, Ore., or Bellingham, Wash., a combination of factors — beautiful settings, movement of skilled workers and entrepreneurs — has come together to create a robust crucible for attracting new talent and new businesses.

Affordability is also a critical factor. St. George is joined this year near the top of the rankings by its intermountain neighbors Salt Lake City and Provo. So, it seems that Utah's strong and diverse job growth and low housing prices — at least compared to California — continue as a draw for people seeking more affordable communities ideal for raising families and growing businesses.

"St. George is the last small, snow-free community as you travel east from California's Pacific Coast," says the town's development director, Scott Hirschi. "And, we have no gambling here which appeals to people that are looking for a family-friendly community."

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