

Maine attraction

By Rebecca Knight

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Brunswick combines small-town charm with cultural benefits

When Cory Theberge and his wife, Shiloh, decided to relocate from suburban Philadelphia back to Maine, where he grew up, they considered several possibilities. “We really wanted to be in a town that was within walking distance of conveniences,” says Theberge, a chemist. “And we knew that the things we’d miss most about living near a big city were the art museums, the orchestra and the concerts, so we wanted to be in a place where there was some culture.”

The couple, who have a 15-month-old son, decided on Brunswick, gateway to Maine’s mid-coast region and home to Bowdoin College, one of the top liberal arts schools in the US. The family are today under contract to buy a 186-year-old, federal-style, three-bedroom home a block from Maine Street. For a little above \$300,000, it includes a carriage house and modest yard.

“We’re across the street from the police station, the elementary school is on the corner and we’re a block away from all the bars and restaurants,” says Theberge. “It’s literally a walking perfection. I loved Philadelphia but there’s more elbow room in Brunswick. The air seems a little cleaner here and there’s more outdoor beauty.”

For homebuyers who covet a small Maine village but don’t want to be too isolated, Brunswick – about 25 miles along the coast from Portland, the biggest city in the state, and two hours from Boston – is increasingly seen as the place to be.

In the first quarter of this year the number of homes sold climbed 75 per cent, compared with the first quarter of last year, according to industry figures. House prices rose about 14 per cent in the first quarter of 2010 compared with the first quarter of 2009.

“It’s got a terrific downtown that’s very easy to get around,” says David Flaherty, owner of Flaherty Realty. “It’s got shopping and restaurants, proximity to the coast and it’s got Bowdoin. It’s a great quality of life and the town is on an upswing.”

That boost is in part due to its recent \$35m federal award to upgrade 30 miles of railway track between Portland and the town, which, from 2012 onwards, should make it far more accessible from cities such as New York, Boston and Washington DC. “When it gets here, the train will be a big draw,” Flaherty says.

Brunswick’s charm is that it is a small town with some big-city amenities and attractions. Maine Street is lined with independently owned bookstores, art galleries, clothing boutiques, gelaterias and coffee shops. It has an arthouse cinema, a music theatre and a world-class library. It has historic landmarks: the Harriet Beecher Stowe House on Federal Street is where the author wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. And Brunswick boasts dozens of restaurants, from Mexican canteens to cosy Italian bistros, from a sushi bar and curry houses to cool gastropubs and eateries specialising in modern American cuisine – not bad for a town with population of about 15,000.



At its heart, however, Brunswick is still a New England village with sturdy small-town sensibilities. In recent years it has been touted as one of the best places in the US to retire – Money Magazine ranked it in the top five – and apparently the silver-haired set is taking note. According to Flaherty, the majority of recent buyers are those who have recently called time on their careers and are relocating to the state. Most have a connection to Maine: either they spent a particularly memorable summer holiday nearby or they went to Bowdoin or they grew up in Maine but left for university and stayed away for their professional careers.

“We do see a number of snowbirds – people who live in Florida or South Carolina or some other sunny place during the winter but live in Brunswick during the summer – but I’m seeing more and more people who want to live here year-round,” says Flaherty.

“Brunswick has a good hospital, and quality medical care is important to retirees,” he adds. “It’s flat, so it’s very easy to get around. A lot of people walk and bike it. Traffic is not an issue, with the exception of a handful of peak summer weekends. And it’s safe. As a real estate broker, I sometimes have to pretend to have a set of keys to unlock the doors when I am doing a showing; most people leave their front doors open.”

Bowdoin is another big selling point. The college’s 215-acre campus anchors the town and gives an air of sophistication and global relevance. Prospective buyers are drawn to the idea of being able to take advantage of the college’s lectures, concerts, readings and sporting events.



Bowdoin College

for more than \$500,000 and 15 in excess of \$1m. “Dollar for dollar, you get more house in Brunswick,” says Dave Gleason, a sales manager at Coldwell Banker residential brokerage.

Like most cities and towns in the US, the housing market in Brunswick lost momentum amid the global economic downturn. Even so, the number of sales is strengthening and home prices are creeping upward. Data from Multiple Listings Service for the first quarter of the past four years reveal: in 2007 there were 159 units sold, with an average price of \$267,000; in 2008 103 units were sold at an average price of \$248,000; last year the corresponding figures were 75 and \$192,000. This year, however, there were 131 units sold, with an average price of \$218,000.

Most brokers and buyers are sanguine but there are some question marks about Brunswick’s future. The Brunswick Naval Air Station is set to close in 2011 as part of the US military’s massive base realignment, meaning the loss of more than 2,000 jobs. The land contains numerous facilities and an airstrip but there is still debate about precisely how it ought to be used after closure.

“It’s a fabulous piece of property,” says Chris Lynch, founder and owner of Legacy Properties Sotheby’s International Realty. “It’s an incredible opportunity to do a major economic redevelopment. I think it’s clear at this point that the solution involves a combination of resource protection, residential housing and commercial zoning. And I think maintaining the airstrip is key [to the area’s future desirability]. People who move here want to know that they can get in and out with some ease.”

Of course, Brunswick has its drawbacks – not least the long, frosty Maine winters. In January temperatures are usually below freezing and annual snowfall can reach two metres or more – though any puritanical New Englander will say that this is the price you pay for splendid summer months of warm, sun-drenched days with average temperatures of 25°C. Taxes are usually high in Maine too. Sales tax is 5 per cent, state income tax tops out at 8.5 per cent and property taxes are steep.

But a cold winter and high taxes just might be worth it for the relaxed way of life. “Maine is uncrowded and it’s got an incredible natural resource base that hasn’t been overrun,” says Lynch.

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Brokers have also seen heightened interest from second-home purchasers – mainly from Boston and Connecticut – and perhaps the biggest driver of this trend is price. Compared with similar Maine towns on the water, such as Falmouth, Yarmouth and Cape Elizabeth, Brunswick is a bargain. In Brunswick, for instance, there are 16 homes listed for more than \$500,000 and none over \$1m. In Falmouth, a wealthier community just outside Portland, there are 63 homes listed