

Ventura, California: 50 Best Places to Live in America



Credit: Photograph by Anais & Dax

Ventura, California

Southern California used to be full of laid-back, middle-class beach towns. One by one they have disappeared — the locals pushed inland, their modest neighborhoods razed to make room for trophy homes and luxury condos. And then there's Ventura. This sleepy city of 106,000, located midway between Malibu and Santa Barbara, remains refreshingly unpolished, "like a 1961 Ford pickup that's been well kept," says C.J. Paone, a 44-year-old architect who's lived here for 11 years. The city's blue-collar roots are evident in the fleets of commercial fishing boats in the harbor. Main Street has more thrift stores than chain stores. Cross Highway 101 and head toward the Santa Ynez Mountains and you'll spot — or at least hear the roar of — vintage hot rods. Ventura County was a drag-racing hot spot in the 1950s and remains full of gearheads and high-end custom shops.

Patagonia, with a workforce of 550, is one of Ventura's largest employers. A start-up incubator funded by the city is hatching new businesses, particularly in health care and technology, such as the Trade Desk, a five-year-old firm that provides services to digital advertisers. "My board has asked me multiple times to move to New York," says Jeff Green, the company's co-founder. "But we've made the choice to be in Ventura; it's one of the best-kept secrets in California."

Underappreciated, of course, also means undervalued. In Midtown, a neighborhood of modest single-story bungalows, a three-bedroom, turn-of-the-century Craftsman can be found for around \$600,000. And good public schools mean you don't have to send your kids to a private-school money pit.

That was a big part of the draw for Phil Graves, who recently moved here from Berkeley to run an investment fund at Patagonia. "Ventura is a better fit for us," he says. "The weather is 65 to 75 degrees all year, so we're at the beach with the kids on weekends. And at least a couple of days a week, some buddies from Patagonia and I might go on a bike ride to Ojai and back during lunch, about 20 miles. They've got showers here on Patagonia's campus. Or if you're pressed for time and you run to your meeting sweaty and stinky, nobody cares. It's very, very chill here."