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Best Places to Live 2012

BY KIMBERLY BLANTON

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Scituate

because of the bustling harbor

Median home price: \$437,000, One-year change: +2%

A wave of development on Scituate Harbor, including retail, office, and condo projects, has energized the waterfront. "All of a sudden, it's lively," says Realtor David Drinkwater. On Front Street, you'll find

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Wishbones pet boutique, food and gift shop Roman Table, the rehabbed cinema, and seafood eatery Oro. In 2009 three local families reopened the 29-room Inn at Scituate Harbor, and its Dogwatch bar attracts weekend crowds.

Topsfield

Because the great outdoors are your backyard

Median home price: \$415,700, One-year change: -4%

Most people know only one thing about Topsfield: the annual fall fair, which features piglet races and giant pumpkins. But this rural community of beautiful old homes and horse farms offers more than just a slice of Americana — it's also a recreational hub for folks of all ages. Topsfield recently completed a two-mile rail trail that's part of the proposed 28-mile Border to Boston Trail, which will eventually run from Peabody to Salisbury. Then there are the large swaths of Bradley Palmer State Park and the Ipswich Wildlife Sanctuary that fall within town lines. Baby boomers can park their bikes at the budding 55-plus English Commons community (customized town homes start around \$650,000), which sits on 69 serene acres near the Putnamville Reservoir. But opportunities abound for buyers of all ages: Since 2006, prices here have plunged by 34 percent.

Vestwood

Because it offers rural charm *and* big-city amenities

Median home price: \$525,000, One-year change: -1%

If you want to leave the Back Bay for an idyllic suburb but are terrified of giving up your Apple store, consider Westwood. Retail addicts get their fix just across the town line at Dedham's open-air Legacy Place, which includes Stellabella Toys, Whole Foods, Anthropologie, and more. Yet pretty Westwood (population under 15,000) retains its quaint character. And it's getting some upgrades: a new library, new luxury senior housing, and a recently expanded middle school to accommodate a baby boomlet. Neighborhoods like Islington (prices start under \$300,000) and the Clapboardtree Street area (\$700,000 to \$1.2 million) feature tasteful postwar housing stock, while Stevens Farm (\$2 million and up) offers newer construction, says agent Barbara Shea. And with an Amtrak station and two commuter-rail stops, those who just can't shake their downtown-shopping habit can get back in a flash.

Winthrop

Because your commute could be a 25-minute cruise

Median home price: \$290,500, One-year change: -11%

When Winthrop began running a \$6 weekday shuttle ferry to Rowes Wharf in downtown Boston last year, it opened up a world of possibilities for commuters in this 'burb northeast of the city (bonus points for free parking near the dock). But the ferry operated from just May to October, leaving residents out of luck during the winter. Thankfully, town manager James McKenna hopes to offer year-round service aboard a town-owned vessel in the near future. Winthrop has also secured state funding for a walkway and bike rail that will run along the harbor. Bargain Capes, ranches, and Victorians abound on this 1.6-square-mile peninsula, where the median price has dropped 25 percent since 2006 — and every house is near the water.

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Wrentham

because it's the little town that could

Median home price: \$390,000, One-year change: +12%

Many know Wrentham primarily for its outlets and proximity to Gillette Stadium. But its assets go far beyond Banana Republic and Tom Brady. For starters, there's the top-notch extracurriculars at King Philip Regional High School, which completed a reconstruction in 2007. The blockbuster music program brings home top awards. Last year, the football team made it to the state semifinals, and the girls' softball squad won its second consecutive state championship. (Paul Schaefer, district director of finance and operations, credits the surge in talent to a bump in enrollment.) Home values are on the upswing, too: The median price jumped \$45,000 from 2010 to 2011, and with the recent approval of the Fox Run subdivision (which will start in the high \$400,000s), the trend is likely to continue.

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