



Tuesday, October 28, 2008

Best Healthy Places to Retire: Punta Gorda, Florida

Four years after Hurricane Charley struck, this waterfront gem is now better than ever

By *David LaGesse*

Posted September 18, 2008

This is no Florida beach town. Not to say that [Punta Gorda](#) divorces itself from the water. Mangrove thickets can't hide the expanse of Charlotte Harbor, whose warm and protected waters beckon to a retirement of boating, world-class game fishing, and other pursuits enhanced by salt air.



Sailing instructor Dennis Peck eases a Sunfish out into Charlotte Harbor.

And not to say it's all about leisure activities. The Charlotte Harbor Paddlers is a fit-crazy group of mostly seniors who train three times a week to compete in frenetic, muscle-powered dashes in something called a dragon boat. The gray hairs sometimes draw teasing, including once from a buffed crew from nearby [MacDill Air Force Base](#), says Jim Getz, 63, a team member along with his wife, Cathy, 58. "They weren't saying much after we beat them."

Aside from beaches, Punta Gorda has a lot that typically draws retirees to Florida. Warm winters, plenty of [golf courses](#), and [costs that are lower](#) than those of many states up north. It also has a slower pace, perhaps to a fault, with little night life and not even a movie theater. But most residents like its [small-town feel](#). The city has about 17,000 residents, though no one's exactly sure these days.

At least not after Hurricane Charley ripped through town four years ago. The Category 4 storm tore off roofs and felled buildings, knocking teeth from downtown's smile. But Charley also offered a chance to fix a hodgepodge look. "The storm did help clean things up a bit," says resident Murray Thorndycraft, 76. Many downed buildings were not in the traditional Florida style that planners are emphasizing in rebuilding.

Year-round. Suntanned Thorndycraft and his wife, Marilyn, 72, live outside the small, historic downtown. Their circa 1980 stucco ranch is in Punta Gorda Isles, a modern Florida development tucked around man-made waterways. The Thorndycrafts' open-air lanai looks across a pool to their 30-foot Sunray in the canal.

It's an active, water-oriented lifestyle that drew the couple here from Wisconsin. "Everything we did up there we can do down here, only now it's year-round," says Marilyn.

The post-storm remodeling also encouraged new businesses to try Punta Gorda, including one called the Yoga Sanctuary. That the studio is thriving doesn't surprise client Paula Gallant, 61, who says Florida's sunshine inherently promotes [an active lifestyle](#). Most of her wardrobe revolves around working out, she says, confessing to owning some two dozen tennis outfits alone. She likes tennis, yes. "But you wear those clothes all the time."

The city is trying to further promote healthful living. A [farmers' market](#) is opening downtown, [bike paths](#) are planned, and a 2-mile bayside walk is nearing completion. Some call it a "promenade," which is perhaps forgivable poetic license. This is a city, after all, stuck with a Spanish name that doesn't flatter residents when translated: "fat point."

Tags: [Florida](#) | [retirement](#) | [senior health](#)

Copyright © 2008 U.S. News & World Report, L.P. All rights reserved.