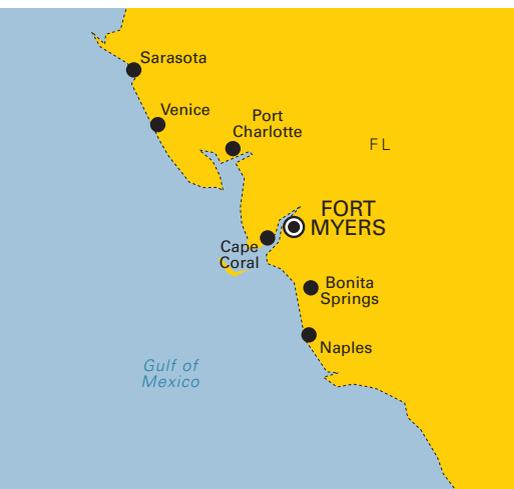


PROFILE: FORT MYERS, FL

Home to a museum for two American legends — Thomas Edison and Henry Ford — Fort Myers also has one of the most historic downtowns in all of Florida. The Caloosahatchee River lazily runs through town.

> BY KATHRYN STRAACH



“Downtown Fort Myers looks like a Disney set.”

— Karen Maxwell

THOMAS EDISON, inventor extraordinaire with more than 1,000 patents, made a lot of discoveries in his life, but one of his personal best finds may have been Fort Myers.

While cruising along Florida’s southwestern coast in 1885, in search of a winter escape from his New Jersey home, he stopped in Fort Myers, which had been platted just nine years earlier in 1876. He bought 13 acres along the Caloosahatchee River and soon built a home and laboratory. He and his new bride, Mina, honeymooned there and made it their second home, thus becoming two of Fort Myers’ first and most beloved snowbirds.

The city would not have its nickname, City of Palms, if not for Edison, points out Nancy Hamilton, author of “100 Things to Do in Fort Myers and Sanibel Before You Die.”

“Edison is responsible for having the first palms imported from Cuba,” she says.

The city is along the beautiful river with the five-syllable name — Cah-loo-sah-HATCH-ee, meaning “river of the Calusa,” the native peoples of the region. It has pristine white-sand beaches bordering the Gulf of Mexico. Juan Ponce de Leon visited nearby Pine Island in 1513 and after that, Spanish and Cuban settlers arrived to establish the area.

Sanibel is one causeway away from Fort Myers, and the vibrant Fort Myers Beach and more than 100 coastal and barrier islands are close, too. The city is part of the Great Calusa Blueway, a 190-mile marked paddling trail.

Edison’s February birthday is celebrated with the Edison Festival of Light, one of Fort Myers’ biggest events, with generations of families staking their viewing spot weeks in advance for the Grand Parade.

In 1916, Edison’s friend, Henry Ford, built a home right next door. Today, the Edison and Ford Winter Estates, is one of the most visited historic home sites in

America, attracting more than 250,000 visitors a year.

One Fort Myers snowbird, Karen Maxwell, found a part-time job at the museum. She and her partner, Fred Rubino, live here during the colder months and in Maine the rest of the year. Karen, 63, and Fred, 66, settled on Fort Myers after they visited Karen’s parents here in 2008. Their home is on the Orange River in the ▶



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Population: 82,254 in Fort Myers and 754,610 in Lee County

Location: Fort Myers is on the Gulf Coast in southwestern Florida, 130 miles south of Tampa and 160 miles northwest of Miami. Nearby communities include Cape Coral, Bonita Springs, Fort Myers Beach and Sanibel. Interstate 75 and U.S. Highway 41, also known as the Tamiami Trail, are the major north-south routes.

Climate:

January: High 72° / Low 57°

July: High 89° / Low 77°

Average relative humidity: 73%

Rain: 56 inches annually

Snow: None

Cost of living: Below average

Housing cost: The median sales price of homes in Lee County was \$255,000 in the first quarter, according to the Royal Palm Coast Realtor Association.

Sales tax: 6.5%

Sales tax exemptions: Groceries, prescriptions and over-the-counter medicines

State income tax: None

Estate tax: None

Inheritance tax: None

Property tax: The rate in Fort Myers is \$20.0177 per \$1,000 of assessed value, with homes assessed at 100% of market value. Annual taxes on a \$255,000 home would be about \$4,264 with the first two exemptions below.

Homestead exemptions: There is a homestead exemption of \$25,000 off assessed value for permanent residents who own and live on the property Jan. 1 of the tax year. An additional exemption allows up to \$25,000 off assessed value for property taxes, but not school taxes, applying to homes assessed at \$50,000 and above. A senior exemption is available for those 65 and older whose household income meets state restrictions, set at \$30,174 in 2019; it's \$50,000 off the assessed value for county taxes and \$25,000 off the assessed value for city taxes.

Personal property tax: Florida does not levy personal property taxes on passenger vehicles; however, an annual vehicle registration fee is charged.

Education: The Renaissance Academy of Florida Gulf Coast University offers a wide range of lifelong-learning programs at its Fort Myers campus and in other nearby communities, including Naples, Bonita Springs, Marco Island and Punta Gorda. Topics include art, writing, computers, science and photography. Attendees

can purchase annual memberships or register for individual programs. With a platinum membership of \$1,250 annually, retirees have unlimited access to all lectures, courses, daytrips and special events. A \$750 gold membership covers all lectures and courses. Lectures on topics such as drawing and historic events are priced from \$20. Individual tickets in the film series and discussion start at \$6. Classes in mahjong and bridge range from \$48 to \$85. The Academy of Lifelong Learning at Shell Point Retirement Community welcomes the public for discussions on subjects such as the environment, politics and history.



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Transportation: Southwest Florida International Airport offers service to cities in the U.S., Canada and Germany. Carriers include Southwest, Delta, American, JetBlue and United. At Punta Gorda Airport, 25 miles north, low-cost Allegiant Air offers direct service to smaller U.S. cities, such as Albany, NY, and Rockford, IL. Bus service throughout Lee County is provided by LeeTran, with \$1.50 fares lowered to 75 cents for those ages 65 and older.

Walk Score: Fort Myers has an overall walkability rating of 38 out of 100, or “car dependent,” according to WalkScore.com. Neighborhoods will vary.

Health care: Lee Health is the leading health-care provider in the region, with four acute-care facilities: its flagship 355-bed Lee Memorial Hospital in Fort Myers, the 356-bed Gulf Coast Medical Center; the 291-bed Cape Coral Hospital; and HealthPark Medical Center, a 267-bed facility featuring the system's primary cardiac location. Lee Health

specialties include cancer care, orthopedics, joint replacement and emergency care.

Housing/master-planned communities:

- **Watermark**, an all-ages community, with a pool, fitness center and tennis courts. From \$242,990, NealCommunities.com.
- **Marbella**, an all-ages townhome community, with a pool, 1-mile boardwalk and amphitheater. From \$204,999, Lennar.com.
- **Marina Bay**, an all-ages community, with a social hall, pool and sports courts. From \$252,900, GLHomes.com/Marina-Bay.
- **The Plantation**, an all-ages community, with an 18-hole golf course, activities director and pool. From \$388,990, Pulte.com.
- **Westbrook**, an all-ages community, with a pool, fitness center and lake and preserve views. From \$275,990, Pulte.com.
- **Bridgetown**, an all-ages community, with two clubhouses, two pools and bocce ball courts. From \$234,990, Pulte.com.
- **Hammock Cove**, an all-ages townhome community within the larger all-ages Gateway, with a soccer complex, dog park and 15-plus miles of trails. From \$241,500, Pulte.com.
- **Shell Point Retirement Community**, a continuing-care community, with a golf course, six restaurants and two medical centers. ShellPoint.org.

Housing/established neighborhoods:

- **McGregor Reserve**, a neighborhood near the Edison and Ford Winter Estates.
- **Old Fort Myers**, with some Mediterranean Revival homes and residences built in the 1920s.

Housing/rentals:

- **Gulfstream Isles Apartment Homes**, rents from \$890 monthly, BHManagement.com.
- **Cobblestone on the Lake**, rents from \$1,200, www.CobblestoneFtMyers.com.
- **Coral Pointe at the Forum**, rents from \$1,045, CoralPointeAtTheForum.com.

Visitor lodging:

- **The Hibiscus House Bed-and-Breakfast**, built in 1923 with five guest rooms, from \$169, TheHibiscusHouseBNB.com.
- **Drury Inn and Suites Fort Myers Airport FGCU**, near I-75, from \$100, DruryHotels.com.
- **Hotel Indigo Fort Myers Downtown River District**, a boutique-style inn with a rooftop bar and lounge, from \$164, HotelIndigo.com.

Information: Greater Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce, 2310 Edwards Drive, Fort Myers, FL 33901, FortMyers.org. Lee County Visitor and Convention Bureau, 2201 Second St., Suite 600, Fort Myers, FL 33901, FortMyers-Sanibel.com.

Caloosahatchee watershed, where the couple love to kayak.

They stay in Florida from October until May when they return to Maine. “I can’t take the Florida summers,” Karen says.

Karen sold her real estate business when the market tumbled in 2007, and Fred retired from 32 years of police service. After arriving in Fort Myers, both became certified Florida Master Naturalists and began volunteering at the Edison and Ford estates, which led to Karen’s part-time job there.

“The best part about retirement is that I can follow my own passion,” she says.

Karen and Fred also golf, work out at the gym, learn Spanish and travel. After retiring from police work, Fred served as chief financial officer for the Ogunquit Playhouse in Maine for five years. From that experience, he finds the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall in Fort Myers impressive.

“It has the only full-size stage in Southwest Florida, so Broadway plays don’t have to downsize their sets,” says Fred, who also likes the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre and Florida Repertory Theatre.

Fred also volunteered for a couple of years with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission helping rescue manatees, who are listed as threatened species.

Downtown is a draw for dining and special events, such as Music Walk, with local and regional musicians lining the streets of the River District on the third Friday of each month. Bike Night is the second Saturday every other month, with motorcycles, bands and vendors.

“Downtown Fort Myers looks like a Disney set,” Karen says.

Lisa Sbuttoni, president and CEO of the River District Alliance, would agree.

“Fort Myers’ downtown offers the largest concentration of historic buildings in Southwest Florida, which adds to its charm and Old Florida feel,” Sbuttoni says. “Over the past decade, the city has installed brick pavers on the streets and added streetlights, all of which help transport people back to the late 1800s and early 1900s. The Caloosahatchee River, which runs between Fort Myers and Cape Coral, serves as a beautiful backdrop.”



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The downtown renovation also expanded the city’s waterfront, attracting new restaurants and businesses. A convention hotel is being built. Downtown now boasts more than 40 restaurants, including several themed ones, such as Ford’s Garage, Capone’s Coal Fired Pizza, and The Firestone Grill Room, Martini Bar and Skybar. Karen and Fred’s special occasion place is The Veranda Restaurant, where they go each New Year’s Eve.

Ken Lewan of Chicago visited Fort Myers in the early 1980s and thought it was a nice place, but it had no nightlife then, he says. In the early 2000s, he started building and selling homes while continuing to work as an executive vice president for an insurance company in Chicago. When he retired in 2012, he built a home in Estero, 15 miles south. He shares the home with his partner Rene Givens, 61, who moved from Naples after relocating from Detroit in 2010.

Ken, 69, keeps busy at Southwest Florida International Airport as a volunteer. “I’ve dealt with people all my life and that is what I like to do,” he says.

He enjoys golf and generally plays on public courses off season. “Some courses can be \$145 in season, but in July, it is \$20,” he says. “I play more in the summer and don’t have to wait.”

Rene, who works as a fundraiser for a nonprofit, loves the weather and being

able to spend time outdoors year-round. “When people ask me what it is like here in the summer, I tell them it is absolutely terrible. I don’t want anymore people down here off-season with us,” she says with a laugh.

Ken’s only complaint is that Fort Myers is gaining in popularity. “When I first came down here, Fort Myers drew people from the Midwest, but now the East Coast people have found out about this little gem.” He attributes some of the interest in Fort Myers to the Boston Red Sox spring training.

“Season in Fort Myers has gotten much busier,” he says, referring to the time period from November to Easter.

Fort Myers now has a happening nightlife, with brewpubs, downtown music joints, dance halls and dockside bars. But Ken is not as interested these days. “I’m usually in bed by 10 p.m. now,” he says.

Fort Myers’ mayor, Randy Henderson, fell in love with the city on his first visit in 1976 with his now wife, who was born and raised here.

“I decided then that I was not going to wait until I got old to move here,” he says. “I was with a beautiful girl in a beautiful city. I thought I had died and gone to heaven.” They moved to Fort Myers in 1979.

As mayor, he still is proud of the city. “I believe it is an attractive retirement community for those looking for a high-quality place, particularly with urban development,” he says. “For the last two decades, we have been modernizing our 40 square miles of city and it is looking great.” ▶

More sidewalks and paths for walking and biking allow residents to stay active, Henderson says.

“We have the most diverse city in Southwest Florida with a vibrant mix of races, which add to our high level of culture, as well as area restaurants,” he says.

One of Henderson’s biggest goals for the city is providing affordable housing. “We’re not perfect, but we are blessed. It’s just getting things accomplished fast enough is a challenge,” he says.

Even though Fort Myers is indeed 40 square miles, it has what Henderson calls “fuzzy boundaries.” Some surrounding unincorporated areas have Fort Myers addresses, including Florida Gulf Coast University.

“That makes me the official mayor of Dunk City,” he says proudly. In 2013, the university basketball team was the lowest-seeded team to ever make it to the Sweet 16 in the NCAA men’s basketball March Madness tournament. The team’s amazing dunks gave the town its nickname. During TV coverage of that tournament, sports commentator Charles Barkley asked, “Where the hell is Florida Gulf Coast at?” “He gave the nation a geography lesson,” Henderson says.

The city hosts spring training for both the Boston Red Sox and the Minnesota Twins, and the Florida Everblades play ECHL Premier Double-A hockey at Hertz Arena October through April.

Another local lure is world-renowned chocolatier Norman Love, the former corporate executive pastry chef for The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Co. His company, Norman Love Confections, which began in 2001, has been named the best premium chocolate company in the country six times since 2006 and Love often is seen on the talk show circuit.

“And yes, Love is my God-given name,” he says. “I was teased in elementary school for it, but now I get a lot of compliments,” he says. “It makes people happy.”

Doug and Paula Akins, formerly of Wooster, OH, discovered southwestern Florida and its mild, sunny weather years ago.

“I came to Naples in 1986 and the temperature was 86 degrees,” says Doug, 63. “I told myself then that I am going

to retire down here someday.” A banker for 40 years, Doug decided to settle in a northern Fort Myers high-rise condo overlooking the river.

In October 2017, Doug announced to his wife that they were going to retire by the end of the year. “That’s the only time she didn’t argue with me,” he says with a laugh.

They moved into their sixth-floor condo in 2018 and Paula, 55, who retired from an auto supply store, began volunteering nine hours a week in the gift shop at Lee Memorial Hospital.

The condo community keeps the couple busy. “We play dominoes, tennis, swim and go out to dinner together,” she says. In season, the trolley picks them up to take them to downtown events.

For beach time, they head to Sanibel. “We walk on the beach; we sit and stare at the water; we play in the water. We enjoy the beauty and quiet. It’s like an ‘ahh’ moment,” she says.

The couple are fans of the Atlanta Braves, who are scheduled to start spring training 40 miles up the road in North Port in the spring of 2020.

“Then again, we have been busy remodeling our condo,” Paula says. “We haven’t had a chance to feel our oats yet. We are decompressing after working for so many years.”

Doug relaxes by fishing on a pier at their condo. “I missed a lot of time fishing and now I’m making up for it,” he says.

Doug also is president of the condo association, which keeps him busy about 10 hours a week.

Hot weather does not bother them. “I love the summer here,” Doug says. “Restaurants beg you to come in.”

It doesn’t seem so hot “because I don’t have a coat and tie on. They have air conditioners here, and when it’s 95 degrees and you are by the pool with a drink in your hand, it is not so hot.”

“We sit on the lanai in the evening and watch all the lights of downtown Fort Myers,” he says. “We still just pinch ourselves to believe that we are really here.” **W**

Kathryn Straach is a Houston-based writer. A former resident of Fort Myers, she also adopted her dog, Barney, from the Gulf Coast Humane Society, just like Norman Love.