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Natchitoches

Multicultural heritage, Old World charm and welcoming spirit weave a seductive magic for town in Louisiana

By Olin Chism

Natchitoches is the oldest continuously inhabited town in Louisiana, but for an increasing number of retirees it's a fresh discovery. Many see it first as tourists, then sooner or later return permanently.

A stroll down Front Street in the historic downtown district reveals its immediate charms. There's a whiff of New Orleans here, with wrought-iron balconies, fine restaurants, streets with French names, Southern botany and a relaxed air of bygone times. And it's active, with no sense of downtown decay.

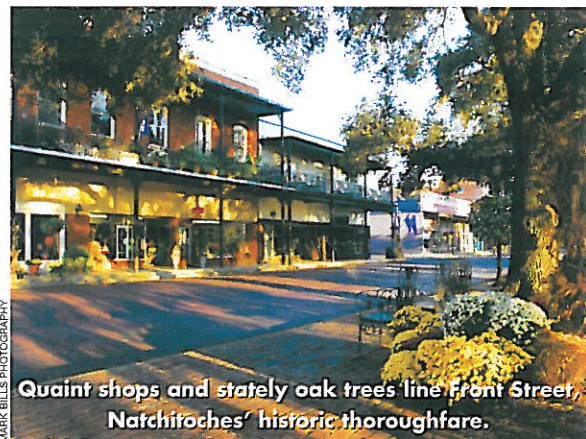
Natchitoches is seductive enough that people move here from places that many retirees would consider desirable — Hawaii, for instance. In fact, Del and Carol Forsloff made just that move.

Why would anyone move from Hawaii to Natchitoches? "We are often asked just that," Carol says. Both she and Del emphasize that they still love Hawaii, but after 28 years, "We were getting tired of the traffic and the crowded conditions, and we thought it was about time to come back to the mainland," she says. The cost of living was another factor, Carol adds.

Among the places on the mainland they considered were New Orleans and the panhandle of Florida. Before making a decision, they decided to relax for a few days ahead of a trip to Mexico with relatives. "We happened to drive up here because we figured it was a nice, quiet town to get away from it all," Carol says. "We had been here before, so we knew it to be a beautiful place."

It was a fateful decision. Their original impression was renewed, and they established a foothold in Natchitoches, buying a vacation house in 2004. In 2005 they decided to make Natchitoches their home, so they bought a second house and rented out the first.

"It's a kind of place that you can fall in love with



at first sight. It's almost like falling in love with a person — you feel swept up in the magic. With us, the honeymoon is not over," Carol says.

Del, 72, is an artist who used to sketch in New Orleans and now does his work in Natchitoches. Carol, 67, is a retired psychological and rehabilitation counselor. They own and operate a bed-and-breakfast inn, La Maison de Aloha, which pays tribute to both Natchitoches' French heritage and their long love affair with Hawaii. It's an indication of Natchitoches' popu-

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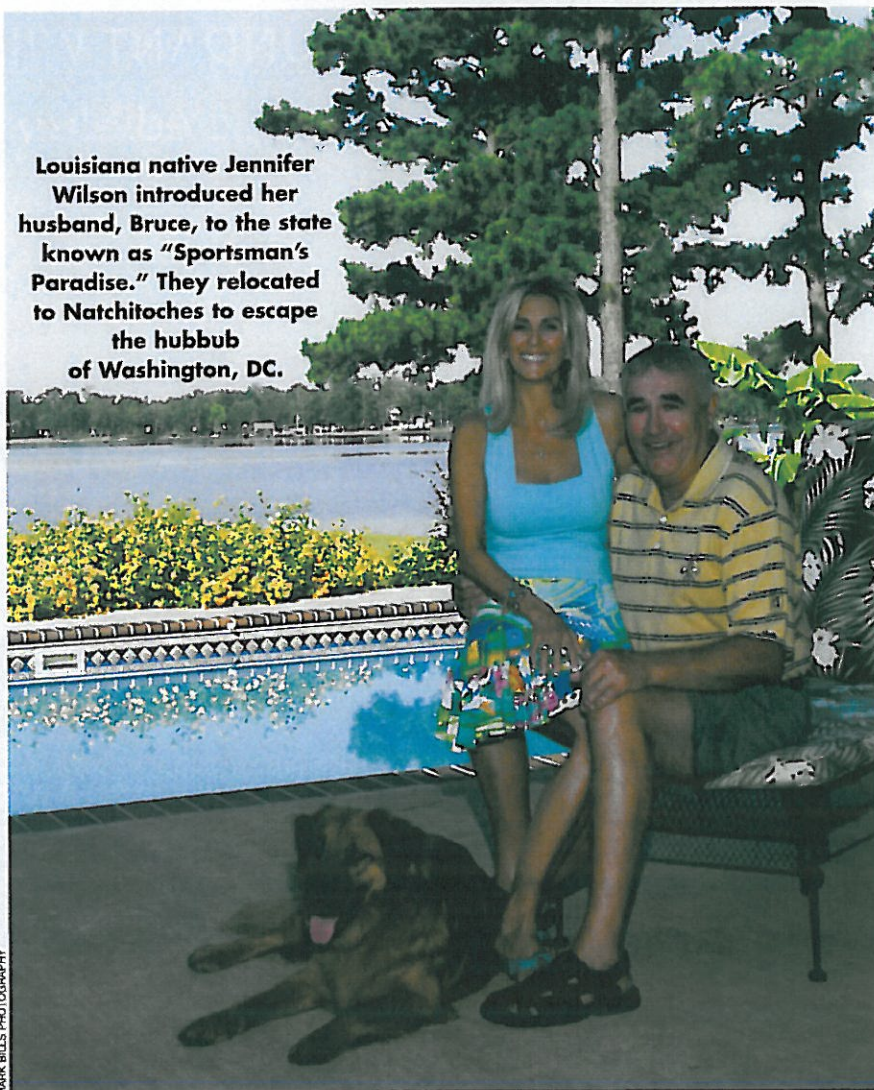
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Louisiana native Jennifer Wilson introduced her husband, Bruce, to the state known as "Sportsman's Paradise." They relocated to Natchitoches to escape the hubbub of Washington, DC.



MARK BILLS PHOTOGRAPHY

larity with tourists that there are almost 40 B&Bs in town, many of them in the 33-block historic district. That's in a town with an estimated population of only about 19,000.

Del and Carol say they've had no trouble fitting in. "I think one thing we appreciate here is that the people are warm and friendly, considerate and kind," Carol says. "Despite the fact that we are from 'blue' states, Oregon and Hawaii, and we have different political views than a lot of people in the South and here, we fit in. People have embraced us, we're invited out, we feel very much a part of the community." They still have a couple of places in Hawaii and return regularly.

One task facing newcomers to Natchitoches is learning how to pronounce the town's name. It's "knack-uh-tish," with the accent on the first syllable. Natchitoches, which is named for an American Indian tribe that once lived in the area, is located in west-

central Louisiana about halfway between the cities of Shreveport and Alexandria.

The town was established by a Frenchman, Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, in 1714, beating out New Orleans by four years. Its purpose was twofold: to establish trade with the Spanish in nearby Texas and discourage Spanish advances into the Louisiana Territory. It became a flourishing river port and a center for the cotton industry.

Commercial river traffic is long gone, but it left a memento in Cane River Lake, which cuts through town and fronts the historic district (hence Front Street). The lake was the Red River in the early days, and traffic went down it to the Mississippi River and eventually the Gulf of Mexico. But the Red River shifted course in the 19th century, bypassing Natchitoches. What's left looks exactly like a river, but it's closed on both ends, leaving a

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The Festival of Lights brightens the city each winter with holiday decor, live entertainment and fireworks, attracting more than 500,000 visitors over several weeks.



narrow, 32-mile-long lake.

For much of its length, it's a pretty, well-manicured body of water of which area residents are clearly proud. A Web site, www.caneriverlake.com, celebrates the lake in music and art. Strollers on Front Street often see boats going by, and the banks of the lake are desired by homebuilders. A cruise along the lake will pass fine homes and, south of town, antebellum mansions left from the days of King Cotton.

Cane River Lake is by no means the only body of water — a boat would get a lot of use in the Natchitoches area. Scenic Sibley Lake on the west side of town is a favorite home site for retirees. Black Lake and the connecting Clear Lake are large bodies of water a short drive to the north of town. To get to them you have to cross the fickle Red River, which stays near even if it snubs Natchitoches proper.

In contrast to the Forsloffs, Bruce Wilson knew virtually nothing about Natchitoches before it first crossed his radar as he was nearing retirement. He did have Louisiana in mind, though. His wife, Jennifer, is a native of the state.

Bruce was a colonel in the Army, stationed at the Pentagon. In 2001 they visited Louisiana for the wedding of one of Jennifer's sisters. "We kind of had been talking about moving to Louisiana," he says. "She had three sisters and her parents living here, and nieces and nephews and all that. I told her the license plate in Louisiana says, 'Sportsman's Paradise,' and I could live with that."

Bruce had to fly back to the Pentagon from Alexandria immediately after

the wedding, while Jennifer stayed behind. "Normally I don't talk a lot on airplanes. I read a book or something," Bruce says. "But a guy was sitting next to me, and he and I started talking, kind of to find out a little bit about each other, and I told him we were considering retiring to Louisiana. The minute I told him that — that wasn't long after we took off — all I heard about was Natchitoches all the way to Memphis."

When Bruce got back to Washington he gave Jennifer a call. "I asked her, 'Have you ever heard of this place?' I couldn't even pronounce the name. And she said, 'Oh, yeah,'" he recounts. Jennifer had attended Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, and Northwestern State University in Natchitoches had been a sports rival. Bruce asked if she thought Natchitoches was a place they should consider for retirement, and she said it was.

The upshot of the casual plane conversation was that the Wilsons bought a lovely home site on Sibley Lake and set about building their dream house.

But before they moved, Sept. 11 happened. Bruce was in the Pentagon when the terrorists' plane hit. In fact, four minutes before the impact he had been standing in a corridor that was struck. He was not injured, but it took him four hours to get through to Jennifer by phone and tell her he was OK. "It was kind of a rough day," Bruce says in a classic understatement.

Bruce, 58, retired from the Army in 2003. Jennifer, 53, is a wellness counselor with Shaklee Corp., which specializes in natural nutrition and green cleaning products. "I've been with

them almost 30 years," she says. "With Internet technology, I have clients all over. I can take it with me. I didn't have to worry about leaving my career behind. I just packed it up and moved it here."

Jennifer did have one hesitation about the move. "One of the things about the military that I loved the most was that wherever we went, there was a built-in community — you were welcomed in," she says. "It's the military life — coming and going. We made really close friends in the military. We visit each other all over the United States."

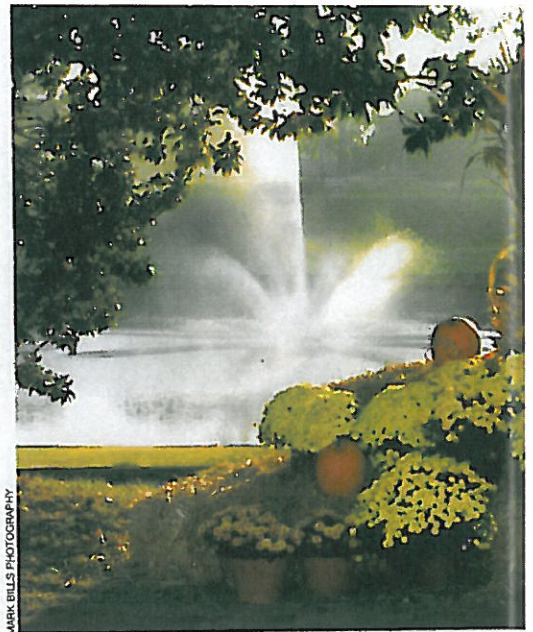
"One of the things I was very concerned about was how was it going to be, moving into a community that does not have that military contingent," she says. "What was it going to be like making friends? How easy was it going to be? Well, I can tell you I have made friendships equal to my military friendships. People open their arms to you."

"We like Washington, DC," Bruce says. "It was a nice area, but it's not a

place I would want to retire to. I don't need that hubbub in my retired years. When you live in Washington, you do not measure things in distance. You measure them in time. Here it takes a little less than an hour to get to Alexandria. In Washington that would be 10 miles. We've learned to measure in distance again."

For Ola Hays Clarke, the road from the East Coast to Natchitoches passed through Colorado. She grew up in Mississippi but didn't like the heat. "My definition of heaven was always never having to sweat," she says. "I really didn't like the South as a child." So after her early retirement from a federal agency in Washington and the death of her husband, she headed for the high (and cool) Rockies.

She decided to check out three cities: Boulder, Denver and Colorado Springs. "I read enough about Boulder on the way out to sort of consider it Stanford East, and I said, 'No, thanks.' Also it was extremely costly." Her other two destinations were more congenial to her, but eventually she gave



MARK BELLS PHOTOGRAPHY

Colorado Springs the nod over Denver because it was "a nicer size."

"The first two years were fantastic," Ola says. "You could drive anywhere. You met people very easily. So many people in Colorado are from other places, they are much more receptive to making friends with you. And this is interesting: I made more friends —

A Sunday afternoon drive isn't what it used to be. The views can't compare to the views I saw from our ship. The castles along the coastline near Angnon were unbelievable. Now whenever my husband suggests we take the scenic route, I tell him that sounds great as long as it's the Rhône River.



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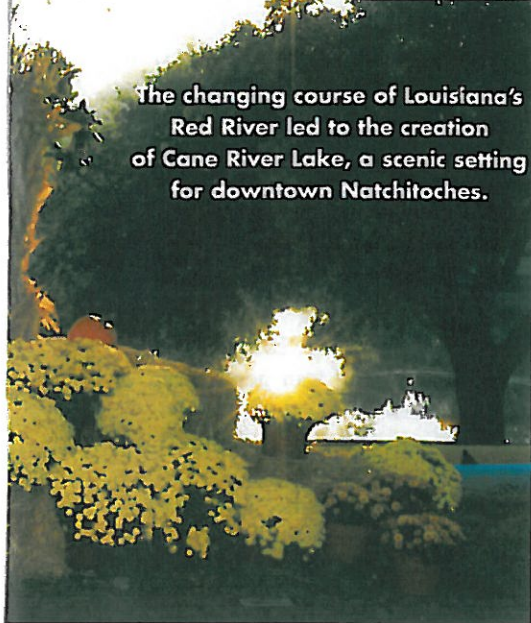
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The changing course of Louisiana's Red River led to the creation of Cane River Lake, a scenic setting for downtown Natchitoches.



friends that you could call on a moment's notice — in Colorado Springs than I made in years in Washington, DC.”

There was one negative: the altitude. Ola developed health problems, including exercise-induced asthma. At sea level, she was fine.

She had visited Natchitoches (a

cousin lives nearby) and here she found the right combination of low altitude and friendly people. “My husband would have loved it,” she says. “He used to watch that television show (‘Cheers’) about the bar in Boston, the one where everybody knows your name. That’s this kind of place. They all know me — you find that with most of the places here in town. It’s easy to get to know people.”

Ola, 70, has a house on a small private lake slightly outside town. She likes the busy civic life of Natchitoches and she’s a fan of Northwestern State University.

The oldest institution in the University of Louisiana System, NSU has more than 9,000 students. Its arts and sports events, open to the general public, take place year-round. For retirees and other adults, it offers continuing-education courses and allows those 60 and over to take one three-hour credit course per semester tuition-free. There are also online classes.

The university’s Wellness, Recre-

ation and Activity Center is available to outsiders. Members have access to exercise equipment, fitness programs including fitness assessments and personal training, as well as sports facilities. A popular destination for seniors is the university natatorium, a heated, Olympic-sized pool open year-round. Water-aerobics classes are available.

If you talk to a Natchitoches resident for any length of time, the annual Christmas Festival is almost sure to come up. Held since 1927 on the first weekend in December, it’s a celebration with a parade, live entertainment, food fair, arts and crafts show and fireworks display over Cane River Lake. It draws more than 100,000 visitors each year.

It’s part of Natchitoches’ Festival of Lights, which begins on Nov. 22 and continues into the new year. Minifestivals are held every weekend in December. There are light displays, riverbank vendors and nightly tours by streetcar or carriages, adding to the area’s shops and restaurants. There’s also a Holiday Tour of Homes. A high-

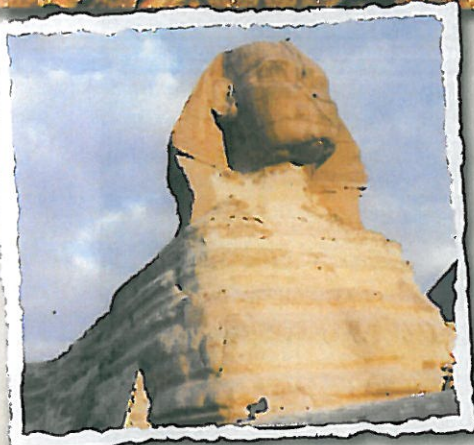
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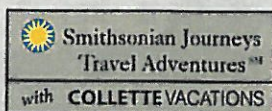
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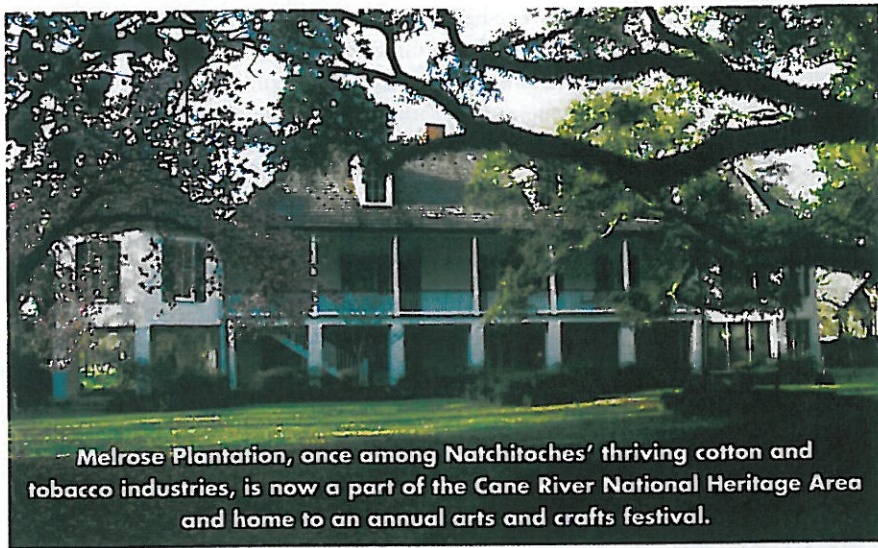
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Melrose Plantation, once among Natchitoches' thriving cotton and tobacco industries, is now a part of the Cane River National Heritage Area and home to an annual arts and crafts festival.

MARK BILLS PHOTOGRAPHY

light is a fireworks display every Saturday night and at midnight on New Year's Eve. The Festival of Lights draws more than half a million visitors annually.

And that's only part of the civic calendar. "There's something going on all the time," Ola says.

The historic district of Natchitoches is well-maintained, with many attrac-

tive old homes. If the old business area is reminiscent of New Orleans, parts of the nearby residential area are reminiscent of another Southern city, Charleston.

The area outside Natchitoches has its attractions, also. Highways 494 and 484 roughly follow the course of Cane River Lake, taking you through the Cane River National Heritage Area,

established by Congress in 1994 to help preserve its multicultural legacy. There are a number of historic buildings. Three antebellum plantations are open for tours — Magnolia, Oakland and Melrose — as is the home of the 19th-century writer Kate Chopin, whose fiction centered on this area. In 2001, the best-selling "Cane River," a historical novel by Lalita Tademy, shared the saga of four generations of black women.

Earlier, attention was focused on Natchitoches when it was the setting for the popular movie "Steel Magnolias," a comedy-drama about the close, supportive friendship among a group of Southern women.

"If I sat down and looked at a map of the United States and asked myself, 'Where would I rather live' (than Natchitoches), I wouldn't be able to come up with an answer," says Bruce Wilson. "I think this is about right. Natchitoches turned out to be a real jewel — a real jewel."

WR

Olin Chism is a writer in Irving, TX.

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NATCHITOCHEs, LOUISIANA

Population: 19,072 in the city, 39,501 in the parish

Location: Natchitoches is in west-central Louisiana, about 70 miles southeast of Shreveport and about 40 miles east of the Texas border. It is 250 miles northwest of New Orleans.

Climate: High Low

January 57 36

July 93 74

Average relative humidity: 73%

Rain: 51 inches annually

Snow: Rare

Cost of living: Below average

Housing cost: According to statistics from the city's multiple listing service, the average list price of homes in Natchitoches was \$197,000 between June 1, 2007, and June 1, 2008. Homes sold for an average of \$95 per square foot, with a maximum of \$200 per square foot. Thus the cost of a 2,000-square-foot home would average \$190,000.

Sales tax: 9%, except for groceries and prescription drugs, which are 4.5%.

Sales tax exemptions: Groceries and prescription drugs are exempt from the state sales tax but subject to the local tax as noted above.

State income tax: For married couples filing jointly, the current rates are graduated from 2% on the first \$25,000 of taxable income to 6% on amounts above \$50,000. For single filers, the rates graduate from 2% on the first \$12,500 of taxable income to 6% on amounts over \$25,000. After Jan. 1, 2009, taxes will change. Rates for married couples will range from 2% on the first \$25,000 to 6% on amounts over \$100,000 and for single filers from 2% on the first \$12,500 to 6% on amounts over \$50,000.

Income tax exemptions: Social Security benefits are exempt. There is an exemption for private pension or other retirement income of up to \$6,000 for each taxpayer age 65 and older. Federal, state and local pensions are exempt.

Estate tax: None

Inheritance tax: None

Property tax: The parish rate is \$107 and the city rate is \$17, both per \$1,000 of assessed value, with homes assessed at 10% of market value. On a \$190,000 home, residents would owe about \$1,230 to the parish and about \$323 to the city, with the homestead exemption for the parish noted below.

Homestead exemption: There is an

exemption of \$75,000 off the market value of the home that applies to parish property taxes.

Personal property tax: The state doesn't have a personal property tax, but new residents can encounter an unexpected sales/use tax on motor vehicles the first year. In the city of Natchitoches, the tax rate is 9% on the current loan value of the vehicle; however, there's a credit of up to 4% based on sales tax paid to another state when the vehicle was purchased.

Religion: There are more than 90 churches representing a range of religious groups.

Education: Northwestern State University is a four-year institution with more than 50 degree programs. It offers continuing-education courses to retirees and other non-students, and those 60 and over may take one three-hour credit course per semester tuition-free. Many of its facilities, including a Wellness, Recreation and Activity Center, are open to nonstudents, though fees may apply.

Transportation: The main north-south artery is Interstate 49, which passes west of town. East-west access is provided by State Highway 6, which connects to U.S. Highway 84. There is no city bus system; Greyhound provides intercity bus service. The nearest airline passenger service is at Alexandria International Airport to the south and Shreveport Regional Airport to the north, both of which are about an hour away and are served by several major airlines. The nearest Amtrak station is at Marshall, TX, about an hour and 45 minutes away.

Health care: Natchitoches Regional Medical Center is the town's principal health-care facility. It's a 96-bed acute-care hospital with a 24-hour emergency department, an active and consulting staff of more than 50 physicians and 500 employees. NRMC also operates a 112-bed nursing home, a 15-bed geriatric psychiatric unit, the Natchitoches Assisted-Living Retirement Community, a rural health clinic in nearby Campt and the PRISM Center, a rehabilitation facility. Larger medical institutions are located in Shreveport and Alexandria, and two Veterans Affairs medical centers are within easy driving distance.

Housing: Janice Bolton of Bolton Realty says that two areas of new construction popular with retirees are River Place and Melrose Estates. A typical price for a two-

bedroom, two-bath house at **River Place**, along Cane River Lake, is about \$193,000. Bolton says **Melrose Estates** has patio homes or condominium-type units; a two-bedroom, two-bath unit, with a one-car garage but no land, costs around \$149,000. There are townhouses in the historic district, within walking distance of downtown restaurants and activities, for



prices ranging from about \$250,000 to \$500,000. Bolton says that single-family homes on Sibley Lake, another popular area for retirees, run from about \$400,000 to \$600,000. A new development on the east side of town, **Christopher's Crossing**, offers single-family homes within one mile of the Natchitoches Regional Medical Center with prices between \$210,000 and \$225,000. Contact local real estate agents for information.

Visitor lodging: The town's many bed-and-breakfast inns are popular with visitors. For a list, go to www.natchitoches.net/accommodations/bandb/index.php. Other lodgings: Best Western Natchitoches Inn, \$81-\$90, (800) 780-7234; Church Street Inn, \$89-\$155, (800) 668-9298; EconoLodge Inn and Suites, \$70-\$80, (877) 424-6423; Hampton Inn Natchitoches, \$109-\$130, (800) 426-7866; and Ramada Inn Natchitoches, \$70-\$100, (800) 272-6232.

Information: Natchitoches Convention and Visitors Bureau/Retire in Natchitoches (Where to Retire magazine), 781 Front St., Natchitoches, LA 71457, (800) 259-1714 or www.natchitoches.net and www.retirenatchitoches.com. Natchitoches Area Chamber of Commerce (Where to Retire magazine), 562 Second St., Natchitoches, LA 71457, (318) 352-6894 or www.natchitocheschamber.com. ➔