

THESE NUMBERS DON'T LIE

This city needs a list just to keep track of all the lists it's on that say what a wonderful place this is to live

BY ROBIN BRINKLEY
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

We're No. 1...and 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 20, 24 and 26.

If there is a list extolling the virtues of suburban living, Virginia Beach is probably on it.

In the past five years, we've received the following national accolades:

- Best Place to Live by "USA Weekend," a magazine insert in 600 newspapers
- No. 1 City for Women by Ladies' Home Journal
- Most Livable Large City for Women by the National Policy Research Council
- Most Technically Advanced City of 250,000 or more by Digital Cities
- Safest City of 300,000 or more, according to data from the FBI and U.S. Census Bureau
- Most Stroller Friendly City by Fit Pregnancy magazine
- Best Overall Sister Cities Program for cities between 300,000 and 500,000 by Sister Cities International
- Most Integrated City with 41.1 percent living on black-white integrated blocks by The Memphis Business Journal

So pat yourself on the back, but don't sit around waiting for a bonus check. Living in Virginia Beach is its own reward. Just ask Patricia Gonzalez.

Gonzalez, 29, hails from New Jersey and has lived at the Beach for seven years.

"When I go home, people ask me how I like living here," she said. "I tell them I love it."

We caught up with Gonzalez as she pushed a stroller carrying her two children, Gabby and Patrick, along the fifth-best Boardwalk



CHARLIE MEADS PHOTOS / THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Women at the Indian River YMCA signal they agree that Virginia Beach is the Most Livable Large City for Women, according to the National Policy Research Council.



Virginia Beach Police Officer Corey D. Burton keeps things safe at Kemps Landing Magnet School. The FBI and U.S. Census Bureau found the city is the safest in the 300,000 citizen or more category.

in the nation, according to www.TravelChannel.com.

A fine patina of sweat coated her face. This was no ordinary seaside stroll, you see. Gonzalez turned it into a car-

dio workout befitting a young mother in the third-fittest city in the nation, according to Men's Fitness magazine.

Gonzalez knew about the Boardwalk's lofty reputation,



Debra Potts has been working out at the Indian River YMCA for six years. According to Men's Fitness magazine, Virginia Beach is the third fittest city in the nation.

but was unfamiliar with the city's recognition for fitness.

Did you know we have only five doughnut shops per every 100,000 people? That's eight

times fewer than comparably sized Sacramento, according to Men's Fitness magazine.

Please see following page

COVER STORY

Continued from previous page

"I'm surprised," Gonzalez said.

Gonzales likes the Boardwalk – and Mount Trashmore – because it provides plenty of elbow room.

"It's safe, too," she added. "That's a plus."

Gonzalez would be pleased to know that safety is job one in the World's Largest Resort City.

Virginia Beach was the safest big city in the nation in 2003 with only 224 violent crimes per 100,000 people. (Sorry Atlanta, you were last).

That's just one of several high marks scored by your municipal government. Virginia Beach tied for third in The National Policy Research Council's list of best managed cities, and was ranked eighth in efficiency by the Reason Public Policy Institute.

That ties in with the Digital Cities ranking (Virginia Beach dropped to ninth last year).

"I don't know that there are any tangible results from winning these awards," City Manager Jim Spore said. "It's more like a reflection of tangible results already here."

For example, Men's Fitness uses the number of recreation centers in a city as one of its criteria for picking the fittest cities. The Beach has six.

Another example is Expansion Management magazine's ranking of Virginia Beach as the 11th best city for companies looking to expand or relocate.

Spore can't think of a specific company that cited that, or any other ranking, as a reason for moving here.

"Still, we feel it all has to help," he said. "When USA Today and Good Housekeeping endorse your city, it can't help but cause people to think about living here."

Not everyone is looking for new neighbors.

Virginia Beach is, after all, the 39th largest city in the nation with about 432,000 people. And we're 34th in land area with 248.3 square miles.

But if people just want to visit, we're open for business. Nearly 3 million tourists spent \$785 million here in 2004, the last year for which statistics are available.

They came for:

■ The World's Longest Pleasure Beach – 35 miles – as recognized by the Guinness Book



Grace Morales pushes her 2-month-old daughter, Katrina, as Angel Olejasz joins her on an early morning stroll down Atlantic Avenue. And why not? The Beach is the Most Stroller Friendly City, says Fit Pregnancy magazine.

CHARLIE MEADS PHOTOS / THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT



We have the fifth-best Boardwalk in the nation, according to www.TravelChannel.com.

of World Records.

■ The World's Largest Single Weekend Sand Soccer Tournament with more than 7,200 players.

■ Fishing. The city advertises itself as the "Striped Bass Capital of the World," and Field and Stream magazine ranked Virginia Beach 20th on a list of the best places in North America to wet a line.

■ The Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center. With 650,000 visitors per year, it ranks among the 10 most-visited aquarium's in the country.

The rankings invariably catch city officials by surprise.

"It's not like a contest you enter," said Diane Roche, assistant to the city manager for media and communications.

And, no, the city doesn't campaign.

Burt Spierling is president of Spierling's Best Places, which



Walking can be a challenge on The World's Longest Pleasure Beach – 35 miles – as recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records.

has been in the rankings business for 16 years, and in 2004 tabbed Virginia Beach the eighth least-stressful city in the nation.

"Surprisingly, we don't receive any hardball lobbying," Spierling said. "We get

invitations to see what people are doing, but it's just to inform."

The rankings are more than a sense of pride – or humility, as the case may be.

"They are a great way to benchmark with other cit-

ies," Roche said. "Most of them reflect on quality of life, whether it's walking trails or crime rates, and they seem to be telling us we're doing a pretty good job."

"Of course, you always want to do better. Maybe fifth instead of seventh."

America's love of lists appears to have no limits. Cars, colleges and hospitals are popular targets, as are places to work.

Often they are broken into subgroups. The Scientist ranks the best places to work for post-docs, while Christianity Today ranks the 40 best Christian places to work.

Neither CBN nor Regent University made that list.

Virginia Beach did, however, tie for 11th in a www.VerizonSuperpages.com ranking of most tax return preparation accountants. We're not sure if that is good or bad.

But here's one ranking that's definitely bad: The Hampton Roads corridor to Virginia Beach and the Outer Banks is the second-most congested summer traffic hot spot in the nation, according to a study by the American Highway Users Alliance, AAA and TRIP, a national transportation research group.

Record-high gasoline prices can only exacerbate that bit of bad news. But there's good news, if you can get here.

Virginia Beach ranks No. 7 on a list of the Top 100 cities for walking by the American Podiatric Medical Association and Prevention magazine.

■ Reach Robin Brinkley at robin.brinkley@pilotonline.com or 222-5142.