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Western promises *Nantes*

Once a fading shipbuilding town, France's sixth-largest city is now a fast-growing hub of ethical entrepreneurs and creatives.

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Spend some time in Nantes, just an hour's drive from France's windswept Atlantic coast, and there's a sentence that you're likely to hear more than once. "It's the city of the future," says resident and architect Benoît Sanson, echoing the thoughts of many *Nantais*. And with the metropolis growing by more than 9,000 inhabitants a year, houses can't be built quickly enough, which is no bad thing if you're in the business of designing them. "It's a dream for an architect," says Sanson, speaking from an office that he shares with other creatives in Madeleine-Champ de Mars, an up-and-coming neighbourhood that is scattered with independent restaurants, boutiques and bars.



1. Small but beautiful
2. *Le Lieu unique*, a cultural centre on the site of a former biscuit factory in Nantes

Setting up a branch of London-based 31/44 Architects in Nantes was a way for the firm to keep a foot in Europe after Brexit. "It would be hard to work in France without a studio here," says Sanson. The city's open-minded spirit and approach to city planning, as well as its bilingual schools for their two children, drew Sanson and his German wife, Michaela, to Nantes. "We are a deeply European family and living in the UK didn't make as much sense to us any more."

France's sixth-largest city has turned from a quiet provincial town into a thriving metropolis of more than 685,000 inhabitants in less than 20 years. Clustered on the banks of the Loire, it has a small, cobbled centre that is dotted with squares and anchored around a medieval castle. You can be in London in an hour and a half by plane and Paris in two by train, making it a strong contender for career-minded big-city transplants who want a place where job prospects are plentiful but life moves at a slower pace.

A lot has changed since the city's shipyards, its historical lifeblood, were shuttered in the 1980s. "When I first

"It was important for us to live somewhere that has a culture of caring about quality family time. I like that a lot of people live in Nantes on purpose"

arrived, the town felt like it had gone to sleep," says Jean Blaise, founder and director of *Le Voyage à Nantes*, the city's tourism body. "We had to bring it back to life to give people a reason to want to live here." Often credited as the force that jump-started the city, Blaise and then-mayor Jean-Marc Ayrault helped to foster an arts scene that today rivals larger hubs and is still a key reason why people choose to settle here.

In 2015 the Nantes Saint-Nazaire Development agency was created to help business owners set up or relocate by finding office space, jobs for their partners and schools for their children. One company that has benefited from all of this is Faguo, a retail brand that makes clothing from recycled materials. Faguo relocated its headquarters from the French capital to Nantes two years ago. Founded by Nicolas Rohr and Frédéric Mugnier, the brand offsets its emissions, planting a tree for every item made, so moving closer to where much of this happens – the company has planted more than two million trees in France so far – felt necessary. "Our location needed to be in line with our brand and what we believe in," says Rohr.

Part of Nantes' appeal is that it is incredibly family-friendly. There are parks and playgrounds all over the city. Rob Spiro, a Silicon Valley transplant who sold his previous company, a social search engine, to Google, was looking for a city where his daughters could grow up with a high quality of life and where his career ambitions



Sarah Mainguy and Damien Crémois
Owners, Vacarme restaurant



Benoît Sanson
Architect, 31/44 Architects



Xavier Thébault
Owner of Le Mana shop



Rob Spiro
Founder, Imagination Machine

wouldn't be dented. Nantes, with more than a dozen incubators and hundreds of start-ups, seemed like the perfect fit.

"It was important to us to live somewhere that has a culture of caring about quality family time," says Spiro. "I like that a lot of people live in Nantes on purpose." After leaving the Silicon Valley rat race, Spiro found direction, moved out to a village on the coast and launched start-up studio Imagination Machine, which creates businesses that have a positive effect on society and promote sustainability. "The impact-for-good idea is one that a lot of entrepreneurs in Nantes share and I love that about the city. There's a community spirit between business owners."

One of the city's most notable start-ups is Lhyfe, a green-technology company that extracts clean hydrogen from water, powered by offshore wind power, and is vying to use this to replace fossil fuels in the transport and manufacturing sectors. In the past two years it has raised €58m. And with the Loire-Atlantique region ranking first in France in terms of offshore wind power, deciding to set up shop here was a breeze – even if this wasn't what initially drew Lhyfe's founders to Nantes. "More than anything, we all wanted to stay here because this is a dynamic city to live and work in," says co-founder Nolwenn Belléguic. "We all cycle to work and there is a lot to see and do. It's ideal for attracting new talent, which we're going to need to do in the coming year."

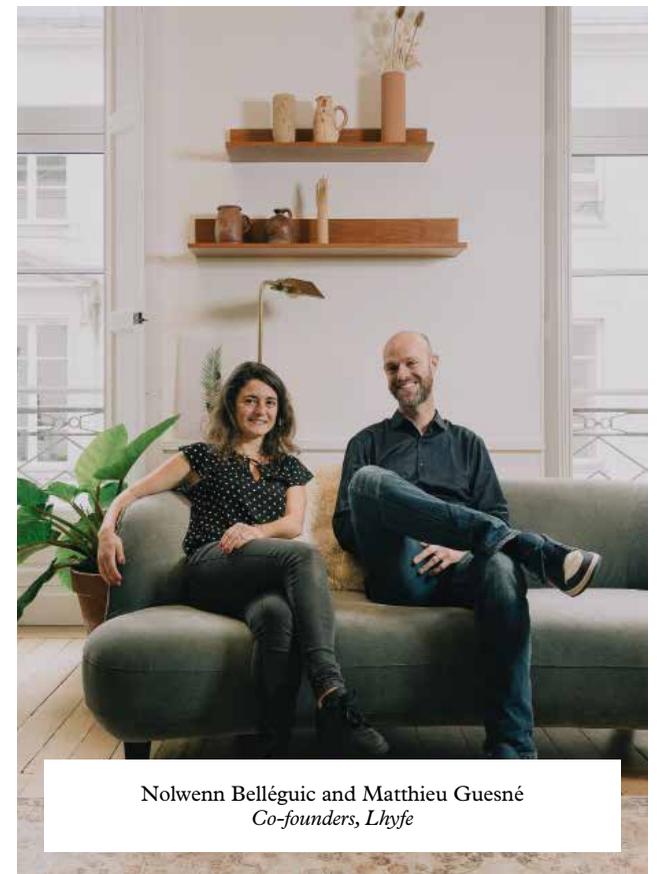
Nantes is expanding quickly with new districts being built from scratch. The most visible development, however, is the Île de Nantes on the water. Once a derelict patch of warehouses, a remnant of the old port, it has been home to a theme park called Les Machines since 2007 (the park's giant mechanical elephant remains Nantes' unusual city mascot). The space around it is now regenerated with river-view apartment blocks, as well as restaurants, bars and craft coffee shops lining the green banks.

The Île de Nantes is the base for many of the city's thriving next-generation companies, including Faguo and Imagination Machine but also smaller businesses such as Xavier Thébault's Le Mana, a shop that sells artwork and vintage-style posters. "When we opened in 2019, this part of town was a bit of a no-man's-land," says Thébault. The former banker decided that he needed a career change at the age of 40 and let himself be swept along by the creative energy of Nantes.

While new entrepreneurs may be flocking to the city, it has also managed to retain its existing talent. One of its heritage brands is Andrée Jardin, a maker of internationally sold home goods that was founded in 1947. Overhauling his grandfather's company with his brother François-Marie, engineer Jean-Baptiste Julio expanded Andrée Jardin's market beyond industrial customers to home consumers. "The change over the past years has brought a wave of creative people to the city, including



Nicolas Rohr
Co-founder, Faguo



Nolwenn Belléguic and Matthieu Guesné
Co-founders, Lhyfe

1. Beaux-Arts Nantes Saint-Nazaire art school
2. Students in Nantes city centre
3. Église Sainte-Anne



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customers for what we wanted to make,” he says. Today the company still operates from the old town but in a new, light-filled showroom and a small workshop on the outskirts, where a team of craftspeople drill, shave and shape the wooden handles of the brand’s smart brooms and dustpans.

The city’s dining scene is also evolving, thanks to the influx of people craving variety. Among the new eateries is Vacarme, opened by Sarah Mainguy and Damien Crémois two years ago in the Bouffay neighbourhood. “We’d had enough of Paris, where it feels like everything has been done,” says Mainguy. Inside, the exposed-brick walls provide a backdrop to the restaurant’s selection of natural and biodynamic wine. Nantes made sound business sense for the pair but they also fell in love with the city for other reasons. “We’re able to live in an apartment double the size of the one we had in Paris for the same cost,” adds Mainguy. “And Nantes has a more underground scene and a lot of old rocker bars, which I love.”

Life in Nantes chimes with a certain freedom of thought and creative spirit. There’s a feeling that there is still plenty of opportunity here and a chance to contribute to shaping an evolving city. “Nantes is so different to most cities in France,” says poster-shop owner Thébault. “It’s like a constellation with lots of moving parts and two beating hearts – the city centre and the Île de Nantes. It’s a place where you feel that you can take a risk.” — (M)

Insider knowledge

Who lives here?

Creative types, entrepreneurs, families who want to make their euros go further and shipbuilders commuting to Saint-Nazaire.

What businesses are booming?

Those having a positive effect. It’s also hot on technology with businesses ranging from health-care booking giant Doctolib to smaller companies such as Les Mini Mondes, a children’s toy and magazine start-up.

Where could I find the proverbial gap?

The Nantes food scene could do with more diversity and international influences.

How welcoming is the city to entrepreneurs?

Very. The Nantes Saint-Nazaire Development

Agency has a 28-strong team that is dedicated to helping entrepreneurs to relocate here.

Will my quality of life improve?

If you live in a top-tier city, yes. Office space comes in at €165 a square metre compared to €620 in Paris. Homes cost €4,500 a square metre to buy compared to €13,000 in the capital. Sandy beaches are less than an hour away and the arts scene is thriving.

What’s the average salary?

€34,600 a year.

And what about the cost of living?

Nantes is almost 14 per cent more affordable than Paris and 8 per cent less expensive than the national average.

Can I escape the city at weekends?

Head an hour west for beaches in Saint-Brévin-les-Pins, Les Moutiers-en-Retz or La Baule. Push further and you can be on Guérande’s salt planes. Head east and you’ll be in the Loire wine territory, scattered with castles. Drive north for some of Brittany’s most beautiful beaches in the Morbihan Gulf.

What about a fun night out to finish the week?

Places such as Little Atlantique Brewery, which serves its own beer, and Vacarme restaurant in town are redefining the nightlife.

Tell me honestly: should I move here?

If the prospect of contributing to building a city with a promising future appeals to you, then get packing.



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