

#1 MANCHESTER, NH

Backyard and beyond...



Lat: 43.0000° N

Lon: 71.4485° W

Elevation: 259 feet

Miles Traveled: 0

Miles to Go: 3,400

Amoskeag. Derryfield. The Queen City. Home. Growing up 40-odd miles north in Laconia, Manchester always intrigued me. In the 1990s Mom and Dad would bring my brother Evan and me on the occasional shopping jaunt to The Heavens sports collectibles or the Mall of NH, zipping past massive, mile-long mills backed by modern office towers. I inquisitively peered out the window of our station wagon as it cleaved to the Merrimack River on I-293, wondering what it would be like to live in New Hampshire's metropolis. As it turned out, I just couldn't stay away. I attended nearby Saint Anselm College from 2001-2005, which was followed by the vortex of grad school, marriage, fatherhood, and stints living in New York and Connecticut. Then, Manchester tapped me on the shoulder and invited me to return, stay awhile, and better get to know her brick-fronted brawn. I received a job offer in June 2012; Alyse, Julia and I settled in and have been proud residents ever since.

Manchester's population of 110,000 wouldn't even crack the top 50 largest cities in California, yet its residents account for roughly 8% of New Hampshire's humanity. As such, it occupies a strange place in the collective consciousness of Granite Staters, much like an awkward big brother going through

puberty. Each morning, individuals chortle as they watch news reports of another Manchester robbery or break-in, comfortably ensconced in their suburban dwellings, lamenting that such shenanigans could occur in good old New Hampshire. They would likely recommend a first-time visitor skip past grubby, oversized Manchester – it's atypical of NH's rural, small-town character, don't you know? In 2010, nearly half of Granite Staters lived in communities smaller than 10,000.

Manchester's awkwardness is also reinforced from the other end of the spectrum, lacking the urban and cultural cred that can be found in uber-cosmopolitan Boston just an hour's drive south. So the Queen City sits in all its historical glory and grit, too large for much of New Hampshire to fully embrace as one of its own, too small to emerge from Boston's crepuscular shadow.

But there's more to the story than that, of course.

I'd like to view the glass as half-full for a moment. Despite Manchester's status as a "small city" by national standards, it boasts an enviable combo of cultural offerings like the Currier Museum of Art, Millyard Museum and SNHU Arena, venues available nowhere else in New Hampshire. With an increasingly inviting downtown and a burgeoning millyard – at once a bastion of history and gleaming tech-savvy modernity – I find Manchester a superb place to live. While I don't deny that certain areas have their share of urban problems, one can find tranquil respites at Dorrs Pond, Stark Park or Massabesic Lake. In addition to the obvious factors that make Manchester a practical home base, it is the city's proximity to other worthwhile pursuits that may be my favorite feature. Within a 1-1.5 hour jaunt, one can dip a toe in the Atlantic, absorb a world-class performance in Boston, scramble up a 4,000-foot peak, or bask in the Lakes Region's balmy summer breezes.

Crossing Bridge Street on my morning commute, I'm treated to sunrises glistening off steadfast century-old brickwork and the glorious gilded crosses of Ste. Marie Church. Standing in the shadows of what was once the most productive textile mill complex in the world, the sense of labor and accomplishment is profound. One can almost hear the horn sounding to signify the end of another 12-hour shift, exhausted workers – French-Canadian, Irish, Greek, Polish, and countless others – trudging home for a few precious hours' rest before the toil began anew.

In a world where travelers seek outward beauty and refined surroundings, Manchester responds with a broad-shouldered shrug and gap-toothed grin, saying to passersby 'ignore us if you like.' If you're willing to look beyond the obvious imperfections, however, you may just develop a soft spot for this hardened city on the Merrimack... zits and all.