

DEMOGRAPHIA



NANTES: CAPITAL OF THE LOIRE

FAST FACTS		Similar To
Metropolitan (Labor Market) Population	675,000	Edmonton, Brasilia, McAllen (TX, USA)
Urbanized Area* Population	525,000	
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	100	Dublin, Victoria, Manaus, Olympia (WA, USA)
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	259	
Population per Square Mile	5,300	New York, Brasilia, Auckland
Population per Square Kilometer	2,050	
Capital of Pays de la Loire region		
*Continuously built up area		

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Nantes (pronounced “nont”) is the capital of the Pays de la Loire region and also capital of the Department of Loire-Atlantic. It is located 30 miles to the east of the Loire River and 200 miles west-southwest of Paris.

My visit to Nantes begins with a late afternoon arrival by air from Gatwick. There is still sufficient light to gain a good perspective of the urban area. There is the typical core of the old French provincial city, with its church towers and high densities. But surrounding the historic core is late 20th century development, from sprawling commercial areas to the single family dwellings that mimic those increasingly found in virtually all high-income urban areas.

The city itself is indeed dense, at nearly 11,000 residents per square mile (270,000 people in 25 square miles). The central area also has pedestrian only streets and many very narrow streets where cars are allowed. Most of the buildings are very old, or at a minimum were reconstructed in former styles after World War II bombings. The exception is a international style black-windowed central monolith more than 30 stories tall. Between one and two miles from the core is a surface street ring road on the north side of the river.

Saint-Sebastian-sur-Loire, to the southeast of the city, is typical of a newer suburb. Detached single family dwellings abound. They are smaller, however, than would be found in newer suburbs of Paris, principally because incomes are approximately 40 percent lower here. Single story houses appear to be the rule rather than the exception.

The urban area has built what may be the most comprehensive light rail system measured in terms of the percentage of the urban community that is within walking distance of a station. With more than 70 stations, more than one-quarter of the urban area is accessible by walking to light rail. Five lines radiate from the core, with approximately 20 miles of line. The first line was opened in 1985. Nonetheless, ridership is not as high as might be expected. Approximately 10

percent of travel in the Nantes urbanized area is on public transport. Some of the central area streets are made much more narrow by the reservation of space for the light rail lines.

Route #2 crosses the Loire River to an island over the General Audibert Bridge. At this bridge, a second structure was built for light rail and cars, to the west of the previous bridge, which still handles northbound automobile traffic. In a seemingly inexplicable and unpleasant architectural treatment, the bridge was built with a surface arch perhaps 10 feet higher than the original bridge.

However, despite the light rail system, traffic in Nantes is very congested. This is typical of virtually all European cities (Geneva, with a population similar to that of Boise [Idaho], has worse traffic congestion than Los Angeles). Nantes is ringed by a peripheral motorway (the “peripherique”), which will be complete as construction finishes on the eastern bridge over the Loire River. The western bridge is exceedingly high and provides a spectacular sight at night with lights seemingly high in the air.

There is considerable development along the peripherique. This includes commercial centers and a large convention center at Beaujoire. The western suburb of Saint-Herblain has a large and sprawling commercial center, Atlantis. Large shopping malls are at the outward termini of some light rail lines and elsewhere. Employment is widely dispersed through the Nantes urbanized area, with less than 15 percent of jobs in the central business district.

Thirty miles to the east is the port of Saint-Nazaire. This is a large shipbuilding center, which specializes in cruise ships. When I was there, finishing touches were being put on the *Queen Mary 2*, which will be the world’s largest cruise ship, approximately twice the size of the *Queen Mary*, launched just before World War II and now permanently berthed at Long Beach, California. Regrettably a tragic accident cost the lives of a number of tourists visiting the under-construction ship just a few weeks before. Another smaller, but still large cruise ship, the *Opera* was also under construction.

In Nantes will be found a charming combination of past and present. The past represented by the narrow streets of the core that are centuries old. The present, the predominantly detached housing suburban areas that surround the city, are as contemporary as any found in either hemisphere. And surrounding it all is the colorful rolling countryside of the Loire Valley. Nantes is a nice place to visit and a nice place to live.



Core



Core & central monolith



Along the Loire River



Looking East (Upstream) Loire River



Residential Street: Nantes



Residential Street: Saint-Sebastien-sur-Loire



Residential Street: Saint-Sebastian-sur-Loire



Shopping Center: Sant Sebastian-sur-Loire



Loire-Atlantique Dream with Wine Cellar (10 Miles West of Nantes)



Inner Ring Road



General Audibert Bridge (Eastern Span, Western Span slightly higher)



Queen Mary 2 nearing completion at Saint-Nazaire



Queen Mary 2



Opera under construction at Saint-Nazaire

By Wendell Cox

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