

Tell somebody who's not from 'round here that you live in the Triangle and any number of misconceptions are likely to result.

They'll think: Oooh, it's hot there. There's Spanish moss dripping from the trees. We all love NASCAR and Jesse Helms, there's moonshine on every table, and our fabled Southern manners are actually just a thin veneer of courtliness covering our minority-oppressing souls.

You can give outsiders one of those. It tends to be a tad warmish here in the summer, though overall our climate is a surprise to many people. (See below for further discussion of this.) The rest of it just ain't necessarily so.

But misperceptions persist — sometimes even among people who have lived here awhile. So once and for all, we dispel the Four Great Myths of the Triangle.

The Triangle has a low cost of living. The South has long had a reputation for being a low-cost place. Mercedes and BMW didn't build new car assembly plants in Alabama and South Carolina, respectively, because German auto executives have a secret fondness for fried okra. They located in those places because costs — labor, land and taxes, among them — are relatively low.

The lesson? If cost of living is your main reason to move to the South, try rural Alabama or South Carolina. The Triangle, in contrast, has grown so quickly that it has higher costs than almost every other place in North Carolina, including Charlotte. Furthermore, the Triangle's composite cost of living index is higher than that for Atlanta, Dallas, Phoenix, Charleston, S.C., and Richmond, Va., just to name a few.

The Triangle is a commuter-friendly place. North Carolina ranks among the worst states for traffic congestion — 53 percent of our roads are categorized as "significantly congested" or "severely congested," according to Federal Highway Administration data. Only six other states rank higher, among them California and Connecticut (which have huge, sprawling metro areas like Los Angeles and New York City to skew their results).

Of course, that statistic applies to the whole state, not just the Triangle. But it's a safe bet that most of the state's congested roads are in the urban areas. According to a U.S. Census study of 49 metro areas, the average travel time in the Triangle increased 23 percent between 1990 and 2000 — from 20.2 minutes to 24.9 minutes.

That was the highest increase among all the areas measured.

The Triangle has a mild, sunny climate. If you like interesting weather, the Triangle's your place. Hurricanes? We get 'em. Tornadoes? Ditto. Oppressively hot, miserably humid summers? You're in the right place. Snow, sleet and ice? Yes, yes and yes. Torrential downpours? Lawn-killing dry spells? Pipe-bursting cold snaps? You betcha.

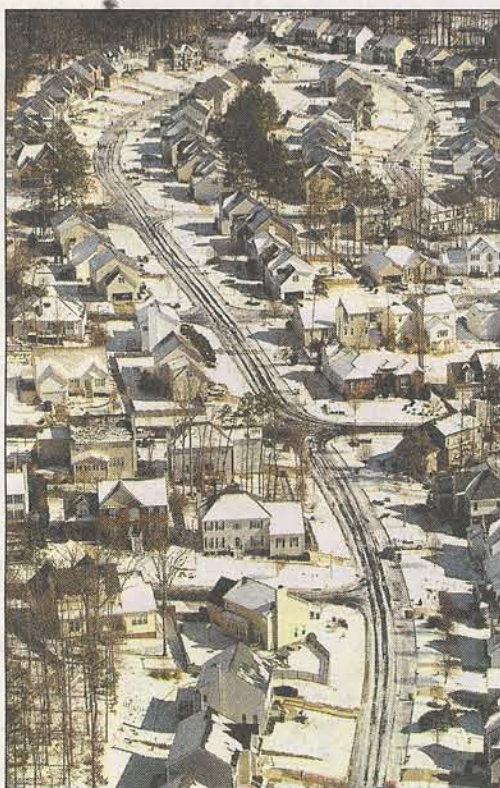
Furthermore, it's not nearly as sunny here as you might think. There are only 112 clear days a year on average, which means that two out of every three days are either partly cloudy or completely overcast. Also, here's a surprise for you: The Tri-



The Triangle has lovely spring weather, which draws kids and parents out to play at parks such as Pullen Park in Raleigh. But overall, the climate here is wetter than Seattle.

STAFF PHOTO BY SHER STONEMAN

What's true and what's not



Think the Triangle is always warm and sunny? Tell that to the folks trapped by icy roads in Apex in January 2004.

NEWS & OBSERVER FILE PHOTO

angle is wetter than Seattle. The average total precipitation for our area is 42.47 inches, while Seattle gets 38.15 inches a year.

The Triangle is an actual, identifiable place. This is perhaps the slipperiest myth of all, mostly because it's sort of true. A long time ago, there were three population centers in central North Carolina — Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill — and together they formed an irregular triangle (with Chapel Hill, appropriately, on the left). By the time Research Triangle Park was established in the late 1950s, the word had taken on an uppercase feel: This was the Triangle.

Nowadays, it is the shorthand term for a swath of land that is home to a million people, three major universities, a state capital, two minor-league baseball teams, one major-league hockey team and — at any given moment — a fresh batch of newcomers who wonder why the barbecue they ordered tastes like vinegar.

Problem is, there's no longer a triangular shape to the Triangle. The three main population centers now are Raleigh, Durham and Cary — and Raleigh and Cary, of course, are so mashed together that they're essentially one place. Also, off to the east, Clayton is growing like kudzu, while to the south, Sanford is starting to exert its own gravitational field. Even Rolesville, a classic don't-blink town, is scheduled to get a second traffic light.

To further complicate things, the Triangle is no longer considered a single place for the purposes of number-crunching. Last year, the federal government decided that the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill metropolitan statistical area should be split in two. Now there's a Durham MSA, which comprises Durham, Orange, Chatham and Person counties; and a Raleigh-Cary MSA, which comprises Wake, Franklin and Johnston counties.

Not even Descartes could discern a shape from all that.

*News researcher Brooke Cain
contributed to this report.*

Staff writer G.D. Gearino can be reached at 829-4802
or dang@newsobserver.com.