

A Buyer's Guide to Arlington, Virginia

Tips for buyers in one of the country's most desirable areas.

By Jennifer Lubell | July 13, 2016, 9:31 a.m.

If you're looking to escape cramped city living in the District of Columbia, but want a quick commute downtown and easy access to the metro area, Arlington, Virginia, might be the ticket.

Directly across the Potomac River from the nation's capital, Arlington includes a diverse array of neighborhoods, including Columbia Pike and the bustling city centers of Rosslyn and Crystal City, as well as the small urban villages of Westover, Cherrydale and Lyon Village. There's also the Wilson Boulevard corridor, which has blossomed over the last two decades. Once home to car repair shops and department stores, the Courthouse-Clarendon-Ballston neighborhoods have given birth to new shopping areas and restaurants.

"Arlington is off the charts in terms of bikeability and walkability," says Billy Buck, president and CEO of Buck & Associates, Inc., whose family-owned real estate brokerage has resided in Arlington for more than 40 years. "We've seen a migration of people from D.C. to Arlington due to its services, parks and immersion school programs." According to Buck, more people are forgoing smaller apartments in the District of Columbia for extra space and individual bedrooms for their children.

As a highly desirable area, Arlington can be a difficult place to shop for a home if you're on a budget. Prices increased

in 2015 from 2014, and RealEstate Business Intelligence reports that on average Arlington homes only stayed on the market between one and 10 days last year. To get some insight on how to find an Arlington home for a great price, we contacted top real estate agents as identified by OpenHouse, an agent referral company (and a U.S. News partner), for the low-down on this vibrant suburb of the nation's capital.

What's Hot in Arlington:

A sense of community. In Arlington, local bands play at neighborhood establishments and families take advantage of community programs. In Clarendon, a regular event at Clarendon Market Common features children's stories and songs. "The sense of community is really incredible," says Keri Shull, founder of the Keri Shull Team at Optimé Realty in Arlington.

Great schools. Arlington County's public schools were voted best in the District metro area on Niche.com, a site that helps people find their next home and school. The Arlington County Public School System received an A+ rating in six out of the seven categories evaluated by Niche.com (it received an A in Sports & Fitness) and earned a high approval rating for parents and students.

New development. The Wilson Boulevard corridor, where the Orange Line of the Metro train system runs from

Rosslyn to Ballston, is experiencing a development boom. From his vantage point, Buck has personally witnessed its transformation. “Our office has been located on Wilson Boulevard for 40 years – it was started by my father,” Buck says. “One thing that’s changed is we don’t need the bars on our office anymore.”

With the arrival of public transit, the area has reinvented itself over the last 40 years, with major developments popping up around Metro train stations. Beginning in 1977, the city established the General Land Use Plan to guide future developments along the Rosslyn-Ballston Corridor while making sure to enhance the unique features of each neighborhood. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the number of multifamily housing units grew to outnumber single-family homes as more people saw Arlington as a good place to live. “It’s become a safe, viable and popular option to places like D.C.,” Buck says.

Experts say the urban planning boom is far from over. One area that’s slated for a major overhaul is the Ballston Common Mall: A multi-million project will replace the mall’s outdated look with open-air plazas and new condos flanking the retail area. The revamp is projected to finish in 2018 and once it does, it’s anticipated the Ballston area “will explode in value,” Shull says.

Walkability. Arlington is a great fit for the health conscious. “There are great trails for running, walking and biking and they link all the way from Leesburg, Virginia, to Potomac, Maryland,” Shull says.

Some people are willing to move to Arlington neighborhoods and walk longer distances to the Metro for their commute to work. Though Arlington has many suburban offerings, many people move there because they want a five-minute walk to the grocery store instead of a home with a four-car garage.

Tips for Arlington Home-buyers:

Start your search on the Internet. Once you decide on a neighborhood in Arlington, Buck suggests getting acquainted with an expert familiar with the area – whether it’s an agent, a business owner or someone who already lives there. “That’s the best way to dial into a neighborhood,” he says.

Be mindful of the seller’s needs. It’s important to find out what the seller’s situation is. A seller who’s buying another home and needs to close on an existing home might appreciate it if the buyer offers them a sale-leaseback, in which the former owner rents the property until they can move into their new home. The seller might be facing the prospect of temporarily displacing their family and paying for movers. Giving them an option to rent could persuade the seller to lower the price.

Know what you’re looking for. Buyers need to know what they want and if what they are looking for actually exists for the price they can afford.

“Often, buyers hire our team after spinning their wheels looking at houses that don’t match their criteria or being devastated when someone else wins their dream home,” Shull says. Analyzing recent sales with your broker can help you see what options there are in the area. This will help you avoid falling in love with an idea of the perfect home that’s simply out of your price range.

Get help from the professionals. It’s important to work with a seasoned agent, especially in a highly competitive market like Arlington. In cases where a settlement is working on a tight time frame, “you need to have an experienced lender that’s really fast,” Shull insists.

“The lenders we work with can close properties in as little as 10 to 14 days – as opposed to a big bank that might close in a month or more – which gives the buyer a big advantage,” Shull adds.

The great thing about Arlington is it has something for everyone, Buck says. Whether you invest in a \$600,000 rambler in Westover or a \$139,000 condo on Columbia Pike, “The diversity of the housing stock – and the people – are what make Arlington so attractive.”