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"The Hills are Alive: Well-heeled retirees and retirees-to-be are flocking to the Texas Hill Country"

By Mark Morrison

CHARLES AND LOIS Woolacott live in a community that is a retiree's dream. Three Robert Trent Jones Sr.-designed golf courses are nearby, and so is Lake LBJ, a great spot for all kinds of water sports. But the Woolacotts had a special reason for choosing Horseshoe Bay: They could live alongside a 6,000-foot runway and park their single-engine Beech Bonanza A36 in a hangar attached to their Southwestern-style house. That allows them to take off for Las Vegas or Palm Springs as simply as heading to the grocery store. "We just love flying and seeing different places," says Charles, 65, a former entrepreneur who sold his water purification products company in Canada three years ago.

Sure, the Woolacotts' airborne lifestyle is unusual, but Horseshoe Bay, one of the premier retirement communities in the Texas Hill Country, can accommodate a wide variety of interests. In these parts, land is relatively cheap, and having room for an airstrip is no problem. In fact, the idea of a Hill Country retirement is catching on fast. Thousands of new and soon-to-be retirees are grabbing up lots, houses, or even small ranches in this scenic 14,000-square-mile area of rolling terrain, lakes, vegetation, and wildlife.

What's it like? Charles Lathrop, a retired Houston oil executive who recently moved to the area, sees a similarity to upstate New York. "O.K., maybe Horseshoe Bay isn't quite as green," he says, "but my wife and I are both from the Finger Lakes region of New York, and it does remind us of home."

To live in Horseshoe Bay, you must make some trade-offs. You have to drive 45 miles to get to Austin, the nearest sizable city, and 80 miles to San Antonio. The frequent 100-plus-degree days from June to September might get in the way of some of those active pursuits. Traffic is starting to get bad around Horseshoe Bay and Marble Falls, the nearest town -- and with growth, it will get worse. The population of the area is expected to top 29,000 by 2010, up from 21,247 in 2000. Plus, "we're a little short of good restaurants," says Lathrop.

All that growth has made it hard for the new retirees to stay retired. Bobbie Walker, 68, moved to Horseshoe Bay in 2001 after 35 years as a college administrator. The local satellite campus of Texas Tech University was growing so fast that it recruited Walker as its director. Much of the demand for continuing education courses, says Walker, comes from retirees.

Horseshoe Bay was founded in 1971 by two cousins, Norman and Wayne Hurd. After buying up 2,700 acres of ranchland west of Austin and north of San Antonio for \$2 million, they set out to build a world-class residential and resort community. Their dream survived Texas' boom-and-bust cycles, and today the community has 2,500

households. It also boasts the three top-rated golf courses, a Marriott hotel, a marina and yacht club, and a private airport. Homes start at \$150,000 for a 1,750-square-foot patio house and go to over \$5 million for a prime lakefront home. Former Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach and ex-astronaut Jim Lovell own waterfront getaways there.

Growth is accelerating as large new developments call attention to the area. Austin developer Brady Oman is building Escondido, a 500-acre enclave with a private Tom Fazio golf course. Lots on the course go for \$300,000 to \$500,000. In less than a year, 165 of the 374 available have sold. Homebuilder Centex is developing a seven-story lakefront condominium near the Marriott. And National Recreational Properties is marketing Horseshoe Bay by flying Californians to Texas and enticing them to buy \$29,000 lots with \$1,495 down. "We've been waiting 35 years for this kind of market," says Sam Tarbet, president of Horseshoe Bay Corp.

Tarbet points out that even the weather is giving the area a boost. Last year's hurricanes have made some retirees wary of the oceanfront. Bruce Agee, 50, an American Airlines pilot who retired on Apr. 1, mainly to protect his pension, moved to Horseshoe Bay from Stuart, Fla., with his wife, Tiffany, and their two sons after seeing two hurricanes do severe damage to their part of the Atlantic coast. "We picked Horseshoe Bay because of the amenities -- especially the lake and the airport," says Agee, who keeps on the move with a 29-foot cigarette boat and a four-seat, single-engine airplane.

Ginny Patterson, 61, a retired IBM and Visa International systems manager, moved to Horseshoe Bay three years ago. She came to visit friends and "immediately fell in love with the place." She also liked the real estate prices. She sold her two-bedroom place in San Mateo, Calif., for over \$1 million and landed a 2,700-square-foot home on the Ram Rock golf course for \$385,000. She figures it's now worth more than \$450,000.

Lots of Lots

More important, Patterson has plenty of activities. She took up golf for the first time and "is hooked." She heads the nine-holers group of women players and has joined the Wildflower Dancers, which perform to show tunes and entertain at parades and charity events.

Sam and Cynthia Boyd, Galveston real estate developers who won't retire for several years, were so sure they wanted to live in the Hill Country -- and so sure of the area's investment potential -- that they bought a waterfront lot in Horseshoe Bay, a lot in Escondido, and a small ranch about 10 miles away. Ken Landry, 49, a retired Houston area petroleum entrepreneur, just spent over \$1 million for a newly remodeled lakefront house. "We tried second homes in Tahoe and California and had never heard of Horseshoe Bay," he says. "But for us the water and the golf courses are just perfect -- and we may move there full-time."

Where to retire is not a pressing concern for Randy and Neva Hall, both 51, of Dallas. Randy, a CPA, and Neva, a Neiman Marcus executive vice-president, could easily work for a decade or more. But they decided a home in

Escondido would be fun. Randy, a golfer, loved the Fazio course. As for Neva, "I like to be out in the country for biking -- and to be on the water." They soon start construction on a 4,400-square-foot home.

For now, the tide of newcomers seems steady. Ginny Patterson, for example, has two sisters; one had plans to move to Florida and another lives in the Seattle area. But after visiting Patterson, the Florida sister decided on Horseshoe Bay, and the two are trying to persuade the third to join them.