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Golf Communities Aren't Just for Retirees

The developer Patrick Melton has made a (very successful) career out of proving it.

On Kiawah Island in South Carolina, Patrick Melton, a golf community developer, plays the course with his daughters, ages 13 and 6. Patrick O'Brien/Kiawah Partners

By Shivani Vora

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This article is part of our latest special report on International Golf Homes, about some of the top spots to live and play.

Golf communities may have a reputation of attracting mostly retirees, but Patrick Melton has built his business on the premise that they should hold equal appeal for families and nongolfers, too.

As the founder of South Street Partners, a private equity real estate investment firm based in Charlotte, N.C., and Charleston, S.C., Mr. Melton, 48, oversees a portfolio of residential golf developments in the Carolinas and Virginia, including Kiawah Island, near Charleston; Palmetto Bluff, near Savannah, S.C.; and the Cliffs, seven lake and mountain communities between Asheville and Greenville, S.C.

Because of the pandemic, South Street Partners has seen record-breaking sales among these communities: At the end of this July, Mr. Melton said, the Carolina properties had $2 billion in closed sales for the last year, a 216 percent increase from a year ago. And all are seeing a younger demographic, including many families with school-aged children, moving in full time or buying vacation homes, he said. "The average age range of these buyers is 45 to 50, but we also see people in their 30s who are just starting to have children."

Appealing to a broader range of residents is a somewhat personal mission for Mr. Melton. He is a longtime golfer, but his wife, Spencer, doesn't play. And while his two daughters, ages 6 and 13, enjoy the occasional round with Dad, they prefer to spend most of their time off the course. "I wanted to create settings where they had plenty of activities to enjoy and where we could spend quality time together," he said.

Below are edited excerpts from a recent interview with Mr. Melton.

How have golf communities changed in the last 10 years?

Many have become more family-oriented and approachable because they've added nongolf amenities that appeal to a broader age range. They offer spas, great gyms with fitness classes, water sports like snorkeling and kayaking, pickleball, biking trails, kids camps and clay shooting.

They're also trying to make golf fun and less intimidating with programming such as night golf, music on the range and comfort stations on the courses with great food and cocktails.

Basically, communities like ours have stopped catering only to traditional golfers. Everyone has something to do that they enjoy, which then creates buy-in from all family members.

Your communities, along with many other golf communities globally, have seen a significant increase in sales because of the pandemic. Why do you think that is?

These communities offer access to the outdoors, privacy and security, which all became priorities during the pandemic. My company saw a rise in sales before the pandemic as our programs and amenities increasingly expanded beyond golf, but they exploded as the pandemic unfolded.

The growth of work from home opportunities brought on by Covid also drove sales. I think many families reassessed their priorities and began to envision themselves getting more out of communities.

My own family is a prime example. We moved around between our communities during the pandemic. I was able to keep working, and we enjoyed wake surfing, horseback riding, fishing, biking, and going to the beach at Kiawah — anything we could do to be outside.

What makes a community family friendly? What should prospective buyers look for?

You want to see kids being incorporated into the everyday life of the place with activities just for them like tennis, swimming, nature programs, and kids camps.

You also need staff that's great with kids. When you visit a prospective community, ask to meet the staff who will be interacting with your children or teaching them how to swim, surf, play tennis or be their camp counselors. Are they friendly? Do they have experience working with children?

Communities are usually very open to introducing interested buyers to their staff. Some even offer the chance to try an activity or two before you commit to a purchase. It's a red flag if a community seems hesitant to having you meet their staff because they're the people who will be in your life every day.

Also, communities that want families will often pair you with another family who already lives there so that you have a chance to meet others with like-minded interests. And some will offer a vertical family membership, so when a family joins, everyone in that family tree, up or down, has membership privileges.

Given that the demand for golf properties has grown significantly because of the pandemic, how can value-seeking home buyers find a property that's affordable?

Value is usually driven by location. Oceanfront homes, for example, are more expensive than something away from the coast. Get a place close to the beach or without a view, rather than on the beach, and you can save 50 to 70 percent. In mountain settings, homes at a lower altitude are less expensive than properties at a higher altitude, which are set in cooler temperatures and often have better views. There's also value to be had in rural settings. If you're willing to drive a half-hour or more to reach a big grocery store or shopping area, you can find a home at a far lower cost, compared with a home in the heart of town.

What's the ideal location for a home within a golf community?

Anything with a long-range view or privacy out the backyard. View preference obviously varies by person, but golf, marsh edge, open space, ocean, long-range mountains, and lake frontage are perennial favorites and generally hold their value more than homes that offer less privacy.

Can you share your top tip for buying a golf home?

First and foremost, decide what you want. Mountains? Ocean?River? Lake? Make sure you visit and spend substantial time in the community to get a feel for what it's like day to day. Try to visit during different times of the year to gain an understanding of the seasonality of the place and how your activities and usage will vary throughout the year. Buying a home is a big commitment, and there's no need to rush to find the right fit.