

REAL ESTATE

Living in Luxury Air Parks

Air parks—where residents live with their planes—are taking off again.

By **NANCY KEATES**

June 5, 2014 6:48 p.m. ET



FLYING HIGH: A private plane in its hangar at Heaven's Landing, a 635-acre, gated-community air park in Clayton, Ga. *Troy Stains for The Wall Street Journal*

Frank Merschman wasn't satisfied with the location of his Ocala, Fla., home, where airplanes buzz overhead all day, landing 1,200 feet from his house. So he just broke ground on a new home, right up against the runway.

Mr. Merschman lives in a residential air park—a development where homeowners keep and fly their private planes. In his new house, Mr. Merschman plans to entertain guests in a second-floor observation room with walls of glass for watching takeoffs and landings. "I want to be where all the action is," he says.

Mr. Merschman, the founder of a construction company, paid \$350,000 for his lot and

estimates that he'll spend about \$2.5 million on his 13,000-square-foot new home and hangar. After buying his individual properties, Mr. Merschman decided to buy the entire development, called Jumbolair, closing on the deal in December. Jumbolair has a paved runway long enough to land a [Boeing](#) BA +0.95% 747, an equestrian center, a community center with a 9,000-square-foot ballroom and famous neighbor John Travolta.

Slideshow: Air Park Sales Take Off



[View Slideshow](#)

Real-estate sales are 'really picking up now,' says Katty Caron, a real estate agent who specializes in air parks. She's at Hidden River, an air park in Sarasota, Fla. where she has several listings. *Edward Linsmier for The Wall Street Journal*

Air parks are taking off again. What started as mostly small developments with modest homes around grass air strips grew in the 1990s and early 2000s to include luxury fly-in communities with paved runways and amenities like golf courses, club houses and concierges. There are about 600 air parks in the U.S. listed in the directory of the Living With Your Plane Association, a Steilacoom, Wash.-based online directory of air parks, up from around 450 in 2001.

Boarding Area



Ray Allbright

\$3.4 Million
Tucson, Ariz.

In La Cholla Air Park, this property includes a 6,777-square-foot remodeled main house, a one-bedroom guesthouse, a studio, a hangar and a garage. On 31.95 acres, it also has a pool, spa and putting green.
Agent: Russell Long, Long Realty

Like luxury golf-course developments, air parks took a big hit in the housing crisis, with some homes losing as much as 40% of their value. "It was very slow for quite some time," says Katty Caron, a real-estate agent with Premier Sotheby's International Realty in Sarasota, Fla., who specializes in air parks. The decline was magnified by a slow but steady drop (5,000 to 10,000 a year) in the number of active private and recreational pilots from a peak of 357,479 in 1980, reflecting the rising price of small planes, fuel and insurance.

But in the past year, as the economy has recovered, lower home prices, coupled with an effort by pilot associations and airplane makers to revive private flying, has helped demand. Ms. Caron says sales of homes in air parks in the area are up about 9% over the past year while showings have doubled in the past six months.

Aero Club in Wellington, Fla., has experienced the highs and lows. Located in Palm Beach County, where polo matches and dressage events are common, the 248-homesite air park was

Stan Rolfness



\$825,000
Prineville, Ore.

In Dry Creek Airpark, this 4,812-square-foot Victorian was built in 2007 on 1½ acres. There is a gazebo, a playhouse, a horseshoe pit and a 50-by-50-foot hangar.
Agent: Stan Rolfness

Peter Allam



built in the early 1980s. A 6,750-square-foot home with a swimming pool and attached hangar on an acre right on the runway listed for \$2.8 million in 2010, soared up to \$5.5 million in 2012, and sold last September for \$2.6 million.

Brenda Brooks, a broker with One Step Ahead Realty in Palm Beach County, notes that a 2,747-square-foot home with a swimming pool on an acre sold in Aero Club for \$407,000 last summer, roughly the same amount people are paying for tract mansions on lots a fraction that size.

Ask anyone why they live in an air park and the responses are always the same. Residents love airplanes and want to be around airports. When your plane is in your hangar, it's easy to take it out for weekends instead of spending time driving to and from an airport. Air-park residents brag about short trips to beaches that would be a 10-hour drive from their homes, and nightly jaunts to restaurants hundreds of miles away. People even commute to work by planes and helicopters, taxing into their private hangars at the end of the day.

"It's like living in a harbor if you're a boat person. Loving airplanes is the common thread among everyone. It makes for a great community," says Doug Johnson, a radiation oncologist who practices in Jacksonville, Fla. He built his own single-engine Lancair four-passenger plane that he likes to fly to medical conferences and meetings around the country.

Dr. Johnson owns a second home in an air park called Heaven's Landing in Clayton,

\$799,000

Marlborough, Conn.

This 5,000-square-foot home and hangar is in the fly-in community of Salmon River Airfield Association.

Agent: Peter Allam, William Pitt Sotheby's International Realty

Ga., a 635-acre gated community with a paved concrete runway. He says the community's residents, who mostly have primary homes in other parts of the country, hold car races, fitness runs and Easter-egg hunts on the runway and taxiways.

Since these are private communities and tend to be in rural areas, residential air parks aren't overseen by the Federal

Aviation Administration, which doesn't get involved unless an airport receives federal funding. Most air parks don't have control towers. Unless a pilot flies into controlled airspace (crowded areas, mostly around big cities, where controllers are essential) they work on what's called "visual flight rules": They tune their radios to the frequency of the airport and call in their identity, location and flight plans so anyone on that frequency can hear them.

Many air-park residents aren't pilots, however. Sarah Patterson's father bought her a three-bedroom, three-bathroom, 5,681-square-foot second home on 10 acres right along a river in Hidden River air park in Sarasota, Fla. in part because the oldest of her three boys, 8-year-old Caleb, wants to be a pilot when he grows up. "He is beyond thrilled. He has seen the air strip and he can't wait to watch the planes take off and land," she says.

Psychiatrist Sabih Kayan said he bought his lot at Hidden River because he loved the "sheer beauty of the natural habitat." "I've always enjoyed airplanes. I like watching them fly," he says. "It's a pleasure." A neighbor likes to land on Dr. Kayan's grassy yard and take him up for rides. (Other residents jokingly refer to his backyard as "Kayan International.")

Now 74, Dr. Kayan is retiring soon and wants to move to a condo, so he has listed his 4,761-square-foot plantation-style home with heated swimming pool for \$1.1 million. He says he'll miss his like-minded neighbors, who seek out air parks in part because they offer larger-than-usual lots.



Airpark real-estate values took a hit during the housing crisis, but demand has begun to pick up again. Frank Merschman just broke ground on a new home in Jumbolair, a luxury Florida airpark. Photo: Troy Stains for The Wall Street Journal.

What others might see as drawbacks doesn't deter most air-park residents. For example, airplane noise. Some "people think it's noise. I don't consider it noise," says Steven Daiagi, 47, who bought a 9,000-square-foot house and a 3,000-square-foot hangar for his helicopter and plane at Aero Club, where residents include Miami Marlins catcher Jarrod Saltalamacchia and Sean Burnett, pitcher for the Los Angeles Angels. Besides, they say, it's mostly during the day.

Safety might also come up as an issue: Accidents get a lot of attention. In February, a 58-year-old pilot and Aero Club resident was practicing landings when his plane crashed, killing him. Air-park homeowners say they aren't bothered because they say flying is safer than driving. There have been two fatal accidents at Aero Club in the past 25 years, says Mr. Daiagi.

Some aviation enthusiasts cite other downsides. Air parks tend to be in remote locations and often have homeowner's association fees, rules about behavior and architectural guidelines for home and hangar designs, such as requirements that govern the types of materials and shapes of the buildings. For that reason, Robin Squires, 50, who owned a marine business, rejected all the air parks he looked at in 2004 and bought 130 acres in Jasper, Fla. He built his own grass airstrip and a 5,000-square-foot home with a 3,500-square-foot hangar. One of his airplanes, which hangs from the ceiling, is used purely for décor; its propellers act as a ceiling fan.

Despite architectural restrictions at some air parks, fly-in living quarters can be pretty unusual. Toshikazu Tsukii, a 77-year-old aerospace-industry engineer, designed his own \$300,000, two-story guesthouse on his property at La Cholla Airpark, a 1,000-acre air

park 20 miles northwest of Tucson, Ariz., using the cabin sections of two Boeing 707, tail section of a Boeing 727 and nose section of a Boeing 737. He furnished it almost entirely with surplus airplane parts. He even has converted his outdoor pool to an indoor pool by covering it with the fuselage of a Boeing 747. "It's like paradise," says Mr. Tsukii.