

Boom in upscale RVs spawning resort-like parks

Big-rig owners buy their spots, which don't come cheap but include luxurious amenities

Jennifer Alsever, New York Times
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Forget the fancy retirement condo in Florida. Mo and Lin Moser traded their Denver home for a \$1 million recreational vehicle and four places to park it -- spots worth \$80,000 to \$500,000 each -- at several high-end RV parks around the country.

The RV world was once populated mostly by vacationers who rented spots at modest, woodsy campgrounds. Today, some RV owners are also buying -- rather than renting -- places to park their vehicles, and sometimes with amenities like concierge and room service and full-time tennis instructors.

Many of these parks are more akin to resorts than campgrounds, with manicured lawns and waterfalls, security guards, golf courses, tennis courts, health spas, live entertainment, yoga classes and coffee shops. The price for a parking spot may run from \$75,000 to \$750,000.

"Baby Boomers are coming in, and they are looking for more," said Linda Profaizer, president of the National Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds, in Falls Church, Va. "They want to be entertained. And they need a place to park their big rigs."

High-end RVs, priced from \$175,000 to \$2 million, have become the fastest-growing segment of the industry, although they still account for just a small slice of the overall market. The most recent available data show that sales of such vehicles grew 19.8 percent from 2002 to 2003, according to the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association.

Ten years ago, most of the biggest RVs were around 30 feet long; today they are 45 feet. Some of these rigs, which have quieter diesel engines, have high-speed Internet, satellite television, washing machines, gas fireplaces, hardwood floors and built-in garages for canoes and motorcycles.

The Mosers didn't cut corners on their RV, which has marble floors and six television sets -- including one that pops out of the exterior for outdoor channel surfing. "It's about as high-end as you can get," Moser said. "It's got all the luxuries of a pretty nice home."

The Mosers bought two RV properties in Breckenridge, Colo., one in Palm Springs and one in Newport, Ore., but they are far from just investments. Rather, the couple wanted to buy what Moser called "the RV lifestyle," and the convenience of having several home sites where they know other people. "It's the friendships, the camaraderie," said Moser, 70, a retired real estate developer. "There is always someone to visit and chat with."

One of the couple's future nesting spots will be at Desert Shores Resorts in Palm Springs, where a 7,000-square-foot RV pad and a private "casita" are under construction. By the end of the year, they hope to enjoy the casita -- a small building with a private garage, full kitchen, bathroom, closets and living space, as well as a private patio and a private swimming pool.

As sales of luxury vehicles climb, one RV maker, the Monaco Coach Corp., wants to use the driver-owned parks as a way to increase demand for its products. Monaco, of Coburg, Ore., created a division to develop RV parks with Outdoor Resorts of America and has two under way -- in Indio (Riverside County) and Las Vegas, with RV pads selling for \$160,000 to \$330,000 each. The Indio resort, which uses the Outdoor Resorts name, has a restaurant, room service and private docks for electric motorboats.

And across the street from the Indio site, Outdoor Resorts of America is selling spots for \$82,000 to \$275,000 at its own park, called Outdoor Resort Indio. Buyers, screened to ensure that their RVs are no shorter than 45 feet, get unlimited golf privileges and access to full-time tennis and golf instructors; water aerobics classes; a health spa with body wraps and hair and nails services; and a lodge for bingo and dances. Robert Schoellhorn, a former pharmaceutical executive, owns Outdoor Resorts of America as well as Marathon Coach, another RV maker based in Coburg.

Outdoor Resorts of America is building similar parks in California, Oregon, Florida, North Carolina and Missouri. "There is more money out there, and people want a bit of a different vacation," said Robert Schoellhorn Jr., the son of Schoellhorn and the company's vice president.

Less expensive options still exist. A resort called Whispering Aspen, which opened last summer in Fairplay, Colo., is appealing to a more low-key buyer, with its RV pads priced at \$50,000 and \$60,000. It offers more traditional RV activities like fishing and hiking, but it recently added a 9,000-square-foot lodge with a spa, Internet room, pools, hot tubs and a nine-hole putting green.

Thomas Lutes, the marketing director of Whispering Aspen, said that many people bought because they had trouble finding parking spots at campgrounds during the holidays and the summer. Some places are simply too crowded; others limit a visitor's stay to perhaps a couple of weeks, and some RV enthusiasts want to stay longer. In addition, many older

campgrounds are not equipped with the concrete pads needed to handle the larger, pricier RVs, which weigh as much as 45,000 pounds.

Sometimes buying a lot "is the only way to get that camping experience," said Profaizer of the RV park association. "Down in the Keys in Florida, it's very difficult to find a place to go camping."

More park owners, seeing land prices soar in many vacation hot spots, are selling instead of renting individual RV pads to consumers as a way to reap the financial rewards of their properties without selling the entire park outright.

Still, for buyers, putting tens of thousands of dollars into a spot at an RV park may be risky, said Jim Miller, an investment adviser in Columbiana, Ohio. Before buying, he said, owners should make sure that they are committed enough to the RV life to keep the property several years and that they want to keep returning several times a year.

Resale value will be determined by resort amenities, upkeep and other RV neighbors -- things that may be out of the owner's control. There are also homeowner association regulations about what can be done with a lot. "The RV you can sell, but the lot you're not going to be able to sell to someone who wants to build a house," Miller said.

Individual owners must pay property taxes, some utilities and homeowner association fees that may range from \$100 to \$400 a month and cover water and sewer services, trash pickup and maintenance of the common areas. At many resorts, buyers can rent their lots to visitors when they are not there, through the resort's management company. The company may typically get 40 percent of the daily rental charges, which can run \$20 to \$100 a night. Individual owners must report that income for tax purposes.

Some people join the RV brigade without fully retiring. Three years ago, Fred and Betsy Williamson, both in their 50s, grew weary of their corporate jobs, shed many of their belongings and sold their Phoenix home for \$170,000. Then they bought a 40-foot RV for the same price -- as well as a \$92,000 lot at the Tiger Run Resort in Breckenridge.

The two now work at the municipal bus department and in a medical center during the winters in Breckenridge, where they enjoy the resort's hot tubs, swimming pools and lodge. In the summer they rent their lot for three weeks a month, at \$50 a night, and keep 60 percent of the revenue, with the management company receiving the rest. During those periods, they stay at other RV parks and find jobs nearby. Williamson said the rental income helped to offset the \$190 monthly dues, \$70 monthly electricity bills and \$1,200 in annual property taxes.

"We have no regrets," he said. "We've got a mobile cabin. We can go just about anywhere and stay for a while."