

LUXURY SPA FINDER

THE SPA LIFESTYLE AT ITS FINEST

SPECIAL ISSUE

Renew Yourself!



Sizing up a spa community

TWENTY QUESTIONS TO ASK • BY EVERETT POTTER

WHEN IT COMES TO BUYING into a spa community, you have to look closely at both “spa” and “community.” “Spa,” as we all know, has as many shades of meaning as fall has colors, and that diversity is reflected in spa residential developments. “Community” has also become an umbrella term, used to describe hotel-residence projects like the Mandarin Oriental Tower in Chicago; gated communities like the Ritz-Carlton Club, Jupiter, in Florida; and planned suburbs with spas like Suncadia, a little more than an hour from Seattle.

One thing that isn't in doubt, however, is that a good spa adds bang to your investment. “Having a spa is a huge amenity,” declares Lorna Ball, a broker who's been selling real estate at Bighorn in Palm Desert, California, since that development broke ground 18 years ago. “Our spa has equal weight with our two championship golf courses. From a value standpoint, it's like having a third golf course. Because of it, you pay a premium to live here.” Her comment is borne out by a resident, landscape architect John Vogley. “Golf was important when we looked at Bighorn, but a lot of our decision had to do with the spa,” he says.

Here's a list of questions, based on my travels around the country for this column, to help you ascertain the nature of a spa residential community and size up the depth of a developer's commitment to the spa lifestyle.

1. What's the community's genesis?

It will have come in one of three ways:

- Spas that added residential components, such as Canyon Ranch, Miraval, Red Mountain, Banyan

Tree, and Cooper Aerobics.

- Real estate developments that added spas, such as Cliffs Communities, Bighorn, and Silverleaf.
- Hotels with spas that added residential components. These include the major luxury brands such as Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons, and Mandarin Oriental.

2. If the community is under construction, when will the spa be completed?

Developers use the spa to promote sales, but the fact is, the spa is often one of the last elements to be built. That's because developers focus on construction that generates cash flow, such as homes and restaurants. Silverleaf in Scottsdale, Arizona, is one of the rare exceptions to this rule, and it demonstrates the developer's commitment to the spa lifestyle. The 7,800-square-foot spa there opened with only 75 of 800 homes completed.

3. What's the spa's role?

For developers, a spa is now what a golf course was in the 1990s—an essential marketing element. The question is whether the spa is a main ingredient or just a topping, a 30,000-square-foot temple to wellness that reflects the developer's seriousness about a healthy lifestyle or merely an amenity, a place to get a massage after a round of golf. The developments I've seen that best exemplify the idea of a spa residential community have sewn the spa into the social fabric, so to speak, and made it a community nexus. The 20,000-square-foot spa at Cordillera in Colorado is a good example: It's planning to run spa happy hours dur-



Canyon Ranch Living



Mandarin Oriental Tower

Luxury residential communities incorporating a spa are one of the hottest real estate trends today. For more profiles of spa residential communities, visit Spafinder.com and click on “Spa Guide,” then “Spa Lifestyle Real Estate.”



Ritz-Carlton Club, Jupiter



Greenbrier Sporting Club

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ing which residents will sample what spa director Angie Primmer calls “mini spa services, with tea, light appetizers, and an opportunity to meet your fellow owners and members.” The spa at the Ritz-Carlton Club, Jupiter, is a meeting place for residents and shows a commitment to healthy living through the quality of its fitness facilities and expertise of its fitness staff.

4. Is there a medical component?

The most forward-thinking communities are making wellness part of daily life. At its best, that means a medical spa where you can lock into a first-rate medical program. At the Greenbrier Sporting Club in West Virginia, residents can avail themselves of the long-established medical clinic at the adjacent Greenbrier resort. The Cliffs at Keowee in South Carolina is building a 53,000-square-foot wellness center. It will be headed by Sam Varner, a former director of fitness for Pebble Beach Corporation who trained seven Olympic medalists; will have a staff of top doctors; and will offer tests such as the Biophysical250, which looks at more than 250 biomarkers.

5. Is the spa big enough to handle the demand?

There’s no exact science when it comes to the ratio of treatment rooms to residents. Ideally, the spa should feel intimate even at peak hours. For example, Bighorn has a 13,000-square-foot spa with 11 treatment rooms, sufficient for a 433-home development with many part-time residents. On the other hand, Sasanquah, the Spa at Kiawah Island Club in South Carolina, has six treatment rooms for 1,638 members and is so crowded at peak times that booking weeks in advance is necessary.

6. How does the spa look?

Spa design reflects depth of commitment. Developers put their money where they believe it will get the most return. When you see a spa like Silverleaf, in which 18th- and 19th-century architectural elements imported from France are incorporated into the interiors, it tells you the developer thought the spa was an important part of the community. The women’s locker room has a

Louis XVI fireplace, zinc bar, and antique mirrors—in short, the kind of seductive surroundings that boutique hotels offer and that will make you want to spend time at the spa.

7. What physical facilities does the spa have?

They should go beyond standard-issue features such as steam rooms and saunas. Silverleaf has a 75-foot-long lap pool lined with water jets, Moroccan-style tranquility room, and outdoor Watsu (water shiatsu) pavilion. Canyon Ranch Living in Miami Beach, which is slated to open early this year, has a 70,000-square-foot spa with 44 treatment rooms, Finnish sauna, hydrospace, herbal sauna, crystal steam room, ice igloo, reflexology basins, heated lounges, and experience showers.

8. How much thought went into the treatment menu?

You want a solid base (hot stone, deep tissue, Swedish, of course) but also a menu with room for exploration. Silverleaf offers acupuncture, reiki, and Watsu. Cordillera has prenatal massage, sports massage, jin shin jyutsu, and Chinese Energetics, which incorporates elements of qi and shen gong. The new 30,000-square-foot Aveda Spa at Amrit on Singer Island, Florida, will have a branch of the Himalayan Institute, whose practitioners will collaborate with spa therapists to customize and administer balance-restoring holistic treatments.

9. What credentials do staff members have?

Therapist-licensing requirements vary enormously. If the spa has therapists who went to school or worked in Nebraska, New York, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Mississippi, New Mexico, Ohio, Utah, Wisconsin, or Hawaii, that’s a good sign: Those states demand the most hours of training, from 1,000 hours in the first two to 570 in Hawaii. British Columbia has the most rigorous requirements in Canada, more than 2,000 hours of training. But remember, good therapists are often born, not made, so don’t give a spa community demerits if it doesn’t have staff who

trained in these places. (See the next point.) Spa residential communities in areas with an abundance of resort spas (for instance, Scottsdale or Southern California) will have a large talent pool to choose from. Because she's in a buyer's market, Silverleaf spa director Sharon Narduzzi can put each candidate through no fewer than five interviews. "because the most important thing is the intention of their work."

10. Can I take a test drive?

Book a treatment or two, take a fitness class, and make sure to linger in the relaxation areas to get a feel for the spa. Visit at least once during peak hours, usually early morning for the gym and late afternoon for treatments.

11. Is there a dedicated fitness staff?

Ask about their education and specialties since the gym will likely be part of your daily routine. If you're considering a community with a large number of seasonal residents, find out whether the fitness class schedule is cut back in low season. Make sure the gym and the development as a whole offer opportunities for your favorite activities such as walking, biking, hiking, or swimming.

12. Is there a spa restaurant or spa cuisine available at the restaurants in the community?

Remember, well-being is a matter of diet, too. The Cliffs at Keowee is probably the most forward-thinking development in this regard, cultivating an organic garden to supply its restaurants and selling the excess produce at farm stands for residents.

13. Will the spa and restaurants be for residents only or open to the public?

The former means more exclusivity and less competition for spa appointments at peak hours. If the spa and restaurants are for residents only, ask if that could change in the future. In some locales, zoning regulations would prohibit the facilities from being opened to the public.

14. What are the related perks?

Residents of the Greenbrier Sporting Club get to

use the adjacent Greenbrier resort. Cordillera has an on-mountain club at nearby Vail for residents and hotel guests who ski there. The Ritz-Carlton Club, Jupiter, offers Ritz Kids, a supervised program for children ages 3 to 12 that's identical to the one at Ritz-Carlton hotels. Buying into Bighorn gets you membership in Medjet, a medical-evacuation service.

15. What's the developer's track record?

Look up the developer's other projects for a barometer of success. For example, DPS, which is currently building the Snake River Sporting Club in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, did the Greenbrier Sporting Club and the Ford Plantation in Georgia. These projects are blue-chip, a good recommendation for Snake River. In the current real estate climate, that's especially important. "We looked at just about everything from Boca through Jupiter," recalls New York businessman Edward Sacks. "In our view, the most outstanding community was the Ritz-Carlton Club, Jupiter, where we bought. And the Ritz-Carlton brand was an obvious bonus."

16. Is the community equity or non-equity?

It's a matter of how much control you want. Equity communities like the Ritz-Carlton Club, Jupiter, are owned by the members. Non-equity communities like Cordillera are owned by the developer. If you want to have a hand in deciding your community's future, whether it's a spa addition or a new clubhouse, go with an equity club.

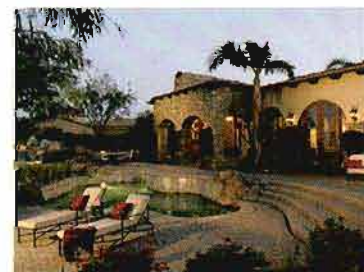
17. Does it offer whole, fractional, or condo ownership?

The choice is largely determined by where you are in life. Whole ownership immerses you in the community, assuming you're going to live there full-time. (Many spa residential communities have part-time whole owners.) Fractional and condo ownership typically restrict occupancy to 30 days a year, which is fine for those who aren't ready to retire or who have the income to maintain several residences.

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The Cliffs at Keowee



Bighorn



Silverleaf



Cordillera

18. What's the community's demographic profile?

At Silverleaf, the average age is 44 and most residents are from the Scottsdale area. Bighorn, in contrast, draws self-made multimillionaires and billionaires from all over and has a glamorous veneer of Hollywood stars (Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell) and athletes (Pete Sampras). At the Greenbrier Sporting Club, your neighbor is more likely to be a doctor or investment banker whose family has been coming to the neighboring Greenbrier resort for generations. Cordillera owners are well-heeled individuals primarily from Arizona, Chicago, and Texas, while the Ritz-Carlton Club, Jupiter, draws hard-chargers from the Northeast with nannies, babies, and golf clubs in tow.

19. What about seasonality?

Most spa communities are highly seasonal. Silverleaf is quiet from April to November, as everyone decamps for their summer residences during the hot months. Only 30 percent of Cordillera's residents are full-time. At some developments, such as Bighorn, the residences are not second but third or fourth homes.

20. Am I clubbable?

Many spa communities are private clubs, and you have to be admitted to the latter in order to buy into the former. That's the case at the Ritz-Carlton Club, Jupiter. The application process can be arduous—full financial disclosure and background checks are not unusual. Letters of recommendation from current members give you an edge. Most clubs have at least two tiers of membership, one with full golf privileges, one with limited or no golf privileges. (Both usually include spa membership.) The price difference is often substantial. At Bighorn, golf membership is US\$237,500, plus US\$17,000 annual dues, while club membership is US\$75,000, plus US\$6,250 annual dues.

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