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Texas Golfer

"Hill Country Real Estate"

By Carl Mickelson

IF YOU'VE dreamed of living on or near the golf course in the Central Texas Hill Country, the good news is there are more properties to choose from than ever before. The challenge is finding the right location for you. While many of the newest and most exciting new golf-centered communities are in upscale private category, others have value written all over them.

Whether you're looking for waterfront, hillside or good-school-adjacent neighborhoods, the Hill Country has a great variety to choose from and several great golf courses that might make your buying decision easier once you play the one that's right for you.

While daily-fee courses in most markets are suffering the effects (namely, zero growth and lagging profits) of late-90s overbuilding and present-day over-saturation, new (mostly private-club) layouts linked to high-end residential developments are flourishing and being built in prime Texas Hill Country locales formerly thought of as strictly vacation destinations.

"More than ever, people- whether they're working families, empty nesters or retirees- are looking to get away from the city and enjoy nature while enjoying the comforts of an upscale community and a quality, service-oriented club," says Mike Tomnitz, director of sales for Marble Falls' Escondido project, home of the Tom Fazio-designed Escondido Country Club. "You're seeing more communities go the extra mile with resort-style amenities, larger lots a more relaxed lifestyle and to reach a special niche of discriminating homebuyer."

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The Lakeway-Bee Cave area west of Austin is one of those scenic, recreational communities now fast becoming one of Central Texas' hottest residential centers. Once a quiet Hill Country hideaway (except for a few quiet and contented flocks of retirees and deer), Lakeway has become part Austin suburb/part self-contained small town. With a half dozen golf courses in a five-mile radius, Austin's former best-kept secret is now one of its most attractive communities for new home buyers, especially those with families. The Lake Travis School district is desirable as is the area's proximity to Lake Travis itself.

“Lakeway has gone from a quiet resort community to a suburbanized small town,” says Jerry Winnett, longtime Lakeway real estate salesman. “It still has all the beauty and natural appeal of a resort community but the cat’s out of the bag and people now realize it’s a great place to raise a family or commute from.”

Flintrock Falls, home of the second Nicklaus-designed golf course at The Hills Country Club, is a booming 371-acre gated community. Accented by natural waterfalls and rocky creeks, the Flintrock Falls course perfectly blends the legacy of the original Hills ambience with new architecture and hillier terrain. The community is also a great compliment to the original phase of the Hills. Flintrock Falls features home sites with hill country or golf course views with custom designs available from Artistry Builders as well as Callahan, Stadler, Maxwell, Jenkins and Red River Custom Homes. Prices for home sites range from the \$80s to the \$340s.

“For someone looking for all the modern conveniences of the big city, but the relaxing environment of a Hill Country getaway, Flintrock Falls is perfect,” says Winnett, adding that new area shopping, restaurants and top-rated Lake Travis ISD schools make the community all the more attractive.

Just south down RR 620 from Flintrock Falls is the only daily-fee property in the Lakeway area (technically a part of the Village of Bee Cave), Falconhead Golf Club. Surrounded by the 442-acre master-planned community, Falconhead, considered one of the top daily-fee courses in Austin, blends broad hilly fairways and a number of thrilling elevation changes with a traditional parkland appeal.

Falconhead, also located in the Lake Travis School District, features homes built by Drees Custom Homes in a custom home development called The Heights featuring 4,000 to 5,052-square-foot floorplans. Other enclaves in Falconhead include the Legends with Taylor Woodrow Homes from the \$400s and garden homes by Carter Bruce from the \$270s. With easy access to a growing number of amenities in Lakeway and Bee Cave, Falconhead has caught on big with local homebuyers.

One of Austin’s fastest-growing upscale country club communities is Spanish Oaks in Bee Cave. A spacious new European-inspired clubhouse overlooks the acclaimed 18-hole Bobby Weed design that meanders through rolling Hill Country terrain along scenic portions of Barton Creek and Little Barton Creek. As Austin has grown and Bee Cave continues to develop, Spanish Oaks’ has become a hot buy for affluent young families looking to take advantage of the private lifestyle and the strategic location where Highways 620 and 71 meet. Attesting to the quality of the golf course and the club, members include PGA Tour players Rich Beem and Joe Ogilvie.

“Our location and the fact that where just 18 minutes from downtown has been attractive to a lot of people,” says Chad Ackerley, director of sales. “People have the benefits of living in a low-density, gated community view panoramic views in every direction as well as easy access to great schools, growing infrastructure and a short commute into the heart of Austin.”

Spanish Oaks offers estate homesites from .5 acres to 4 acres, luxury villas (2,000- to 4,300-square ft.), and finished custom homes starting at \$1.5 million.

Residents enjoy 24-hour guarded security at the community entrances, six parks and the state-of-the-art Austin Tennis Academy, complete with a training and fitness center. The golf course, winner of the Golf Digest award for Best New Private Course in America, 2000, is the crown jewel of Spanish Oaks, and one of Austin's most scenic layouts and best tests of golf.

Spicewood's Lakecliff community, centered around an Arnold Palmer signature course with flawless bentgrass greens, Lakecliff is the brainchild of longtime Lake Travis developer (and original developer of what's now known as Barton Creek Lakeside) Bobby Day who calls the development, the culmination of all his learned in 30-plus years of developing golf course communities- all the amenities a golf-minded home buyer wants with all the scenery and privacy of the country's finest country club communities. Situated 35 miles from downtown, Austin, Lakecliff is very much a getaway from the city grind. With 125 homesites, Day focuses on low-density, large lots and excellent views for those looking to escape and relax. Many of those purchasing property in Lakecliff are from outside of Austin.

"Our niche is really affluent second home and retirement home buyers," says Day. "Our property values out here (near Lake Travis and the Pedernales River) have always been stable. We're attractive to homebuyers who want a lot of room and don't want to settle for are drawn out here for the views and the peaceful atmosphere."

When top course architect Tom Fazio's name is associated with a golf course in a master-planned community, you know instantly, the developers mean business. When said Fazio-designed private championship course is in a posh, new Marble Falls community on the shores of enticing Lake LBJ, you've just breathed new life into the phrase, "If you build it, they will come."

With a limited number of home sites, 394 total, Escondido is an intimate community with a heavy emphasis on preserving nature and the area's quiet, secluded ambience. Half-acre and larger golf course, lake-access and creekside home sites are available for custom homes. Also popular is the exclusive new offering of luxury courtyard villas and golf casitas.

We're calling this a 'micro-luxury' community," Tomnitz says. "With world-class chef and concierge services as well as a spa available, it's like living the resort lifestyle all the time. Combine that with a tremendous Tom Fazio-designed golf course and you see why people have taken notice of Escondido."

A consistent architectural design flow will be obvious throughout Escondido with classic elements echoing the look and traditions of Tuscany, Spain and Provence. Developers have worked closely with architects Michael Imber, Overland Partners, Ryan Street and Robert W. McKinney to give the development visual distinction.

The 7,027-yard, par-71 golf course incorporates Fazio's understated but unmistakable resort-style aesthetics with what nature gave him to work with. Spring-fed creeks, granite outcroppings and lush, rolling fairways set up a playable but memorable design.

Just a brief jet ski ride down Lake LBJ from Escondido, the venerable Horseshoe Bay Resort community offers new opportunities to enjoy lakefront living. Second-home buyers have taken a serious liking to The Waters project, a collection of one-, two- and three-bedroom town homes situated on the shores of Lake LBJ. Owning a residence at The Waters entitles you to full golf membership at Horseshoe Bay and access to its three acclaimed Robert Trent Jones designs, the Ram Rock, Apple Rock and Slick Rock courses.

“There's been a healthy resurgence in second-home purchases on Lake LBJ with this project and with the rejuvenation of Horseshoe Bay since the Horseshoe Bay Marriott opened in 2004,” says Bill Scholl, director of sales for The Waters. “We're slightly ahead of schedule on a 10-building, 325-villa project. We've sold more than 100 villas already.”

Prices range from the \$200s to the \$800s and ownership allows owners access to Horseshoe Bay's numerous resort amenities. “We're seeing a lot of buyers who are taking on these properties as second homes today, but with the probable intention of retiring here,” says Scholl.

Also, at Horseshoe Bay, the Villas at Caprock offer exquisite, modern floorplans on three-bedroom villas designed for elegant leisure living. Well appointed outdoor-living inspired back porch designs offer views of the 17th green and 18th tee of the Apple Rock course. These villas are priced in the \$500s. “This is a beautiful community with very modern, stylish designs and floor plans that are great for buyers who appreciate a low maintenance, lock and leave property as a second home or future retirement home,” says Mike Gordon, Horseshoe Bay's director of real estate sales.

Another new lakefront attraction is the Waterford Texas development on the shores of Lake Travis near Marble Falls.

Overlooking a breathtaking section of Lake Travis, Waterford offers a variety of home sites geared for either permanent or vacation living. The development borders a private ranch and a gated community and features and private front-gate security.

Waterford will be developing 340 estate home sites on the shores of Lake Travis that are adjacent to a still-being-shaped Bechtol and Russell layout that takes full advantage of the dramatic lakefront setting. The golf course plays along heavily wooded ridgelines while waterfront holes showcase miles of uninterrupted views. Waterford Texas developers are billing this community as the essence of “casual, natural, and elegant living” in a dream setting.

Just across from the Waterford Club community will be the Waterford Springs community, offering views of rolling Hill Country on 146 spacious homesites. Waterford Creekside is a garden home community with approximately 80 home sites located next door to Waterford Springs. Waterford Creekside home sites works with select builders and ownership also include membership in The Club at Waterford.

Increasingly, homebuyers are looking deeper into the Hill Country for second homes, retirement spots and idyllic settings for their dream homes. The triangle from Boerne to Fredericksburg to Kerrville used to signify exceptional siteseeing, camping, antique shopping and Rockwellian small-town life. Today these Central Texas destinations are hot markets for some incredibly high-end real estate.

“With a certain segment of homebuyers, simply putting up a golf course in the middle of a cookie-cutter neighborhood with monotonous quarter-acre lots lined up row after row won't cut it anymore,” says Chris Hill, vice president of Boerne's Cordillera Ranch Development Corporation. “People want to get back to nature and be in a place that relaxes their senses and meets the needs of their active time and their leisure time. I have residents who tell me they love feeling like their on vacation 365 days a year. It's a great thing to come home to.”

Nestled in the rich hills west of Boerne, Cordillera Ranch may be Central Texas' newest home to a Jack Nicklaus signature course (got your attention, huh?) but it's a great example of a new breed of hybrid luxury community where lifestyle dictates the design and creature comforts of the community. Not the other way around.

While this 8,600-acre community on the meandering banks of the Guadalupe and (home to rod & gun, river, equestrian, tennis, swim and social clubs plus a spa and fitness center) is a perfect second-home and retirement home spot, a surprising number of families have flocked its spacious neighborhoods. “Being just a half hour from the heart of San Antonio and offering a true back-to-nature setting at 1,500 feet of elevation makes us a clear choice for families who work in town or telecommute but want the best of both worlds,” says Hill. Top-rated Kendall County schools are another attraction for family-oriented buyers. home spot, a surprising number of families have flocked its spacious neighborhoods. “Being just a half hour from the heart of San Antonio and offering a true back-to-nature setting at 1,500 feet of elevation makes us a clear choice for families who work in town or telecommute but want the best of both worlds,” says Hill. Top-rated Kendall County schools are another attraction for family-oriented buyers.

Hill describes the golf course as classic Hill Country. Natural creeks and eye-catching water features wind through the course's rolling fairways while strategic elevation changes, canyon walls and outcroppings of limestone shape this 7,477-yard layout. “I think Mr. Nicklaus did a wonderful job working with the land in a really minimalist kind of way. All the holes are distinctive but the design fits the land,” Hill says. “The par 5s here are some of the best holes in the region.”

Home sites are available in Cordillera Ranch in parcels from one to 10 acres with riverfront, golf course, hilltop or valley views with prices ranging from \$90s to the \$450s. Riverfront lots begin at \$500. Preferred builders include Stadler, McGrath, Starnes and Authentic Custom Homes.

Winding deeper into the Hill Country, to the legendarily hilly and friendly small town of Kerrville, you'll find one of the region's most acclaimed golf communities, Comanche Trace. Home to a satisfying and challenging 18-hole Tom Kite/Bechtol-Russell design, Comanche Trace has lived up to its recent national awards

(GolfWeek's 100-Best Residential Golf Courses list, Golf Digest's Best Courses in Texas list and LINKS Magazine's Premier Properties distinction).

By nearing sell-outs in several of its initial development phases and attracting members in droves, Comanche Trace now moves into a new phase that calls for additional home sites and nine new golf holes designed by Jay and Carter Morrish to be built in the same scenic foothills as the original 18.

A wide range of homes and lots, from 2,000-square-foot golf villas to spacious single family and estate homes, are available in this distinctive community where German Tuscan and Hill Country styles and architectures blend seamlessly. Nearby infrastructure, entertainment, dining and outdoor recreation and city-quality healthcare make Kerrville, and Comanche Trace, a desirable place to call home.

"People are instantly attracted to this area and the terrific quality of life," says membership director Chad Gunier. "Our members and homeowners are our best salespeople because they're so proud of this place and the lifestyle here." You have to keep an eye on successful Tour players because they really know how to dream big. If there was any doubt 1982 PGA Championship winner and 2004 Ryder Cup captain Hal Sutton's ability to shoot for the moon, he erased it with his vision for and development of Boot Ranch. There's nothing ordinary about this 2,200-acre luxury country club community perched in the broad, rugged hills near Fredericksburg (perhaps the most charming Hill Country town in Texas).

"This is the culmination of Hal's 23 years on tour, observing the best in country club lifestyles, the best of resort life, the best of corporate entertainment at the highest level," says Gilbert Little, a longtime friend and business associate of Sutton's and a partner in Boot Ranch. In the heart of this gated "destination club", some 120 feet above the golf course and surrounding residential community, you'll find much more than a pro shop and bag drop. Sutton and his partners are constructing a luxurious 35,000-square-foot village complete with a spacious clubhouse, golf shop men's and women's locker rooms, dining facilities, a spa & fitness center and a small but beautifully-designed guest lodge.

Designed by the acclaimed Marsh and Associates (clubhouse architects of choice at upscale clubs like San Diego-area club The Bridges at Rancho Sante Fe and Georgetown's Cimarron Hills Country Club), these buildings feature detailed stone work and an elegantly organic style and grandeur that makes those romanticized Italian villages you've seen in the movies look like a strip-mall Olive Garden. Just down the hill from the clubhouse and overlooking the first hole and mammoth three-hole 34-acre practice area (yes, "thirty-four") are collection of Sunday Houses, designed exclusively for corporate entertainment of the highest caliber.

Boot Ranch is the work of visionaries and is designed for affluent golfers and outdoorsmen who haven't lost touch with their inner rugged individualist. In addition to the Sutton-designed championship golf course that plays through every type of Hill Country terrain, brilliantly showcasing the natural beauty of the area, other amenities include a golf academy, fine dining, on-site fishing, trap and skeet and local hunting excursions.

"Boot Ranch is a destination club," says Little. "Our members appreciate excellence and attention to detail. They enjoy their lifestyles and want a club and a getaway that suits their interests and comforts and lets them recharge." The show piece of the property is unquestionably the golf course with standout holes like the short par-4 10th hole that features a carry over the winding Palo Alto Creek that is accented by a breathtaking, multi-tiered waterfall. The final stretch of holes, from 15 in to 18 traverse up and down through rolling hill country and set up views that go on for days. The uncommonly inspired view from an elevated tee box spurred 1956 Masters champion and longtime Sutton mentor Jackie Burke to quip, "God used up a lot of paintbrushes on this view."

Home sites in Boot Ranch are out of the ordinary as well. We're talking all estate home lots with lot sizes ranging from 3 to 28 acres and price tags in the \$500,000 to \$1.75 million range. The panoramic views and serene hilltop setting are what set these spacious home sites apart while the luxury-resort-meets-rugged-ranchland appeal is consistent throughout the community.

"Many of our members have primary memberships somewhere else but they recognize this is something special and what we offer here, you can't find anywhere else," Little says.

You're dying to know, so I'll tell you, golf memberships at Boot Ranch go for \$175,000 with \$12,000 annual dues. To welcome you to this one-of-a-kind club, you'll be given a personal pair of Boot Ranch logo'd M.L. Leddy alligator cowboy boots. Make no mistake; for private clubs in Central Texas, the ante's just been upped. Significantly.

Georgetown's Cimarron Hills could well be credited for ushering in this recent wave of resort-style country club communities developed well-outside the Austin city limits. While it's 30 minutes north of downtown Austin, many of the homebuyers find the secluded nature of this gated community attractive- like living in a plush vacation retreat.

The club at Cimarron Hills features a stylish clubhouse, restaurant, fitness and swimming pool, all elegantly designed and luxury-resort caliber.

Cimarron Hills is home to an 18-hole Jack Nicklaus Signature course that features remarkably mature bent grass greens and well-manicured fairways. The surrounding 825-acre community offers residents an exclusive lifestyle with architecture themed in a classic yet distinctive Tuscan style that echoes throughout the planned 500-homesite community. Golf-course adjacent villas are also available.

Another community helping to expand the definition of Greater Austin is Manor's ShadowGlen. This east-of-Austin development may be the perfect-fit community for home buyers interested in affordability and a small-town feel to a master-planned community. Built adjacent to a challenging 18-hole, par-72 Roy Bechtol-Randy Russell design, ShadowGlen spreads across 1,660 acres of Central Texas plains and features a number of amenities geared toward attracting young families.

Treelined trail systems, parks and a recreation center give the neighborhood a great sense of tranquility and community, while the location, 18 miles northeast of downtown Austin in the quaint cowtown of Manor, lends to the simple, cozy feel.

With homes prices from the \$120s to the \$300s, ShadowGlen is one of the Austin area's most affordable golf course communities and features homes available through a variety of builders, such as Plantation, Newmark, Highland and Streetman Homes.

With a steady stream of accolades and members flocking to the 7,021-yard, Fred Couples-designed Twin Creeks Country Club, the residential development surrounding it continues to boom in the ever-evolving suburb of Cedar Park. Featuring some of the most eye-popping elevation changes in north Austin, Twin Creeks is one of North Austin's top real estate attractions.

Cedar Park remains one of the fastest-growing areas in Austin and the 760-acre Twin Creeks community fits in as its most affluent suburb with homes available from Standard Pacific Homes, Newmark Homes, David Weekly Homes, Ryland Homes and D.R. Horton Custom Homes.

Work will soon begin on Twin Creeks' spacious clubhouse which will compliment the club's Family Sports Center, which features an 8,000 square-foot sports clubhouse with fitness facility and two tennis courts and a water park with water slides and a Junior Olympic sized pool.

Twin Creeks PR spokesman Al Sommers says, "The Clubhouse will serve as the centerpiece of the residential, golf course and country club community, complementing the Waterpark, Family Activities Center and Fred Couples Signature golf course."

Zoned in the Leander Independent School District, homes in Twin Creeks range from the \$200s to the \$500s and up.

University of Texas Golf Club, located in the thriving Steiner Ranch development has attracted affluent homebuyers with a brilliant Bechtol-Russell design on the dramatic, rolling bluffs high above Lake Austin. The Legends is a collection of 14 half-acre and one-acre estate home sites overlooking the eighth and ninth holes and the Balcones Canyonland Preserve overlooking the course. A variety of other home sites from half-acre to larger tracts are also available near the course. The community features a private lake club, 819 acres of nature preserve and numerous recreational amenities for residents.

A number of top daily-fee courses in the Austin area with surrounding residential property include Round Rock's Teravista Golf Club and Avery Ranch Golf Club in North Austin. Perfect for homebuyers who want to live near a course, but don't want to commit to club membership, each of these layouts make perfect "home courses" in true country-club-for-a-day style.

Teravista, a Newland Community, opened in late 2002 in the heart of one of Austin's fastest-growing areas, Round Rock. In the shadows of Dell Computers' main headquarters and surrounded by new schools, shopping

centers and entertainment amenities, Teravista has become a thriving community designed for families with active lifestyles.

Teravista's recreation center includes a swimming pool with a Swim Pavilion, a fitness center, a sand volleyball court a children's Playscape Area, tennis courts and a Sport Court. Future plans call for the construction of a full-scale shopping mall and several new roads near I-35 and Chandler Road.

Homes surround but do not impede upon the golf course at Teravista and with homes available from Hammonds Homes, Mercedes Homes, Plantation Homes, Streetman Homes, ranging from the mid-\$150s to the \$400s, the dream of living in a golf course community is an accessible one.

Avery Ranch Golf Club is perched on a scenic bluff in north Austin and many of the home sites in the 1,800-acre community share the Hill Country vistas as well as views of the 60-acre lake that is in view from Avery Ranch's well-appointed clubhouse.

Strategically situated near RR 620 equidistant from the rapidly expanding Hwy. 183 and I-35, Avery Ranch attracts homebuyers interested in a peaceful, suburban lifestyle with easy access to Round Rock and north Austin.

"Real estate sales have been amazing," says head golf professional Brent Brown. "People love the location and the fact that we still have an isolated, private-community feel here, but we're so close to so much in North Austin and Round Rock." Avery Ranch works closely with Hammonds, Drees, Ryland, Morrison and Wilshire Homes and features home sites in a variety of price ranges.

Each of these exceptional communities is attracting Texans and soon-to-be Texans to the Hill Country for exquisite golf (a given in this scenic, beloved setting) but also for the promise of a lifestyle designed to mimic fit your family's lifestyle.

Never before have so many options for luxury Hill Country living been available at one time. And not without good reason; according to the National Association of Realtors (NAR), 2004 saw a record 2.8 million second-home purchases across the U.S. With so many affluent Americans at or near retirement age or simply able to spot a good investment when they see one, this trend toward luxury communities could bring a few more high-caliber golf courses to the region in.

"Developers have learned what people want out of a community," Hill says. "More and more, people are going to prefer to live away from the city if they can. The Hill Country has a lot to offer a really broad range of homebuyers who appreciate natural beauty and a peaceful, better quality of life."