

Second homes: Tucson is the right size at the right price

By Larry Olmsted, Special for USA TODAY

Tucson is Arizona's worst-kept second-home secret. Its population is less than a quarter of the Scottsdale/Phoenix metropolitan area, just two hours away, but to many, that's Tucson's appeal.

"Tucson is a larger version of Santa Fe, while Scottsdale is a smaller version of L.A.," Realtor Russell Long of Long Realty says. "We appeal to the well-educated, the artsy, golfers, and the athletic outdoorsy types." Home to the University of Arizona, Tucson is a college town, which offers buyers — many of whom come from the New York and Chicago areas — a dose of culture.

Tucson sits at a high elevation, and though summer is hot, the moderate season is longer than in other desert destinations. The Upper Sonoran desert is much greener and less barren, which fosters an active outdoor community and puts Tucson among the nation's best for road and mountain biking as well as hiking. The city is ringed by five mountain ranges and vast swaths of protected land, including Coronado National Forest.

"The desert is thick and lush, and skiing is just 45 minutes away," Long says. Less than 75 miles from the Mexican border, Tucson is also Southwestern in its food, art and culture, and its atmosphere appeals to many buyers from the East.

Most buyers choose resort communities in the mountain foothills north of the city center, which feature elevated views. "The foothills are most popular," Long says. "There are very nice new condos, villas and townhomes from \$350,000 to \$600,000." Typical for Tucson are large planned communities with developments at varied price points, along with golf courses and a resort hotel offering owners spa services and dining.

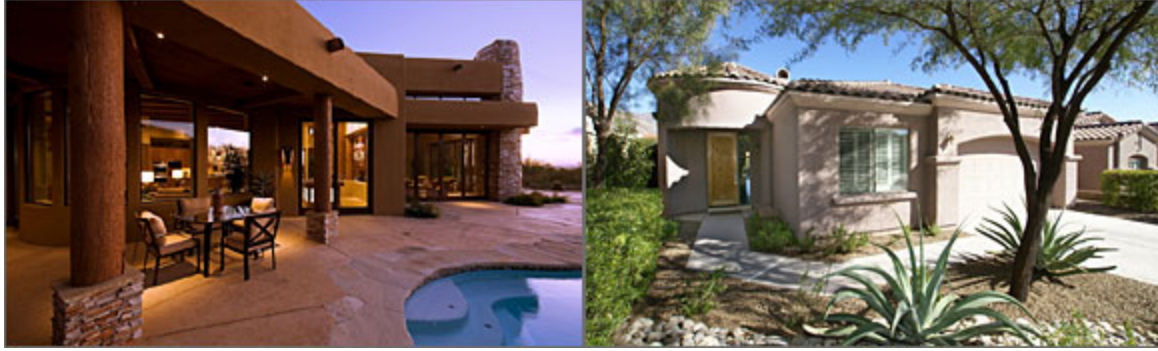
Buyers are divided about equally between those who split their year with a colder locale and those who come for weeks or weekends. Both will appreciate that median home prices have dropped 16% since last July.

A look at three Tucson neighborhoods

Ventana Canyon: A 1,100-acre community in the foothills just north of the city, Ventana Canyon contains nearly 700 houses, three condo complexes, two golf courses, a tennis center, sports and dining facilities, and two hotels, the Lodge and the upscale Loews Ventana Canyon. "Buyers are usually golfers, but it abuts the National Forest, and once you go through the gates, you can bike, run and hike without ever going onto public streets," says Realtor Janell Jellison of Long Realty. "You can get a nice two-bedroom golf villa from under \$500,000 and custom homes from \$1 million" (ventanacanyonaz.com).

La Paloma: One of Tucson's first second-home communities, La Paloma is close to Ventana Canyon and spans 790 acres with a 27-hole golf course and Westin hotel. The array of homes is very similar to Ventana Canyon. The turnkey golf villas are most popular with part-timers, Jellison says, but because there are fewer offerings, the prices are slightly lower, with villas from about \$475,000.

Dove Mountain: Tucson's hottest second-home enclave, this 6,200-acre development northwest of the city has 3,500 houses and condos. The most affordable section has townhouses and houses from \$300,000 to \$1 million. The Gallery is one of the nation's top golf communities, with two standout private courses and a limited number of golf cottages from \$795,000 and houses at more than \$1 million. Canyon Pass features houses on large sites from \$1.7 million. The newest phase is The Residences at The Ritz-Carlton, a new luxury hotel with two golf courses opening in December (dovemountain.com).



The Residences at The Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain

Courtesy of Ray Allbright

ON THE MARKET

High price: \$2,560,000

The Castillo is one of three pre-designed house models available in the new Ritz-Carlton residential community in Dove Mountain. The first 25 buyers get a \$175,000 discount, \$75,000 in upgrades and a free golf membership (\$125,000).

Bedrooms: 4

Bathrooms: 4 1/2

Size: 4,836 square feet

Features: Master bedroom suite with walk-in closets, oversized tub, private patio and fitness room, plus a great room with panoramic windows and fireplace, a wet bar, gourmet kitchen, den/billiards room, three en-suite bedrooms, laundry room, three-car garage, outdoor living area with kitchen, pool and whirlpool.

Midrange price: \$579,000

This 6-year-old patio house in the La Paloma golf resort community is designed for part-time use and easy maintenance, with golf course and mountain views.

Bedrooms: 3

Bathrooms: 2

Size: 2,275 square feet

Features: Marble tile and granite counters, living room with fireplace and built-in entertainment center, large deck and landscaping, two-car garage. Community includes 27-hole golf course, pool, hot tub, spa and clubhouse, plus Westin hotel resort amenities.