

Living the Good Life in Retirement

Thanks to a growing number of options, deciding where to spend your retirement can be a challenge—albeit an enjoyable one. Here, what you need to know to make a choice that suits your lifestyle.



ALMOST FIVE YEARS AGO, Peg and Jim Lynn sold their family home in Alabama and moved to a place with amenities that rival those at a four-star resort: a beautiful indoor heated pool, gourmet food, access to a full-time concierge, cocktail hours—the works. Only this “resort” is actually the Lodge at Balfour in Louisville, a retirement community that serves as a prime example of how living options for seniors are changing.

“My daughter-in-law calls this place the cruise ship that never leaves the dock,” Peg says. “She’s right. This weekend I’m going to see the simulcast of the Metropolitan Opera. I had my first hot-air balloon ride, courtesy of Balfour. We have performers come and discussions about current events and classes for just about anything you could want to do. I love it here.”

The Lynns represent a growing number of seniors who are eager to invest in retirement options that don’t look anything like old folks’ homes. With 78 million Baby Boomers heading toward retirement—about 8,000 of them turn 60 every day—developers and investors see a prime opportunity in this marketplace, even during a slow economy.

“If you look at all of the industries in the world, this industry is more recession-resilient than almost any other,” says Michael Hargrave, vice president of NIC MAP, the data-analysis group for the non-profit National Investment Center for the Seniors Housing & Care Industry (NIC). “Compared to other real estate markets and hotels, for example, seniors’ housing is very strong.”

Colorado—Denver, in particular—is booming, Hargrave adds. “I’m not sure what drives growth in certain areas, but developers in this sector tend to target progressive markets that are open to new ideas and that have attractive demographic growth rates.” In short, our growing population of retirees is ready for something new.

That’s just what Balfour founder Michael Schonbrun hoped to deliver when he started the community from scratch about 12 years ago. “The concept was to create what did not exist here in senior living—namely, the Four Seasons kind of experience for seniors,” he says. The most recent addition, an 87-unit independent living community called The Residences▷

By **HILARY MASELL OSWALD**



(above, left) In the waiting room at the spa at Balfour in Louisville, the Kelly Wearstler-designed wallpaper suggests this isn't your typical retirement home.

(above, right) Notice the luxurious "throne" for hydrotherapy that sits above the indoor pool to the left.

(right) The design team at Edwards-based Slifer Designs chose the high-back tufted benches and ottoman from Pacific Design Furniture; pieces are covered in leather from Moore & Giles. The wallcovering is Kelly Wearstler's Imperial Trellis.





In the dining room, designers mixed prints in soft greens and coral pinks. The tables and chairs come from Stanford Furniture; draperies are from Carlton V Creations.

KIMBERLY GAVIN

Capital Markets Group in Chicago. The draw is obvious: lifelong learners can audit classes, attend sporting and cultural events, and relish the vibrancy of college life.

The Academy in Boulder offers just this kind of experience to its residents. The small community—only about 68 people live there—is not far from the University of Colorado campus, where residents audit classes. College students and professors regularly visit The Academy to give performances and lectures. “We really invite [the college] community into our community,” says Gina DiVincenzo, director of marketing at The Academy. “It suits our residents’ lifestyles.”

So what does all of this good living cost? That depends. CCRCs typically charge entrance fees that range from \$200,000 to \$800,000, which is generally refunded at about 90 percent when residents die. (Erickson Retirement Communities, which manages Wind Crest in Highlands Ranch, ups the ante and refunds 100 percent of the entrance fee). If a resident decides to leave, the refund is often less. CCRCs also charge a monthly service fee of several thousand dollars that covers most meals, access to clubs and on-site events, building maintenance and other services.

MAKING THE RIGHT DECISION

Before you even think of moving into a retirement community, talk to a financial advisor about what you can afford. If you don’t already have an advisor, you can find one at napfa.org.

Where should you begin? Try snapforseniors.com, where you can search for communities based on type and zip code or city and state.

Visit, visit, visit. Elinor Ginzler, the AARP’s vice president for livable communities, suggests that you bring along adult children or other family members to help you evaluate different places. And be sure to visit several of each type of option, so you can compare proverbial apples to apples.

During your visits, don’t just talk to the marketing director. Chat with residents, staff and visitors. What do they like? What would they change? (Ginzler says not to be surprised if food is always on the list of things residents would change. “It’s such a personal preference that someone is always unhappy about the food,” she adds.)

Ask about staff turnover, Ginzler suggests. “It’s an indicator of quality if people have stayed a long time in their jobs,” she says. If you’re choosing a CCRC, an assisted living facility or a facility with nursing care, this question is especially important.

Once you find a few living options you like, contact Colorado’s long-term care ombudsman at (800) 288-1376, ext. 217. The ombudsman is a state-employed consumer advocate who can give you information on any complaints filed against the communities you’re considering. And communities that serve Medicaid or Medicare patients have to be inspected annually. Ask about the results of those inspections.

Before you commit to a place, ask about year-over-year rate hikes. Big jumps might indicate money-management problems.

When you finally choose a community, take the time to read the contract—which will be lengthy. “Don’t rush the process,” Ginzler says. “Take each step carefully, and you’ll be much happier where you land.”

is perhaps the group’s finest example of luxury retirement living. The common areas are decorated in the bright, bold styles of Carlton Varney and Kelly Wearstler; the spa includes steam rooms, a yoga studio and dedicated massage rooms; and the apartments sport high-end finishes such as slab granite countertops and wood flooring.

Beyond the look and feel of luxury, Balfour offers another amenity that appeals to many retirees: health care for life. Each of its separate facilities—independent living, assisted living, skilled nursing and memory care—offers a different level of care, so if residents need greater medical help, they don’t have to look for a new place to live.

This type of community, called a continuing-care retirement community (or CCRC) is among the fastest-growing retirement living options in the country. “It gives people our age great peace of mind,” Peg Lynn says. When her husband Jim got sick, she didn’t have to worry about moving him or traveling to visit him at another facility; he was right across the street. “When he died [about a year ago], I was so thankful to live among people who knew him and could reminisce with me,” she says.

The type of community seniors choose depends on a host of factors: their health, their finances and lifestyle, and the facility’s location. But as the over-60 population swells, developers are also responding to demand for niche communities that cater to residents’ specific interests, values and attitudes. Religion-centered developments have popped up across the country, as have communities for eco-conscious retirees and service-minded seniors.

Communities close to—or smack-dab in the middle of—college campuses are also popular. There are more than 50 such CCRCs across the country, a 30-percent increase over the last decade, according to Ziegler

Balfour is an unusual model for a CCRC. Each resident pays a one-time, non-refundable \$5,000 community fee and a monthly rental fee that ranges from \$3,500 to \$6,700, depending on the size of the apartment. The fee covers breakfast every day plus 240 meals a year, all utilities, basic cable, all on-site entertainment and educational programs, and transportation.

At most CCRCs, monthly fees depend on the amount of care needed. Independent living tends to be less expensive than assisted living or skilled nursing care. And few facilities offer an opportunity to buy deeded property; in the vast majority of continuing-care communities, residents don't actually own their homes.

The Academy is one exception. Residents purchase their bungalows the way they would any piece of residential real estate. "You realize 100 percent of the appreciation," DiVincenzo explains. "We don't take anything. When you're ready to sell your place—or if you inherit a bungalow from your grandfather, for example—we help you sell or rent it [to new residents]. It could even be income-generating, rental property."



At The Academy in Boulder, residents can choose to rent apartments or purchase bungalows. The option to buy sets the community apart, as most facilities don't offer deeded ownership.

Then the question becomes: if you or your parent finds a community that marries amenities you want with a fee structure you can afford, is now the time to move? Because they aren't traditional investments, retirement communities don't behave like typical residential real estate, so the market isn't as soft as it is elsewhere. Unless you choose a place like The Academy, the real estate market shouldn't dictate move-in price.

There is one benefit of shopping for a retirement community during an economic slowdown: availability. Many places have wait lists, but because most potential clients have to sell their homes before they can move, the wait times are shorter now than they've been in recent years.

Ultimately, making the choice to move—or to help aging parents move—is about finding the right mix of timing, finances and lifestyle. Certainly the growing over-60 population will continue to drive demand for high-quality retirement communities across the spectrum of care. "In general, the options for seniors who want to live in an age-restricted place are good and getting better," says the NIC's Hargrave. "This market isn't going anywhere." □