

Retirement Living

Picture it – swimming pool framed by manicured lawn, tennis court sporting a smiling foursome, spacious bedrooms and en suite-bathrooms, lush fairways, evening entertainment, healthcare facilities, spa, Wi-Fi, and well-trained staff to respond to your needs. Don't get confused: this isn't the brochure for a Caribbean holiday resort; it's the one for the luxury retirement complex.

Frankly, why shouldn't retirement feel like a holiday? It's no longer purely medical reasons or the challenge of living independently that motivates older people to replace their homes with retirement village accommodation. Nor is it always something that children (in the throws of mid-life crises) 'do' to their parents. In fact, many of the modern facilities are well situated for local amenities and aimed at anyone over the age of 50, working or not. So it frequently becomes a lifestyle choice – a vote for the security of knowing that if help is required, it is available. Even though not all retirement villages or complexes include frail-care, there is generally nursing help or a clinic on the premises. Even the able-bodied sometimes benefit from easy access to frail-care: after an operation, for example, or when one spouse needs it but the other doesn't.

Janice, who moved to a golf estate retirement village at 50, says that if they'd let her in earlier, she would have been there. She's a sociable, single, career girl who loves her holidays. The secure lock-up-and-go environment suits her perfectly, and she knows there's someone to care for her (when she needs it). She says that she regularly chooses to be alone, but never feels lonely.

Earlier retirement and a longer lifespan mean that prudent planning for that second phase is required. Most of us will spend a few decades in our retirement housing and want to see value for money or a return on investment that could finance frail care if needed. Furthermore, the shortage on the market means long waiting lists – some of 20 years or longer – for established developments. This encourages people to register younger and to look beyond their own areas at new developments. That way they can buy off plan and have time to sell their current homes.

There are many players in this industry, from developers to decorators, but there is no one more interested than the buyer. The list of benefits people expect from retirement villages includes a general sense of security, companionship, reduced responsibilities, home comforts, proximity to amenities, friends and family and a way to age with dignity.

Yvonne, an active 73-year-old, loves walking freely at night in the secure, gated environment she moved to recently. She particularly enjoys the recreational activities, even though her children tease her about taking up snooker.

Yvonne wasn't the only retiree who commented on safety at night. Many village residents spoken to believe that crime has helped fuel the demand for retirement housing. According to James Wilson, CEO of Amdec Property Development, retirees want a quality lifestyle that meets the same standard they enjoyed prior to retirement, but scaled down. They want to be close to their friends, families and established support networks.

In fact, most of the retirement village residents interviewed had made their choice based on proximity to their regular 'beat'. Pat Lindgren of Action on Elder Abuse SA believes that: 'For the residents to be happy they need to ensure that the complex they are buying into is secure and meets their particular needs. It is a good idea to move into a complex near to where you were living, if at all possible, so that there is not a radical change.' Carl Scheppening, director of Cape Retirement Consultants, says that, traditionally, the main reasons for investments in retirement villages have been death of a spouse, deterioration in health, a bad security experience and difficulty maintaining one's current home. The average age of first time purchasers is about 72.

Purchase prices currently range from under R500 000 to over R5-million, while monthly levies, which cover different facilities in each development, can be from under R1 000 to over R4 000. Frail care costs vary and can be up to about R12 500 a month. Then, on resale, the amount that returns to your estate could be anything from the original purchase price to 75 per cent of the full value of the sale, depending on your contract.

But when it comes to making a decision, you need to know what you are paying for. We may think we know what we want or need, but in many cases developers are offering us so much more than we ever expected – more than

The downside when choosing a retirement option is that facilities, costs and contracts are so finely tailored by each development that it becomes almost impossible to make useful comparisons. The repeated advice given by residents, developers and owners is to read the contracts, ask questions, inspect the facilities, talk to staff and residents, and check up on track records, waiting lists for frail care, levy increases and special levies – anything that will help you make your selection and avoid pitfalls. Anne Boag, of Fairbridges Attorneys, urges purchasers to seek legal advice if they are not sure of the implications of the agreement and before they sign any documents.

After you've done all this homework, you'll deserve a rest! Who was it that said she could finally relax now that all her children had moved into retirement homes?

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