

EMERGING MARKETS

They're no California or Florida—yet—but these locales hold the potential to be enclaves of luxury.

BY CAMILLA McLAUGHLIN

“THE WORLD IS YOUR OYSTER.” Nothing could better describe luxury real estate in 2008 than this phrase lifted from Shakespeare’s “The Merry Wives of Windsor.”

Today, almost no locale is too remote, too small, or too humble to become a springboard for upscale living, and the term “luxury” is being aptly affixed to properties in an array of seemingly unlikely locations from Vietnam to Venice Beach, Calif.

In the last 10 years, as the number of millionaires and billionaires has almost doubled, expectations regarding what comprises an affluent lifestyle have seen an equally dramatic shift. Today, “it’s not about having luxury trappings; it’s about what can I do that is unique and different and that I will enjoy,” says Paul Boomsma, president of Luxury Portfolio.

THE UNITED STATES

Mountain panoramas now rival water views as a “must have” for many, as does an authentic lifestyle. Locations such as the southwestern tip of **North Carolina** capture as much interest as Florida, even California, with Maggie’s Valley, Highlands and Cashiers becoming as preferred as nearby Asheville, a perennial on our annual Markets to Watch.

Across the border, eastern **Tennessee** is gaining a reputation as a wonderful place to retire or own a second home. Situated in the lap of the Great Smokey Mountains and studded with beautiful lakes, the region offers a laid-back country lifestyle close to good medical facilities and Knoxville. Add to that excellent home prices, no income tax and new developments that cater to diverse passions from equestrian to hiking. Lakes such as Tellico connect to inland waterways making water travel to the Great



PHOTO COURTESY GENERAL HOTEL MANAGEMENT

Lakes and to Florida possible. “You can do all sorts of hiking and still have your yacht on Tellico Lake,” says Donna McCullough-Mitchell, a broker with East Tennessee Luxury Properties.

Not traditionally a luxury locale, **Oxford, Miss.** is a southern sleeper that exemplifies the back-to-campus trend. Here the “livin,” and the cost of living, is easy. Old Miss is a big draw for retiring alums and the university brings newcomers from around the world. The largest home in Mississippi is on the market at \$4.9 million.

No part of the U.S. is growing as fast as the West, where

Resting on a tranquil stretch of private Vietnam beachfront estate with ocean views of the Cham Islands, the villas at The Nam Hai are elegant, luxurious, spacious yet modern. At press time, 32 of the 40 villas had already sold.

continued on page 54

EMERGING MARKETS

continued from page 50

a few of luxury's newest stars can be found off the beaten path. Buyers answering the siren call of the West's wide open spaces are drawn to **South Dakota's Black Hills** as a less-pricey alternative to Colorado and Wyoming. Once there, they are surprised by a climate similar to Denver's—60-degree winter days are not uncommon—and an excellent quality of life. It's "no longer a well-kept secret," says Stephanie Lien with VIP Properties in Rapid City. New developments such as those of Red Canyon Company, which preserve 80 to 90 percent of the land as wilderness, echo consumers' reverence for the environment, and beckon buyers from as far as London.

Long a regional favorite, **McCall, Idaho's** relaxed artsy ambiance evokes comparisons to Telluride before the luxury explosion. Bringing more upscale visitors will be the Fairmont Tamarack being developed by Andre Agassi and Steffie Graf.

On the cusp of discovery is **Pagosa Springs, Colo.**, nestled in the San Juan Mountains. Even Oprah stopped here to test the



In Idaho, Fairmont Tamarack's village location, "Belvedere Ridge" will feature approximately 285 units (hotel, condo and penthouse residences), with scenic lake, mountain and golf-course views.

hot springs, some of the world's largest, according to locals. Rolling hills, lakes and the San Juan River translate into prime home sites and spectacular views. The area's natural attributes charm potential developers but town officials are keeping tabs to ensure that growth doesn't go through the roof. Another draw: the most snow in Colorado, which makes the nearby ski hill, Wolf Creek, very popular.

A wave of new development is turning the **Texas** coast, from Galveston to Padre Island, into a second-home mecca. Right now, prices for land or homes in communities such as Cinnamon Shores in Port Aransas and Evia on Galveston

Island are a fraction of those of the neighbors across the Gulf of Mexico.

MEXICO

Directly south of the U.S. border, flying under the radar is **Valle de Bravo**, a quaint lakefront village with a distinct European feel less than 50 miles west of Mexico City. "It is very high-end and Mexicans know it and have been going there for years," says Sumar Salameh, founder of Livtopia, an American company that helps match buyers with international locations and shepherds them through the legal process.

CENTRAL AMERICA

Once an incubator for radical politics, Central America today is a hotbed for real estate development. Although Costa Rica, Panama and the Dominican Republic garner the most attention, the pulse of development is beginning to beat elsewhere. In **Belize**, long considered a haven for divers, Leonardo DiCaprio and the Four Seasons are reportedly planning a green hotel on DiCaprio's island, Blackadore Caye. In the offing minutes from Belize City is Smugglers Run Planatation, which will include almost a thousand residential offerings, hotels, an equestrian center, retail spaces and a championship golf course. Also on the drawing board along the

Placencia Peninsula is Ara Macaco Resort and Marina and the Cocoplum Resort, which is currently under construction. A two-bedroom, two-bath condo at the Villas at Cocoplum ranges from \$425,000 to \$575,000.

Elsewhere, multinational investors are eyeing **Nicaragua**, according to Raul Calvet, president of Calvet & Associates, a firm specializing in investment strategies in Central America. Calvet attributes the turnaround in Nicaragua's image to more than 20 years of democracy, having one of the region's most dynamic economies and being rated the safest country in the entire region. Among those involved with upcoming projects is Jack Nicklaus, who is designing a signature course as part of a new resort, Seaside Mariana, on the Pacific coast, which will include a mix of residential offerings, a spa, retail space, and medical facility.



This swath of Pacific Ocean coastline in Nicaragua will host Seaside Mariana. The 923 gated acres will feature luxuriously designed homes, estates, condos, and villas, as well as a Jack Nicklaus signature golf course.

ASIA

In Asia, Phuket is **THAILAND'S** luxury mecca. Adding to the cachet of a number of new developments is quality infrastructure, excellent hospitals and international schools. Prices are significantly lower than the Caribbean and the Mediterranean and the quality of construction and architecture is much higher, according to Tom Travers of Indigo Real Estate. Then, he adds, there's the wonderful Thai people, and, naturally, Thai food!

Asia's newest luxury destination is **Vietnam**. The Nam Hai resort is located on China Beach, considered one of the world's most luxurious. Buyers from Singapore and Hong Kong already have snapped up 32 of the 40 \$1.5 million-plus beachfront villas. Over the next 12 to 24 months, many new projects are expected to come onto the market. Travers reports, "Most will be branded five-star hotels with mixed-use residential components."

AFRICA

Tourism is a precursor of residential development and today's vacation hot spot is likely to become tomorrow's second-, third- or fourth-home destination. In Africa, tourism is booming and **Marrakech, Morocco** is the epicenter. Here, upscale properties range from a small hotel, especially suitable as a private palace, for \$44 million to a \$483,000 golf villa. Elsewhere, in **South Africa**, opportunities include the potential of owning a lodge at a private game preserve at Silonque or a private island in the Garden Route.

Also on the horizon: more luxury in both Buenos Aries and Patagonia, and possibly in the Maldives and the Seychelles. **UHI**

The following also contributed to this article:

Kelly Johnson, Galles Properties, Pagosa Springs, Colo. Jim Farmer, Red Canyon Company, Black Hills, S.D. Betty Appleton, ERA Advantage Real Estate, Oxford, Miss.