

The rising cost of real estate hasn't kept snowbirds from making their annual trek south

by Bend Weekly News Sources

More than 50,000 snowbirds will spend the winter of 2007 in park model vacation cottages, with most residing in Florida, Texas and Arizona.

When Dean Sarbaugh and his wife, Tacy, got the idea of leaving their native Ohio and spending the winter in Florida, they bought a brand new fifth wheel travel trailer.

But after trying out several RV parks in central Florida, they wound up buying a 400-square foot recreational park trailer or "park model," which they've placed on a leased site at the Travelers Rest Resort in Dade City.

"Now I have a brand new fifth wheel for sale," Sarbaugh said with a smile. "We had no idea we were going to do this. But the idea of purchasing a roomy, cottage-like park model, fully equipped with full size kitchen appliances, made a lot of sense."

So did the price. Park models average just under \$40,000 and they can be placed on leased campsites for about \$1,500 to \$7,000 per year, depending on location. Some park model owners also purchase their campsites, which ensures that they always have a place to park their unit.

The Sarbaugh's Breckenridge park model cost only half as much as the fifth wheel they had purchased, and it provides more space and more amenities, including bay windows, built in bookshelves and a fireplace. And since the unit is attached to utilities, the Sarbaughs don't have holding tanks to worry about, either. "We think this is a better option for us," Sarbaugh said. "We can come down here every year and I won't have to tow it back and forth."

Snowbirds in other states have gotten the same idea, including Roger and Chris Sefton of northern Wisconsin, who traded in their fifth wheel for a Forest River park model, which they've placed at the Llano Grande Lake Park & Country Club in Mercedes, Texas.

"For the two of us it's perfect," said Roger Sefton, 64, a retired customer service rep for a copy machine sales and service firm. "It's nice being in a place with room."

Other recent park model converts include Tom and Judy Martin of Washington, who spent four years full-timing in their fifth wheel before settling down into a Cavco park model at Rincon Country West, an upscale resort in Tucson, Ariz.

"We had the park model built specially to meet our needs," explained Judy, who owned two travel agencies in Spokane. "We entertain a lot so we wanted a dining area for a bigger table and a bigger kitchen. We had an Arizona room built to our specific needs. My husband loves his computers and I sew. He has one end of the Arizona room and I have the other end. In the middle is the family room. We don't have a lot of room but it works for us."

Adds Judy, "I love the coziness of it. When friends come down from the North to visit, they say it looks like a little playhouse. I love the size; it's not much to clean. That's important to women, especially when you're retired."

Many part-time park model dwellers, meanwhile, are hanging on to their towable and motorized RVs and plan to continue their travels this summer, including Don and Dee Dammann, who purchased a park model at the upscale Sun 'n Fun Resort in Sarasota, Fla., four years ago. The Dammanns plan to stay in their park model until summer, when they'll head north to the Carolinas and beyond in their Class C motorhome.

Drawbacks? "There aren't for us. It's wonderful for our age," Dee Dammann said, adding that she and her husband hope to eventually purchase a second park model in the Smoky Mountains for use during the summer months.

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