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## In Texas Hill Country, a Land Rush for the Rich

A new wave of settlers has arrived in remote central Texas: affluent buyers seeking luxury getaways on hundreds of acres.



Located in central Texas, Hill Country's latest wave of settlers are purchasing ranches as luxury weekend homes to take advantage of the countryside and sweeping views. PHOTO: AMY MIKLER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By ALINA DIZIK  
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180 COMMENTS

**Dallas residents** Pat and Cindy Fox wanted a rural retreat with easy urban access. They chose to build in Dripping Springs, a small Texas town that calls itself “the Wedding Capital of Texas.” Here they paid \$1 million for 100 acres of land and built a \$3 million, modern country home on it.

“You can hear the wind and the birds, and see the stars, but in 30 minutes you can have dinner” in Austin, said Mr. Fox, a 58-year-old a real-estate investor who commutes from Dallas and plans to retire on the property.

The Foxes, who built their home in 2010, are among the Texas Hill Country's latest wave of settlers, affluent buyers from large metro areas seeking getaways in the countryside. Located in central Texas near Austin and San Antonio, the Hill Country covers about 17 counties across 11 million acres of terrain noted for gnarly live oaks, spring-fed streams and rocky hills.

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The area's first nonnative settlers were Spanish missionaries and mountaineers, followed by German immigrants as well as pioneers from states like Tennessee and Arkansas. Agriculture was the main industry at first, but soon lone trading posts expanded into small towns that attracted even more pioneer families to the area.

Today's settlers are reshaping the landscape in their own way, building modern getaways with little interest in herding cattle or growing crops. These newcomers are attracted to the remote, rural lifestyle within distance of cosmopolitan cities. Retirees from across the U.S. often relocate here for an active lifestyle and low cost of living relative to many other states. And while there's still a strong cowboy vibe, there are plenty of cultural offerings and [some creative fare for foodies](#).

In the past three to four years, “we’re seeing an increase in absentee landowners,” said Katherine Romans, interim executive director of the Hill Country Alliance, a natural resource and economic organization. Many of them are buying vast swaths of land and leaving much of it undeveloped as conservation easements. The purchases ensure the area's rugged rural feel, while entitling the landowners to property-tax breaks.

With few luxury homes for sale, buyers typically look to add on to existing property or build new ranches, says Tim Riley, a land broker in Austin who covers Central Texas. Dry land lists for as low as \$4,000 per acre, he said. Properties with running water, such as a lake or swimmable creek, can cost as much as \$50,000 per acre, he added. Homesites within an hour or two of Austin or San Antonio also have premium prices.

Land values around towns like Dripping Springs and Boerne, as well as smaller communities around Lake Travis have grown by 2% to 3% in the past few years, he estimates. Clients are typically looking to build 100-plus acre “recreational ranches” mainly for hunting, fishing and horseback riding, with plans to hand down the properties to children or grandchildren, he says. In Fredericksburg, a town settled by German immigrants in the mid-1800s, properties spent 122 days on the market in March, down from 194 days two years ago, according to the Texas Association of Realtors.

After a yearlong search, Amy and John Miller built a 3,000-square-foot ranch-style home on 2,700 acres that overlooks a spring-fed creek in Vanderpool. The couple paid \$9 million for the land in 2008 and \$3 million to build the home in 2012. The home's kitchen and living area have sliding panel walls that open up to the outdoors. “You are hearing nature even though you are in the house,” said Ms. Miller, a 48-year-old stay-at-home mom. Mr. Miller, 57, is a geophysicist.

The master wing is connected via a glass hallway, while additional bedrooms are in a separate structure. Their twin daughters must walk outside to get from their rooms to the main house, something that was difficult when they were younger, but is fine now that they're 17. “Long term, we knew it was good design,” said Ms. Miller of the home designed by Lake Flato architects.

Those who buy land to build on can expect to spend \$100,000 to \$150,000 in improvements to prepare a septic system, roads, water wells and electrical hookups for the home, says Paul Sumrall, a custom home builder based in Johnson City, Texas. Construction is another hurdle, because getting to more remote properties can be difficult. “You're paying a premium to build out there,” said Mr. Sumrall, who estimates construction costs at \$150 to \$450 per square foot in the Hill Country.

### Modern Ranches in the Texas Hill Country »

Inside some of the newer homes in an area of Texas known for ranching and farming. Now, many affluent homeowners are building weekend getaways in rural towns.



1 of 21 The pool area of Scott and Diane Clark's Texas Hill Country home near Uvalde. The modern ranch was designed by Lake Flato Architects with limestone and has oversized windows to maximize the views. AMY MIKLER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

This spring, some Hill Country areas have had record-setting floods, cutting off accessibility to roads. Rural areas tend to have poor flood-mapping records, so builders increasingly rely on engineers to predict flood-stage water levels, Mr. Sumrall said. The area is also having more frequent droughts, which may lower property values if buyers purchase land during years when nearby rivers and streams are dry, he added.

In the past five years, homeowners have embraced architecture that combines modern elements—walls of glass, industrial railings and angled rooflines—with local materials, such as weathered wood, metal roofs and Austin White Limestone, says Alex Landry, an Austin real-estate agent who owns a second home in Spicewood near the Pedernales River. “That ‘Hill Country modern’ aesthetic has gone gangbusters,” says Ms. Landry.

Scott and Diane Clark owned a hunting lodge on 500 acres near the Hill Country town of Uvalde, where the extended family would gather for long vacations and Thanksgiving. In 2012, the Clarks built a modern ranch on the property, purchased in 1980 for “hundreds of dollars per acre,” said Mr. Clark, 60 years old and a retired financial executive from New York. The Clarks' new home is LEED certified, meaning it meets green-building standards. Features include an outdoor pool area and large, energy-efficient windows that capture Hill Country views. Mr. Clark declined to give construction costs for the Lake Flato-designed home, but the architects said comparable projects start at \$1.8 million. The couple kept the original cabin. “It's a time capsule,” he said.

Modern ranching hasn't completely crowded out country charm. Gloria Frame is listing her Hill Country home in Spicewood for \$1.8 million. Ms. Frame, an 84-year-old interior designer, built the home in 1999 using 100-year-old logs from three disassembled cabins in Tennessee and Kentucky. She paid \$150,000 for 5 acres near a horse farm and another \$800,000 on the house, designed by Austin-based Chas Architects.

“The old wood has a warmth and dignity,” said Ms. Frame. Hallways between the three reconstructed cabins connect to an open kitchen, a living area and a master wing with a loft guest room. There's a separate guest bedroom over the garage. Ms. Frame is selling because she now finds it too difficult to maintain the 3,000-square-foot home.

Some developers offer a low-maintenance approach to Hill Country living. Last year, Craig Martin, a partner at Dallas-based developer Terra Verde Group, purchased Boot Ranch in Fredericksburg. The 2,050-acre property includes a golf course that was partially developed in 2006 but fell into foreclosure. The developer hopes to sell 360 properties over the next seven years. So far, 85 lots have been sold, with 25 homes completed and 16 under construction. Homes cost between \$1 million and \$10 million. In addition to golf, Boot Ranch homeowners have an on-site restaurant and a fitness area with a spa, which are included in the price of the property ownership. Nonresident memberships start at \$100,000 and have sold out. The property managers maintain the grounds and facilities, one less burden for homeowners.

San Antonio residents, Bill and Mary Anne Waldrip, who moved into Boot Ranch's “Overlook Cabin” style home last May, said the process was simple. Rather than hiring an architect, they modified a design suggested by the developer to build the 3,800-square-foot home. The family declined to give costs, but similar homes in the development sell for \$2 million.

In addition to the main home, the family built two guest cabins on their 1.4-acre property for visiting grandchildren and business associates. They also have access to 10 guest lodges built by the developers for homeowners' use, says Mr. Waldrip, a 61-year-old private-equity firm founder who commutes weekly from San Antonio.

The Waldrips' home, modeled after cabins built by Fredericksburg's early German settlers, includes an outdoor kitchen and bar area for entertaining. The couple plans to pass down the property to their three adult children. “If you use it, it's really money well spent,” he said.

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### Corrections & Amplifications:

The architect firm Lake Flato says its projects comparable to the home of Scott and Diane Clark near Uvalde, Texas, start at \$1.8 million. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Lake Flato's projects typically range from \$780,000 to \$1.8 million. (6/8/2016) Katherine Romans is interim executive director of Hill Country Alliance, a natural resource and economic organization. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said that Ms. Romans was interim president and that Hill Country Alliance was an economic and tourism organization. (6/9/2016)

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