Florida’s Kissimmee Basks in Sunshine

8 Cities for Golf (and Much More)

Tips for Relocating With a Pet

Gabby and Joe Thomas of Kissimmee, FL
VALENCIA LAKES
WIMAUMA, FL

This Florida playground near Tampa attractions draws active adults, including RV and boating enthusiasts, with its waterfront recreation complex, 40-acre lake and lifelong-learning programs.

WHEN MICHÉLLE AND LARRY ZIPIN WERE SEARCHING for a place to call home in retirement, they were hoping for an “Aha, this is it!” moment once they discovered their dream community. That moment came when they arrived at Valencia Lakes, an active-adult development in Wimauma, FL, outside Tampa. They enjoyed a stay-and-play weekend for prospective buyers, which Michelle describes as “my vision of a welcoming, warm and friendly community.”

Because a first impression often makes a lasting one, GL Homes emphasizes attention to detail, says Maria Luften, vice president and project manager for the Florida builder.

Visitors are greeted with an impressive gated entrance featuring a stone-clad bridge, rock waterfalls and oak and palm trees. Throughout the development, well-landscaped home sites offer views of water and nature preserves. Residences are grouped in enclaves, creating the sense of neighborhoods.

“We put a lot of time and effort and money to give Valencia Lakes a spectacular appearance,” Luften says. “Yes, it looks like a neighborhood with very expensive homes, but we have homes and villas in very affordable price ranges.”

The centerpiece of the community is a 27,000-square-foot clubhouse overlooking a 40-acre lake. The facility boasts indoor and outdoor amenities designed to appeal to all lifestyles near Boynton Beach in South Florida

homes here are a bit less expensive.”

The social scene and ease of meeting new people also are appealing. “We’ve made friends through our neighbors, various sports activities or just hanging out at the pool,” he says. For Tina, lunch outings with the girlfriends club give her an opportunity to explore restaurants in nearby Sarasota.

“A big thing is lifestyle,” Randy says. “Our previous home was two stories with four bedrooms and two and a half baths. Now we have two bedrooms, two baths and a den with almost the same square footage.” The floor plan is designed for easier living. “Our new master suite is bigger than the entire second floor on our old house,” he says.

Randy also likes that yard maintenance is included in the homeowners association fees. “The first thing I did when we sold our Weston home was get rid of the lawn mower,” he says. “Now we just pack up the RV and go and don’t worry about the grass.”

Among the Kings’ neighbors are Gerry and Rae Yingling, who moved to Valencia Lakes in 2013. Gerry, 60, had a 32-year career as a Marine aviator before retiring as a colonel in 2007. He served three tours of duty in Iraq. Gerry’s last assignment was as chief of staff at the Pentagon outside Washington, DC. “Earlier in my career, I served on the staff of the late Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf of Desert Storm,” he says. “I developed a real love for them to restaurants in downtown Tampa, and we found

Larry adds that the development is convenient to Interstate 75, which connects them to restaurants in downtown Tampa, sports events in nearby St. Petersburg and beaches on the Gulf coast.

Community lifestyle director Cassandra Leopold manages a schedule of daily activities and more than 40 clubs, from Valentine’s Day celebration. Lifelong-learning programs include a lively lecture series and a course in culinary delights. The chef at the Valencia Lakes bistro has received rave reviews. Lunch is served daily, breakfast on weekends and dinner on scheduled evenings.

“Our goal is to satisfy the interests of our residents,” Leopold says. “For example, aerobics classes are extremely popular, so we keep adding new ones. We now have more than 20, including water aerobics and Zumba.”

For Tina and Randy King, having everything they enjoy within the community proved to be a bonus. At a previous residence, Tina, 53, often took their three Shih Tzu dogs — Cinnamon, Cookie and Coco — to a dog park several miles away. They now have one at Valencia Lakes. Randy, 54, also had to park his RV at an off-site location, but the development has RV storage spaces that can be leased annually.

The Kings moved to the neighborhood in June 2013 from the South Florida city of Weston. They are among a percentage of buyers that may be younger than 55. Randy, a pilot with JetBlue Airways Corp.,

However, the community’s real attraction is more than the Yankees’ George M. Steinbrenner Field, roughly 30 miles away. “It’s a practical decision, of course, but relocating to a new place is also an emotional decision,” Michelle says. “Valencia Lakes has the look and feel of where we want to call home. Everything about Valencia Lakes exceeded our expectations, from the quality of home construction to the wonderful lifestyle.”

The couple moved to Valencia Lakes in July 2012 after they sold their Trumbull, CT, home. “We downsized, but not that much,” Larry says. They had a three-story New England Colonial with 3,500 square feet and now are on one level with 2,500 square feet. “We still have three bedrooms and three baths. We expect lots of guests,” he says.

The Zipins began their quest for a new home several years before they retired — Michelle in 2005 as a nurse at Yale-New Haven Psychiatric Hospital in New Haven, CT, and Larry in 2010 as an executive with Time Warner Cable Inc. in Stamford, CT. They combined their search with vacations to Wilmington, NC; Charleston, SC; Savannah, GA; and southeast Florida. “We always had an eye on Tampa,” he says. “It was partly because the New York Yankees have spring training in Tampa, and we are thinking was to find a place where I can bug-free lounging.”

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QUICK FACTS

VALENCIA LAKES

Location: Valencia Lakes is in Wimauma, FL, about 25 miles south of Tampa. Gulf Coast beaches are roughly 35 miles southwest. The community is about 40 miles north of Sarasota and 95 miles southwest of Orlando. Tampa International Airport is roughly 35 miles away and Orlando International Airport is 95 miles away.

Developer: GL Homes is a builder with developments on Florida’s east and west coasts.

Home sizes and prices: Valencia Lakes offers twin villas and single-family homes. Five twin villa models with 1,321 to 1,800 square feet are priced from $185,900 to $215,900. Twin villas feature two or three bedrooms, two baths, screened patios and two-car garages. Single-family homes are available in three collections with 1,779 to 2,770 square feet. Prices range from $240,900 to $371,900. Most designs have two or three bedrooms, great rooms, screened patios and two-car garages. Some larger homes offer four bedrooms, two and a half or three baths and three-car garages. The development also provides quick delivery twin villas and single-family homes, which are completed or at various stages of construction. These homes have savings from $5,000 to $20,000.

Community size: About 840 homes have been built of 1,300 planned on 750 acres.

Amenities: The community’s social and recreational hub is a 27,000-square-foot clubhouse with a state-of-the-art fitness center, arts and crafts studio, full-service bistro and ballroom with a stage for parties as well as theatrical and musical performances. Outdoor amenities are split between the main recreation complex and a secondary site that opened in May 2013. At the main complex, residents can enjoy a resort-style pool, resistance walking pool and courts for bocce, shuffleboard, pickleball and tennis. The secondary site features a community garden, veterans memorial park and basketball court. Additional amenities include a dog park, RV storage area with spaces for annual lease and softball field with bleachers and concession stand.

Community fees: Monthly homeowners association fees are $440.61 for twin villas and $306.28 for single-family homes. Dues cover the clubhouse and amenities, lawn maintenance, basic cable, security monitoring and a 24-hour staffed, gated entrance. Fees for twin villas also include property insurance for the structure and exterior repainting every five years.

Age restrictions: In 80 percent of the homes, one resident must be 55 or older. No one 18 or younger may live here permanently.

Resident mix: The development draws buyers from throughout the U.S., with many relocating from the Midwest, Northeast and Florida.

Visitor arrangements: Prospective buyers can experience the community lifestyle during a three-day, two-night visit for $99. Guests stay in a twin villa or single-family home, sample amenities and participate in activities on the events calendar.

Information: Valencia Lakes, 5005 Pearl Crest Court, Wimauma, FL 33598, (800) 875-2176 or GLHomes.com/Valencia-Lakes.

Valencia Lakes floor plans, such as the 2,191-square-foot Palazzo, feature great rooms for better flow between seating and dining areas.

liking for the Tampa area. But the road to Valencia Lakes had a detour. Gerry wanted to park his boat in the Gulf of Mexico, so they moved to a waterfront home in nearby Apollo Beach.

“For many reasons, it just didn’t work for us,” he says. After meeting with real estate agents, they discovered the Wimauma community, where Gerry’s boat now is in storage.

The couple were able to downsize. “In Apollo Beach, we had four bedrooms and three baths with 3,100 square feet,” says Rae, 62, a former service representative who assisted disabled veterans. “We also had a pool and a Jacuzzi and a dock all to be maintained.”

Gerry did upgrade their new 2,000-square-foot, two-bedroom, two-bath home by adding a 1,000-square-foot backyard lanai. A pool and other amenities are within easy reach at the clubhouse. And, similar to the Kings, they can “lock and leave” on trips, especially cruise vacations. “There’s so much to do right here on the property, yet we also enjoy getting out three or four times a month with neighbors,” Gerry says. Siesta Key, with a top-rated beach, is about 50 miles away. Tampa attractions are close by, and Westfield Brandon mall is roughly 15 miles away.

He adds that he likes the development’s atmosphere. “The newness of Valencia Lakes means that there is a wide range of ages within the community,” he says. “For example, many young retirees have found a home here. It gives the community an active vibe.”

— Alan Macher is a writer in Sarasota, FL.