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Havens | Wimberley, Tex.

A Hill Country Town Raises Its Profile

By BETH GREENFIELD

FORGIVE the people of Wimberley, a bucolic village in the Texas Hill Country, if they're given to calling their town "a little piece of heaven." As corny as the phrase may sound, it feels right. Wimberley is home to sweeping cypresses, lush fields of bluebonnet and Indian paintbrush and sweet breezes off the Blanco River. And the people are friendly — Texas friendly.

"Everybody waves at you when you drive through town," said Carolgray McSpadden, a nurse from Houston who bought a two-bedroom house on the Blanco last year after renting for many summers.

"It's got a real laid-back, artsy atmosphere," she said, "like a little Sante Fe." Wimberley attracts painters and sculptors and other landscape lovers from Austin, both coasts and other artistic communities like San Miguel de Allende in Mexico.

"But there's still definitely a cowboy element, too," Ms. McSpadden said, referring to the Fourth of July rodeo that comes to town each year. Ms. McSpadden, 50, said she and her husband, Hal, a project manager for an oil drilling service, bought their \$230,000 house on the first day they looked.

"When I was a child, I went to camp in Wimberley," she said, "and it was always my dream to own a home there."

Nostalgia is another big part of Wimberley's charm: that general longing for simpler times, when towns had drowsy Main Streets, undeveloped vistas and a welcoming feel. In Wimberley, many people find that atmosphere.

Tom Wells, a Houston finance manager, and his wife, Paula, an artist, were enchanted by the area last fall as they searched for a Hill Country vacation home. They wound up buying a three-bedroom house on five acres last October, for \$320,000. "The town is not very developed," he said, "and it's still very quaint and old-fashioned."

Even though it is near San Antonio, Austin and Houston, Wimberley has pretty much resisted the development that has spread within the wide triangle of land created by those cities.

Of course, being accessible makes the price of Wimberley real estate — the average home price being about \$300,000 — a bit high for those parts.

"We're now starting to get people from California, New York and Florida, in addition to Houston and Dallas," said Linda Hudson, an agent with Century 21 Hill Country Properties in Wimberley. "To them, our stuff is still a bargain."

The Scene

Downtown Wimberley is made up of a clutch of boutiques and restaurants, like the River House gift shop and the Wimberley Cafe, which sport Wild West facades and sit on a venerable town square that's anchored by a flagpole that bears both the United States and the Texas flags.

But much of the action takes place away from the center of town. The hills and clear river and creeks draw people who like to hike, ride horses, swim (especially at the brisk Blue Hole) and fish for Guadalupe and smallmouth bass.

"I was looking for a place where I could fish and my wife could chill out on the river," said Jim Coleman, 52, a Huntsville, Tex., banker who said they were happy to find a mobile home, right on the river, for just \$65,000.

On the first Saturday of the month (April through December), Market Days — a rollicking bazaar that brings more than 450 vendors to a large field on the outskirts of town — lures bargain hunters from all over the state to consider goods that range from barn doors and wrought-iron headboards to quilts and hand-woven straw hats.

Theater fans support productions by the Wimberley Players, a company founded in 1979 that moved its stage from a converted greenhouse to a new space last fall; "Man of La Mancha" will open the theater's 2007-08 season. There is also the EmilyAnn Theater, which presents Shakespeare under the stars in summer.

Then there are the artists, who seem to have begun their pilgrimages here on the heels of the muralist Buck Winn, who did many of his paintings — depictions of local country and ranching life — in the 1930s.

"I never intended to leave Austin," said Deborah Elliott, a painter and retired designer who made the move into her second home here five years ago. She heads the Wimberley Valley Art League, which has nearly 160 members.

"I live up on a hill overlooking the Twin Sisters and the Devil's Backbone, and it's just so peaceful and beautiful," said Ms. Elliott, 57, describing hills in the region. She lives with her partner, Pat Davis, a retired real estate agent. "It's just a spiritual place," she added. "I don't know how else to explain it."

Pros

Although Texas can be blistering in summer, Wimberley's hilly, riverside location ensures cooling breezes year round. And it's just far enough off Interstate 35, which links Austin and San Antonio, to feel isolated and rural.

Cons

Rural feeling aside, Wimberley is in Hays County — one of the state's fastest-growing counties, where the population increased by 50 percent between 1990 and 2000. This has led to concerns not only about water supply in Wimberley (where many residents rely on their own wells and septic systems), but also about a parade of major housing developments that have steadily replaced rural fields outside town.

It has also made for an increase in traffic. "When I moved here, there were no traffic lights," Ms. Elliott said. "Now there are three."

The Real Estate Market

When picking a second home, said Ms. Hudson, who moved from Houston, "the thing most people look for is water." After that, it's acreage — a house that sits on 10 or 20 or even 50 acres is not uncommon — and views of the hills and valleys. The typical house, she said, is a stone house, built starting in the 1980s, with a fireplace and front porch. Some properties on the low end are available for \$150,000 and less, with the top of the market reaching \$3 million.

On the edges of town, there are a handful of condo projects that are still in development. That includes River Rock Resort Residences & Spa, which is being marketed as an upscale second-home retreat; units range in price from \$157,500 to \$429,500.

"The whole Texas market is doing well," said Dave Estey, an agent with Wimberley Land Company Realty, who added that local values for land have appreciated by more than 10 percent in the last year, while appreciation for homes has been a bit lower, about 6 percent to 9 percent. Most of his recent second-home closings, he said, have been within the range of \$160,000 to \$450,000.

And although he has seen plenty of home buyers from California, Mr. Estey believes the market is about to shift to local-city transplants like Ms. Elliott. "I think it's going to change to more of a primary-residence place soon," he said, "because you can drive 40 miles and be in downtown Austin."

LAY OF THE LAND

POPULATION 2,703, according to a 2006 estimate by the Census Bureau.

SIZE 16.1 square miles.

WHO'S BUYING Middle-age professionals from around Houston, as well as artists, musicians and younger professionals from Austin and San Antonio who want a natural getaway that's also infused with culture.

GETTING THERE Wimberley is about a one-hour drive from both Austin and San Antonio. It's just over three hours from Houston.