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## Second homes: Try before you buy

By Larry Olmsted, Special for USA TODAY

"Try Before You Buy!" is a marketing technique more associated with infomercials than luxury real estate. But in this economic climate, developers of high-end residential communities are getting creative with "test drives" that give prospective buyers a taste of the lifestyle.

"Buying a second home is a big decision, especially in this economic downturn," says St. John Fisher College professor Kyle F. Reinson, a real estate specialist and consultant for residential developers. "Many buyers want to consider quality-of-life issues and even driving distances in addition to cost."

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Such test drives allow people to stay in a comparable home, play golf and use dining facilities, the spa and other amenities — usually for a reduced fee. It also usually means a mandatory real estate tour.

Many developments let serious shoppers play a round of golf or eat dinner in the past, but test drives are now presented as formalized multi-night vacation packages. Even some of the USA's most prestigious private golf communities, such as Colleton River, S.C., and Hualalai, Hawaii, are participating.

Besides giving prospective buyers firsthand knowledge, test drives can actually get buyers the best price, Reinson says, because salespeople do not want to lose interested customers. Even residence clubs, alternatives to traditional second-home ownership that sell shares in multiple vacation homes, are using the concept.

At Encanterra in Queen Creek, Ariz., a "Taste of Trilogy" four-day all-inclusive package costs \$299 per couple during the week. Twenty percent to 25% of such visits result in sales, says Shauna Farmer, director of marketing for Shea Homes at Encanterra.

"People are being very cautious before they make any financial commitments," says Jeff Teich, Encanterra's general manager. "We thought this would be a great way to let them experience the club just as a true member would."

### Some places that offer community "test drives"

- Colleton River in Bluffton, S.C.: Two nights in residential cottage, golf, lunch, pool, tennis and fitness facility. \$310 per couple June-September, \$625 October-May ([colletonriverclub.com](http://colletonriverclub.com)).
- Cornerstone in Montrose, Colo.: Lodging in luxury cabin and golf, \$395 per couple per night ([cornerstonecolorado.com](http://cornerstonecolorado.com)).
- One Steamboat Place in Steamboat, Colo.: Lodging in shared five-bedroom guest house, with daily breakfast and apres ski cocktails, \$175 per couple per night ([onesteamboatplace.com](http://onesteamboatplace.com)).
- Mountain Air in Burnsville, N.C.: Two nights with breakfast, \$199 per couple per night in suites, \$399 in homes. Access to club amenities, golf and spa is extra ([mountainaircc.com](http://mountainaircc.com)).
- Hualalai in Kona, Hawaii: Lodging in luxury home or villa, golf at private Ke'Olu and Hawaiian watersports instruction, \$1,200 per night ([hualalairealty.com](http://hualalairealty.com)).
- The Tribute in Dallas: Two nights in clubhouse suite, one round on each of the club's two golf courses, \$500 per couple starting Oct. 1 ([thetribute.com](http://thetribute.com)).
- Abercrombie & Kent Residence Club: Three to seven nights at choice of residences around the world, airport transfers, daily housekeeping and local host, \$1,400 per night ([akresidenceclub.com/trial](http://akresidenceclub.com/trial)).
- Ultimate Escapes Residence Club: Three nights at choice of luxury homes around North America, free — for "qualifying" guests who used competitive accommodations at least 14 days in the past year ([ultimatescapes.com/stay](http://ultimatescapes.com/stay)).

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Estrella del Mar



Shea Homes

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## ON THE MARKET

### Midrange price: \$695,000

- This home is on the golf course in the Estrella del Mar community in Mazatlan, Mexico, an 800-plus-acre gated development with 3.5 miles of beach. Condos and lots are also available.
- **Bedrooms:** 3
- **Bathrooms:** 2 1/2
- **Size:** 2,600 square feet
- **Features:** Large kitchen with granite counters and stainless steel appliances, master bedroom suite with two-person whirlpool tub and walk-in shower, living room with floor-to-ceiling windows, courtyard with fountain, two-car garage.


### Low price: \$208,990

- This new St. Tropez model home in the Encanterra community outside Phoenix can be sampled by prospective buyers through the "Taste of Trilogy" package.
- **Bedrooms:** 2
- **Bathrooms:** 2
- **Size:** 1,437 square feet
- **Features:** Great room with floor-to-ceiling windows, master bedroom suite with walk-in closet, large covered patio, two-car garage. Community includes a golf course, numerous pools, fitness facility and several restaurants.

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