

The New York Times

How Green Are the Greens?

What to look for in a sustainable golf community, from electric carts to how the wildlife is managed.



A kudu at the Silver Lakes Game Reserve at the Silver Lakes Golf & Wildlife Estate, near Pretoria, South Africa. Silver Lakes Golf & Wildlife Estate

By Shivani Vora

This article is part of our [International Homes special section](#), which takes a look at homes and golf, from planned communities and sustainability to course designers and where they live.

When it comes to buying a golf property, whether it is in Phoenix, Portugal or another part of the world, sustainability is a factor that has never been more relevant, says Christine Kane, the chief executive of [Audubon International](#), a nonprofit that evaluates and certifies golf communities and golf courses for their eco-friendliness through its Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf.

“Home buyers today care more and more about living in a golf community that takes its environmental footprint seriously,” Ms. Kane said.

The increase in the number of Audubon-certified golf courses globally, many of which have a residential component, is one indicator of this rising interest: This year, 965 golf courses in 27 countries are fully certified in the program, up from 617 courses in 13 countries in 2010.

But as much as prospective golf community home buyers care about green living, Seth Tilton, a realtor and golf property specialist for [ERA Evergreen Real Estate Company](#), in Hilton Head, S.C., said that they did not always know or understand what that entails.

They should also be aware, Mr. Tilton said, that living in a “green” golf community can be more costly, “because of the expenses involved to maintain eco-friendly standards,” he said.

How do you make an informed decision about buying property in a sustainable golf community? Here are some things to consider.

How are the homes built?

[Clyde Johnston](#), an international golf architect, said buyers should seek communities that use mostly environmentally friendly materials to build their homes, like pine and cork, both of which are recyclable, and recycled steel and plastic. These homes should also have eco-friendly features such as energy-efficient heating and cooling systems, solar panels, energy-efficient lighting and water-conserving appliances.

“Some communities have sustainable golf courses with residences that aren’t sustainable, so you should find out about the homes before considering the golf,” Mr. Johnston said.

Does the community follow a green lifestyle?

Communities that care about sustainability adopt sustainable living principles. These include electric golf carts and maintenance vehicles; limiting the use of plastics in restaurants, the spa, the clubhouse and other social spaces; having strict recycling standards; and relying on local ingredients and suppliers as much as possible for all food outlets.

Some communities, Mr. Tilton said, even have restaurants that compost their food waste and grow their own produce to help cut down on the carbon emissions produced from transporting it.

Offering sustainably-minded activities, like inviting residents to create their own vegetable patch, also figures into a green lifestyle. [Palmetto Bluff](#), a golf community in Bluffton, S.C., for example, has several leisure programs focused on conservation, including a camp for children that teaches them about the community's wildlife and the ideal environments to encourage a healthy population of animals.

Ms. Kane, of Audubon International, also advised buyers to seek communities with ample biking and walking trails and green spaces such as parks, and to consider how far the community is from the nearest town, grocery store, hospital and attractions.

"Ideally, you'd be able to walk or bike everywhere," she said, "but at the very least, they should be close so you're not using too much gas or producing a lot of carbon emissions to get around."

Is the community certified?

Green communities, Mr. Tilton said, should ideally be certified by a third-party environmental organization. The Golf Environment Organization, for one, is a widely regarded international certification. Mission Hills Haikou, a golf resort in Haikou, China, [is an example of a GEO certified community](#).

The certification from Audubon's Cooperative Sanctuary Programs is also highly regarded globally, according to Mr. Tilton. "These organizations do the due diligence of evaluating a community's environmental standards and help them meet and maintain these standards," he said.

How is the wildlife managed?

Given their settings on open spaces of land, said Frank LaVardera, the director of environmental programs for golf at Audubon International, golf courses often make prime habitats for wildlife such as deer, elk, rabbits, coyotes and birds. Green golf communities encourage the local wildlife to thrive by maximizing the natural areas — such as woodlands, wetlands and streams — surrounding their courses and homes.

[Silver Lakes Golf & Wildlife Estate](#), near Pretoria, South Africa, for example, has built floating islands in the dams around its course that allow for birds and fish to breed.

"These areas should have no outside interference such as irrigation, cut grass or usage of chemicals and should be protected by signs that tell residents to stay away," Mr. LaVardera said.

Prospective buyers should learn more about a community's wildlife conservation initiatives before committing to a purchase.



Sustainable golf communities use water wisely on courses and feature water-conserving appliances in homes. Getty Images

Ask about the use of water and chemicals

How much and when a community uses chemicals and water is a significant player in how eco-friendly it is.

Many sustainable golf communities today use recycled wastewater to irrigate their courses and other green areas. Also, the amount they water depends on how much it has rained. “Having a set watering schedule is not sustainable,” Mr. LaVardera said. “Watering when there hasn’t been enough rain is.”

It is a similar idea when it comes to the use of chemicals: Green communities avoid using them proactively and rely on them only when necessary, like when grass starts to develop fungus or there is a problem with insect infiltration.

Find the right agent

Interested buyers can find an agent through word of mouth or by contacting local real-estate agencies and asking for names of brokers who have sold eco-friendly properties.

In the United States, the [National Association of Realtors](#) has a Green designation for brokers and connects buyers with brokers in the locations where they are seeking homes.

Try before you buy

Some golf communities sell attractively priced “stay and play” packages for prospective buyers that include accommodations, greens fees and some activities. Taking advantage of these is important because they allow buyers to immerse themselves in a community and see how sustainable it is.

“I’ve had home buyers stay in a community for a night and know that they would love to live there,” Mr. Tilton said. “In other instances, they don’t feel that it’s green enough or don’t like another aspect of it that they wouldn’t have discovered without spending a night or two.”