

A Reprint from *Tierra Grande*, the Real Estate Center Journal



**a**s a rule, Texans don't have to worry about blizzards, galoshes and tire chains. And that's precisely why so many people from northern states migrate south to winter in Texas. Flocks of Winter Texans start arriving in October, intent on spending the state's mild winters golfing, birdwatching and day tripping across the U.S.-Mexico border to shop.

Winter Texans are defined as those who visit the state for at least seven days but no more than five months. According to a study by the Texas Department of Economic Development, more than 1.3 million Winter Texans visited during 1997, spending \$992 million across the state. Texas captures 12 percent of the winter visitor market in the United States, following Florida (48 percent) and California (20 percent).

One of the most popular destinations in the state is the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Visitors tend to stay the longest amount of time in that area. During February 1999, an estimated 124,000 Winter Texans were visiting the Valley, up from 71,000 in 1986. Not surprisingly, a study by the Center for Tourism Research at the University of Texas Pan American found that Winter Texans have a significant impact on the border economy.

The typical Winter Texan visiting the Rio Grande Valley is on average 68 years old and has an annual median income of \$41,500. These visitors have made an average of eight trips to the area and intend to return the following year.

Most Winter Texans come from the Midwest. Eighteen percent of those visiting the Valley come from Iowa, 11 percent from Illinois and 10 percent from Missouri, according to the Texas Department of Economic Development. Interestingly, Winter Texans tend to cluster with people from their own hometowns. For example, 15 percent of surveyed Winter Texans visiting San Antonio came from Minneapolis-St. Paul, while 25 percent of those in El Paso came from Chicago.

The Texas Department of Economic Development study found that 18 percent of Winter Texans over the age of 45 stayed in condominiums or timeshares. Fifteen percent stayed in hotels, and 50 percent stayed in private homes, including RVs and manufactured homes.

The UTPA study found that 74 percent of Winter Texans who stay in the Valley live in RVs or manufactured homes. The remaining 26 percent stay in hotels, apartments, condominiums or homes.

Nineteen percent of all visitors to the Rio Grande Valley were interested in

purchasing a vacation home in the area, according to the UTPA study. Fifty percent indicated they would be willing to pay up to \$50,000 for a vacation home; an additional 26 percent would be willing to pay between \$50,000 and \$75,000.

Many Winter Texans choose to purchase mobile home lots. Demand from this group has fueled an increase in construction of RV parks. The UTPA study found that 1,500 new RV and manufactured home sites were added in the Valley between 1997 and 1999. Because Winter Texans stay for an extended period of time, they tend to expect RV parks with better than average amenities.

Texas attracts a different group of winter travelers than states such as Florida and Arizona, which cater to visitors with high incomes. Clearly, the demographics of the typical Winter Texan do not support large-scale development of luxury condominiums. But the economic opportunity these visitors represent is nonetheless significant. ♣

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*Tierra Grande* (ISSN 1070-0234), formerly *Real Estate Center Journal*, is published quarterly by the Real Estate Center at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas 77843-2115. Subscriptions are free to Texas real estate licensees. Other subscribers, \$20 per year.

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