

If you're growing weary of the taxes, weather, crime, and congestion of Greater Chicagoland, I have just three words for you: Hot Springs Village.

This 14,000-person gated enclave about an hour west of Little Rock, Arkansas, has no less than nine golf courses, making it one of the most golf-rich communities in the U.S. Eight of the courses are public. The private course, Diamante, is ranked by *Golf Digest* as the third-best in Arkansas. The others aren't far behind.

When a fellow golf writer, Chuck Miller, author of *Golfing the U.S., Reflections on a 50-week, 50-state Golf Odyssey*, invited another writer and me to visit, I had no thoughts about retiring there. But two days in, I caught myself thinking, "Hmmm."

Dive into Hot Springs Village

By Dan Vukelich



Unlike The Villages, that 32-square-mile retirement community in Florida, Hot Springs Village isn't just for oldsters. Some 800 children live there and attend three schools, two public and one private. With remote working now common, families of less than retirement age are discovering the place, attracted by its pastoral setting far from the hubbub of cities they left behind.

During our visit, I met Greg Jones, 61, an IT entrepreneur who retired there from the Dallas area. He still telecommutes to his start-up in Denver, but has enough time on his hands to run the three restaurants he and his wife launched. "I had had enough of the Dallas traffic," he said. "There are a lot of people here like me."

At 40 square miles, the village is the largest gated community in North America. It's run by the property owners' association's board of directors, and has its own police and fire departments, 11 recreational lakes, 30 miles of trails, a 650-seat performing arts center, and more pickleball, tennis, and bocce-ball venues than you can shake a racquet at.

The weather in Hot Springs Village is mild enough that they play year-round. And although it has four distinct

seasons, in Chicago terms winter is practically nonexistent. They got just above six inches of precipitation last December, January, and February combined. About half of the days last December saw highs in the 60s; Last August's temperatures averaged in the mid-70s, with typical highs in the 80s and 90s, and no days reaching 100.

And the cost of living? Arkansas is the land of low taxes. It doesn't tax military retirement income and property taxes are ridiculously low. I found a listing for a \$335,800 2,300-square-foot three-bedroom, two-bath golf course home built in 1995 that carried an annual tax bill of just \$1,664.

Demographically, despite in-migration from across the country, Hot Springs Village is not very diverse. The 2010 Census found the village was 97.9 percent white, 1.5 percent Black, with the remainder Asian, Native American, or Hispanic. In terms of crime, according to the website neighborhoodscout.com, Hot Springs Village annually sees about 21 crimes per 1,000 people, which is on par with the crime rate of River Forest, Ill.

Lying within the Ouachita Mountains, the terrain of Hot Springs Village is rolling hills. Its golf courses – all but one built by Thomas E. Clark for the Ault Corporation, the town's developer – follow the natural flow of the land, but they're not so hilly as to preclude walk-

ing by a healthy player. All are parkland in style, with mature trees and pine straw lining the margins.

Most of the courses play between 6,600 and 7,300 yards from the tips, although Diamante plays 7,560 yards from the back tees. For a quick 18, there's a par-62 executive course devoid of bunkers that plays 3,868 yards.



Tom Heffer, director of golf for the village, estimates that 40 percent of the population plays golf. There are three women's leagues, including one social league where no one keeps score, and two men's leagues. The men's nine-hole league is the largest with 400 members, he said.

"I've never seen so many 70- and 80-year-olds who are single-digit handicaps," Heffer said. "Golf is a

top draw," he added. "The others are the gates, trails, and lakes."

Clara Nicolosi, who retired there from a career in the U.S. Coast Guard and runs the local REMAX real-estate brokerage, said the best way to learn what Hot Springs Village has to offer is to sign up for a \$349 introductory stay-and-play visit that includes two nights, dinners, and a round of golf. An extra night is available for \$130.

"We're a draw for people who want a gated community with an active lifestyle and people who are looking for country living in a moderate climate," she said. "Golfers love it here because they can play a different course each day of the week."

If You Go:

Hot Springs Village is 10 and a half hours from Chicago by car. The nearest major airport is in Little Rock, an hour to the east, which is served by American, Delta, and United from O'Hare, and by Delta, Southwest, and United from Midway. To learn about Hot Springs Village stay-and-play packages visit explorethevillage.com.

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