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HAVENS | TUBAC, ARIZ.

## A Small-Town Oasis in the High Desert

By KEITH MULVIHILL

SOUTH of [Tucson](#) on Interstate 19, just over the Santa Cruz County line, two rugged mountain ranges vie for your attention: the soaring Santa Rita [Mountains](#) to the east, and the smaller, but no less compelling, Tumacacori Mountains to the west.

The valley is narrow, flat and thick with shaggy mesquite trees. A ribbon of bright green foliage — a cottonwood and willow woodland — marks the course of the Santa Cruz River. For centuries, this lush stretch of land surrounded by desert vistas has lured American Indians, Spanish missionaries, miners and, more recently, artisans, [birders](#), hikers and golfers — not to mention second-home owners.

“Just driving the highway, you have really no idea what’s out there,” said Lonnie Wagner, who lives in [Colorado Springs](#). Smitten by the region’s rich history and beauty, Mr. Wagner and his wife, Linda, bought a second home with another couple — a 1,500-square-foot villa — at the Tubac [Golf](#) Resort in 2001 for \$185,000. Both couples later opted for their own digs, and in 2004 the Wagners bought a larger place just north of the resort area.

“The more we came down here, the more we liked the idea of having more space around us,” Mr. Wagner said. “Plus prices were starting to climb fast, and we didn’t want to miss our chance.” They paid \$250,000 for a 2,400-square-foot, three-bedroom stuccoed house on three-quarters of an acre. “We have a small pool and a yard and mature mesquite trees on the property.”

On the south edge of the golf resort sits the village of Tubac. Some 40 miles south of Tucson, the village was established in 1752 as a Spanish presidio, or garrison. Today, its grid of rambling streets is packed with brightly colored [art](#) galleries, shops and restaurants. The remains of the fort make up the Tubac Presidio State Historic Park, where visitors can learn about Spanish colonization and daily life in the 18th century.

“At first I thought it was dry and dusty, but it didn’t take long for the desert to win me over,” said Christine Priester, of [Denver](#), who traveled frequently to the area with her husband, Erich,

to visit family. “We were walking hand in hand, on one of those gorgeous starry nights they have here, and we thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have a place here.’ ”

Soon after, in 2003, the couple learned that an adobe-brick house next door to an aunt and uncle was up for sale. They bought it for \$260,000.

“We play tennis and golf, but we also love to just walk around,” she said. “There is so much history here, we love learning about it.”

## The Scene

By all accounts, Tubac’s fortunes changed in 2002 when a [Telluride](#), Colo., developer, Ron Allred, bought the Tubac Golf Resort. Soon after, the sleepy club — nestled on the former Otero family ranch, the first land grant in the region from the King of [Spain](#) in 1789 — underwent a \$40 million restoration and expansion.

The upscale but down-to-earth resort plays up its ranching history by offering a rustic retreat. One of its two restaurants, Stables, is housed in an old horse barn that retains its original rock floor and adobe walls. Outside, cattle graze just off the fairway.

For many newcomers to Tubac, the golf resort (a [spa](#) was added last year) is their point of entry. But the curious soon learn that the village is much more than golf.

“I love golf but I don’t play all the time,” said Judy Barrows, of [Dorset](#), Vt., who bought a villa at the resort in 1998. “What’s great about Tubac is that there is a lot to see and do.”

The Tubac Center of the Arts, described by one local as the heart of the community, features concerts, lectures and art shows. “Not only do you have a lot of galleries and shops in the village,” Ms. Priester said, “but all the fun and interesting creative types that go with it.”

Tubac also abounds with [hiking](#) and [biking](#) clubs, and most days birders can be seen walking along the Anza Trail next to the village. The sandy path, named after the Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza, who led an expedition along this route in 1775, meanders alongside the Santa Cruz River.

On one recent morning at the Tubac Deli & Coffee Co., people sipped espressos and took advantage of the free Wi-Fi, while a lone pedicab prowled the streets. “I think Tubac remains one of [Arizona](#)’s best-kept secrets,” Ms. Barrows said. “It’s very laid back. A lot of people here have tons of money, but somehow or other they are some of the most unostentatious people.”

Despite Tubac's rising population of second-home owners — real estate agents estimate that 25 percent of homeowners have primary residences elsewhere — the village has kept its small-town charm. Residents like to point out that there's no stoplight in town, and just one gas station.

### Pros

Tucson is less than an hour away. Summer temperatures are 5 to 10 degrees cooler than in Tucson, and up to 20 degrees cooler than in [Phoenix](#).

### Cons

Basics like grocery stores, banks and health care are about a 20-minute drive away in Green Valley, to the north, and Rio Rico, to the south.

### The Real Estate Market

Tubac has had considerable growth in the last five years. Barrio de Tubac, a 350-acre planned community just south of the historic village, has exploded in size in recent years. Its residential homes include town houses, patio homes and larger single-family dwellings. Prices range from \$275,000 to \$850,000.

Home sales were strong in Tubac starting in 2003, but have since begun to taper, said Gary Brasher, president of Brasher Real Estate. "We're a niche market here," he said. "Even though things are not great guns like they were, things are still selling at a pretty good pace."

Confidence in the housing market remains high among builders. There are five large housing developments currently before the Santa Cruz County Planning and Zoning Commission and Board of Supervisors. At least one of them, Tubac de La Montaña, a 1,400-home development with a [Gary Player](#) Signature golf course, may start preliminary construction later this year.

There are two basic types of properties in Tubac, Mr. Brasher said — those in small subdivisions, like the ones found in and around the golf resort, and those found in Barrio de Tubac. Overall, one- and two-bedroom town houses typically range between \$268,000 and \$425,000. Patio homes and villas, with more space, are priced between \$350,000 and \$550,000. Prices for single-family homes vary depending on location and lot size, with prices ranging from \$400,000 to \$800,000.

A third option is land, most of which is zoned as rural, meaning one home to roughly five acres. Those lots are typically priced between \$250,000 and \$325,000.

The most sought after second homes are those that are low maintenance, like the golf resort villas. “When one comes on the market they tend to get snapped up pretty quick,” said Bill Mack of Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage.

#### LAY OF THE LAND

**POPULATION** Because Tubac is not incorporated, a firm figure is not available. Real estate agents estimate that there are 1,600 to 1,900 people in the village.

**SIZE** About 12 square miles.

**LOCATION** Southern [Arizona](#), roughly 40 miles south of [Tucson](#).

**WHO’S BUYING** Couples in their late 40s to early 60s, many from [California](#), [Washington](#) and [Colorado](#).

**GETTING THERE** Fly into Tucson International Airport, then travel south on Interstate 19.

**WHILE YOU’RE LOOKING** Tubac [Golf Resort & Spa](#) (1 Otero Road, 520-398-2211; [www.tubacgolfresort.com](http://www.tubacgolfresort.com)) has rooms and suites that start at \$189 a night. The Tubac Country Inn (13 Burruel Street, 520-398-3178; [www.tubaccountryinn.com](http://www.tubaccountryinn.com)) is in the village just steps from the park. Rooms range from \$120 to \$160 a night.

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