

# NEW HOMES

TC C6

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Torontonians Bill and Herma Reuten are spending their vacation in Victoria visiting family and house-hunting. Tourism Victoria says more visitors are coming to look for a home.

# Relocation vacation

For some tourists, sightseeing in Victoria is all about checking out properties for sale

STORY BY PEDRO ARRAIS  
PHOTOS BY RAY SMITH  
*Times Colonist staff*

An increasing number of tourists are coming to Victoria with more than sightseeing in mind. They're using their vacations to scout properties, hoping to get in on the region's hot real estate market.

Many visitors come for the sole purpose of purchasing property, says Melissa McLean of Tourism Victoria. Some soon-to-be Victorians plan to buy now but move to their homes after they retire, which can be up to 10 years in the future.

"We hear many buy because they want to stake their claim in Victoria now, as a hedge against rising prices," says McLean.

While Realtors have traditionally looked after the real estate needs of buyers, a local tourism business has packaged a "relocation vacation" to introduce visitors to different neighbourhoods as relocation possibilities. The new venture will provide a tour of the properties visitors are interested in but there is no expectation to buy, says business owner Kathy McAree.

*Please see* RELOCATION, C8



Kathy McAree, who runs culinary tours of Victoria, has started a new business to tour visitors through new condominium projects and existing homes for sale. Victoria Relocation Vacation is a joint venture with the public relations company that represents several developments.

# Relocation: Tour targets middle-aged women



The Breakwater, a condominium townhouse development on Dallas Road in James Bay, is one of the stops on the Relocation Vacation tour. The public relations firm for several condominium projects has teamed up with a tourism business to offer out-of-towners tours of their developments as well as other properties and surrounding neighbourhoods.

Above: The Breakwater two-storey show suite kitchen shows off granite countertops and stainless steel appliances in an efficient, elegant design.

Right: The living is at the front of the suite, which looks across Dallas Road to the coast guard station and Victoria Harbour.

*Photos by Ray Smith/Times Colonist*

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"It's a different way to look at real estate," says McAree, a tour expert, who recently launched Victoria Relocation Vacation in co-operation with Tartan Public Relations. The PR firm has embarked on a media blitz to publicize the new service. Its primary market is Alberta, with central Canada, California, the Pacific Northwest and the United Kingdom also targeted.

Relocation Vacation customers can choose between a self-guided tour of area housing projects or have McAree take them on a guided tour of the properties.

While the projects on the tour are clients of Tartan, visitors can also request to be shown other properties.

Tartan owner Deirdre Campbell says the Relocation Vacation package is targeted mainly at a female audience, aged between 45 to 55, who are looking either to relocate or buy a second home.

"It's like a concierge service," says Campbell. "The person who we are trying to reach does not have as much time and this service will assist them."

She says women find it important to know the neighbourhood before they purchase. The tour gives clients the time to explore the communities around the new developments.

McAree's relocation tours, which she estimates will take one day, give visitors a choice of seven condominium projects that are under construction. Each tour is customized to the client, she says.

"I do an interview to gauge their area of interest. Sometimes it is downtown; sometimes it is the Westshore where they want to go," McAree says. She does not take a commission if the client purchases a property.

McAree devotes as much time to exploring the amenities of the neighbourhood as she does to the details of the property.

Providing real estate tours is an addition to her original business, which offers culinary tours of Victoria.

"I found at the end of the day, clients invariably ask about real estate," says McAree, who is in her 30s.

Visitors to Victoria also house-hunt the old-fashioned way, using their time in the city to drive around neighbourhoods and attend a few open houses on their own.

Bill and Herma Reuten's idea of a vacation is to check out the real estate market wherever they visit. "We are professional house hunters," jokes Herma, 63. "We do this routinely everywhere we go."

In the past three years — after they got over the sticker shock — the couple has put in a few low offers, but got cold feet and backed out quickly when one was accepted.

Things changed this year for the Reutens. In previous years, they were happy just to visit their son and daughter-in-law in Victoria. But the arrival of their first granddaughter added a new incentive to their moving plans. Now, Herma says she can't wait to leave Toronto, where the couple has lived for the last 40 years, describing it "like living with a million smelly armpits."

"Fun is fun, but having a grandchild has motivated us to get serious. We recently lost the bidding on a house because my husband cheaped out," she says. "He has been put on notice: This time we do or die."

Other visitors manage to mix a bit of house-hunting while doing business here.

His work brought Larry Bellani, 48, an environmental health and safety consultant, from Northern California to Victoria.

While visiting the city 18 months ago, the former competitive triathlete made time to view about 10 properties, eventually purchasing a bachelor suite as an investment. He has no plans to move to Victoria.

Bellani is guardedly optimistic about his condo. "Hopefully it will appreciate."

Some Realtors have taken note of the increase in out-of-town buyers. Taylor Conroy, a local condo expert, estimates that about half of the inquiries he receives are from out-of-towners. While they look for the same attributes as local buyers — location, amenities and value — they also inquire about rental possibilities, he says.

"There has been a massive influx of baby boomers," says Conroy, a Realtor with RE/MAX Camosun. Most are typically aged 55 to 57, he says. On the whole, they know what they are looking for and plan their trip to research the market in person.

Steve Hutchinson, owner of Treehouse Media, a media-buying and planning company, attributes the influx of out-of-town buyers to marketing efforts by developers. In the last five years, he says, spending on marketing has risen more than 50 per cent.

"I estimate that developers spend between 70 and 75 per cent of their marketing budget out-of-province," says Hutchinson, who oversees the advertising placement for the Bayview, Dockside Green, Juliet, Oak Street Village and Bear Mountain developments.

A lot of the money is spent advertising in the key Edmonton and Calgary markets, he says. If clients want to market beyond Alberta, they place ads in national publications. Very little, if any, money is spent promoting local projects to the Lower Mainland market, Hutchinson says, because buyers there prefer offerings on the Sunshine Coast, in the Okanagan and the mid- and upper-Island.

