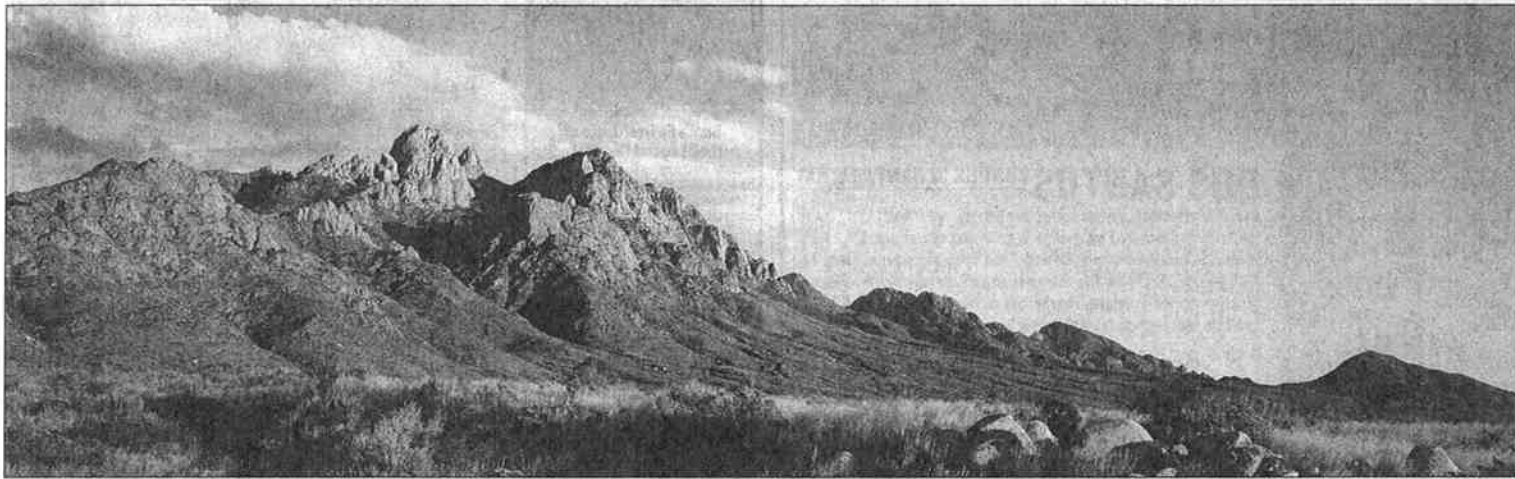


# NEW MEXICO PROPERTIES



Views of the Organ Mountains and year-round access to golf courses are some of the reasons increasing numbers of retirees are relocating to Las Cruces.

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## Las Cruces Increasingly Attracts High-End Homebuyers

By Meta L. Levin

At the end of February, Tom Hanrahan and his wife, Cheryl, waved goodbye to their snow blower in North Hampton County, Pa., and joined a growing number of retirees relocating to the sunnier climate of Las Cruces, N.M.

Set in the southern part of the state along the Rio Grande River, amid pecan orchards, mountains and high-desert terrain, Las Cruces has been named one of the best places to retire by Money magazine and AARP, formerly the American Association of Retired Persons. And the area's popularity is starting to show. The population is expected to grow 6.7% in the next five years, according to projections by Data Management Research Inc. of Franklin, Tenn., which supplies information to health-care providers. The number of residents aged 55 to 65 is expected to rise 19.3% in the same period.

Seven years ago, high-end property in Las Cruces was anything over \$500,000, and there were few of those, says Michele Marshall, executive officer of the Las Cruces Home Builders Association. Now, however, that category can range from \$500,000 to \$2.2 million, and accounts for more than 10% of properties currently for sale in Las Cruces, according to figures supplied by Janice Gutierrez-Ehly, a realtor with Steinborn GMAC Real Estate in Las Cruces. Sixty-five percent

of the homes sold since the beginning of the year for \$500,000 or more were built less than five years ago, she says, and in the past four years owners of luxury homes have seen a 10.7% average rate of appreciation.

Despite its attractiveness to retirees, Las Cruces is not a community catering solely to those aged 55 and over. Forbes magazine singled out Las Cruces as one of the top communities in which to do business. The valley is home to an agricultural region where farmers grow pecans, chili peppers, cotton, onions and cabbage. The Las Cruces area will benefit from a publicly funded spaceport facility under construction in Sierra County, 45 miles to the northeast. Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic has leased the majority of Spaceport America to provide suborbital flights, while other entities will use it to launch commercial space and reusable launch vehicles. Nearby Fort Bliss will expand soon with the addition of 23,000 troops and their families from the U.S. Army's First Armored Division, and White Sands Missile Range, just over the Organ Mountains, recently



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**In the past four years, owners of luxury homes have seen a 10.7% average rate of appreciation.**

took on testing some of the Army's Future Combat Systems equipment.

New Mexico State University in Las Cruces has nearly 16,500 students and provides college sports, music, theater, special community programs and a widely admired golf course to the community. Its Southwest Technology Development Institute was recently awarded a \$4.2 million, five-year contract to conduct research for the Department of Energy's new Solar America Initiative. "We are surrounded by youth," says Jack Hokkanen, who with his wife, Marsha,

recently bought a retirement home on the East Mesa with views of the mountains and the valley. "It's not like moving to Sun City."

The area boasts golf and tennis, hiking and biking trails, is less than two hours from downhill skiing in Ruidoso, N.M., and close to the Gila National Forest. "We get a lot of active older adults who like to be outdoors all year round," says Ms. Gutierrez-Ehly.

The Hokkanens spent a year researching places to retire before finally settling on Las Cruces. Avid golfers, the ability to play year round was high on their wish list, but they were also cost sensitive. Green fees at some of Las Cruces's best courses range from \$25 to \$28. In Phoenix or Tucson, Ariz., where they also looked, a round of golf could cost as much as \$100. They also wanted a location with reasonably priced housing and good weather. "As a bonus, the people here are really great," Mr. Hokkanen says.

The Hanrahans were drawn to the area by more than just the outdoor life. Their daughter lives in Phoenix, a day's drive away, and there is an international airport in El Paso, Texas, about 50 miles from Las Cruces. There also are two regional tertiary-care medical centers in the area and the mild weather was a draw.

"It's 15 degrees cooler here than in Tucson and Phoenix," says Connie Hettinga, a realtor with Coldwell Banker

Las Cruces. Many of her retiree clients first looked in Arizona, but told her that they thought Tucson and Phoenix were getting too big. They come from all over the U.S. — even from Tucson and Phoenix.

Barry Nordell and his wife, Pat, moved to The Pueblos at Alameda Ranch on the city's rapidly growing east side last September, after three years in Tucson. "The house we bought in Las Cruces would probably have cost one third to one half more if we had bought it in Tucson," Mr. Nordell says. Drawn by the small-town atmosphere, friendly people and Mr. Nordell's interest in western history, they were delighted to find a 2,100-square-foot home in the gated community, where 30% of the land is dedicated to open space. Their home enjoys an unobstructed view of the Organ Mountains.

In the past four or five years, there has been an increase in the pace of growth, both in terms of the size of the city and the pace of new developments, says John Moscato, president of Bright View Land Co., which developed The Pueblos. He largely attributes this to a stable economy and lower land costs than in areas such as Tucson and Santa Fe, N.M.

Mr. Hanrahan compares it to paradise: "The sky is always blue and the colors of the Organ Mountains change with the time of day. We couldn't be happier."