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# In Hawaii, an Oasis For the Ultra Rich

By MICHELE KAYAL

**L**AURENCE BLICKMAN, a businessman from the San Francisco Bay Area, is so enamored of Hawaii's Big Island that one day on impulse, he snapped up a house for a friend.

"I said, 'If you're not going to take it, I'm going to keep it,'" said Mr. Blickman, who figures that about five of his friends from home have also bought vacation places at the Hualalai Resort, where he keeps a vacation house.

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If the friend had not been interested, he said, he would just have kept the three-bedroom town house for himself. With dry sunny weather and plentiful private golf, he figured that there was little risk in buying an extra place.

Like that old shampoo commercial, where one happy user tells two friends, who then tell two friends, and so on, the rich and deliberately not-so-famous are inspiring each other to own a piece of paradise on the Big Island.

The eager buyers, primarily from the West Coast, and especially from the Bay Area, are transforming the crusty black lava of the Big Island's leeward side into an oasis of multimillion-dollar vacation homes and gated resort communities populated by top financiers, technology mavens, entrepreneurs and the successfully self-made.

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**FREEDOM** Playtime on the Big Island, above, takes place in developments with guards and gates, like the Hualalai Resort, left. The island is so popular with Bay Area executives that some of them may buy a plane to go back and forth.

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"It's like the Bohemian Grove moving further west," said Ricky Cassidy, a research consultant for Prudential Locations Hawaii, referring to the Sonoma County summer retreat for powerful business leaders and politicians.

The Big Island has been popular with a certain class of wealthy people from the West Coast since Laurence Rockefeller began developing resorts there in the 1960's.

But the current boom in luxury resort development — begun in the mid-90's with a rising stock market — has brought larger, more expensive homes, construction and real estate executives said, and some of Hawaii's highest real estate prices.

"There was a house on the water that sold three years ago for \$14 million," said Putman Clark, a Big Island real estate broker and president of the Clark Realty Corporation, who is known as Putty. "Now a vacant piece of land sells for that."

More than 3,000 acres are under development right now at six luxury communities, according to real estate agents and developers, all but one of them in a roughly 20-mile stretch of coastline north of the Kona International Airport. Kukio, destined to become one of the coast's most exclusive developments, has had consistent sales of \$10 million and more, according to tax records. In January, agents said, Kukio sold 2.4 acres of oceanfront for \$16.5 million.

On the Big Island, according to Mr. Cassidy's research, the average price of a luxury resort property hit \$3.6 million in 2001, the highest in the state. Maui is still a big draw, popular with regular people as well as with Hollywood millionaires.

But the Big Island has won the hearts of some West Coasters looking for the privacy and exclusivity that come with the high prices at the resorts.

"Maui has become more of a tourist destination and less of a nice place to live," said Alan Pinn, the president and a co-owner of Pinn Brothers Construction in San Jose, Calif., who said he rented vacation condominiums on Maui and Kauai before coming to the Big Island in 1990. "All the new developments are private, so you feel very comfortable."

Mr. Pinn spends about half the year at his home on the golf course at the Mauna Lani Resort. "By and large, people here are country-club members on the mainland, and they like the country-club feel," he said. "Not a day goes by the phone doesn't ring with an invitation."

Seclusion and security at these resorts is enforced not only by access-coded gates, staffed guard houses and golf courses that are often off limits to the public, but by an ethic among the residents to keep a low profile and keep the family secrets.

How private are they?

So private that Tom Davidson, a founder of an information management company Datatel Inc., said that when he sold his Hualalai home to one of America's biggest computer moguls in December he was not told who the

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client was during negotiations — and would not provide his name for publication.

So private that Mr. Davidson said a group of homeowners is considering buying a Boeing 737-300 aircraft to shuttle between Kona and the Bay Area a few times a week.

So private that the superbroker Charles Schwab is involved in building a members-only golf course across the highway from Hualalai, according to officials at the County of Hawaii Planning Department.

The 18-hole course will sit on 319 acres and will include a small clubhouse and a pro shop, said the county planner Norren Kato, who handles plan approval for the project. Plans for the clubhouse and the course itself were cleared in late March, Mr. Kato said, and grading work has begun at the site.

FOR the vacation residents of the Big Island, getting there is easier than ever. Nonstop daily flights from the West Coast have gone from one a day in 1995 to more than four a day last year, according to the Hawaii Visitors and Convention Bureau. United Airlines plans to add a second daily flight from San Francisco in June.

When residents do arrive at their vacation home, however, there is a good chance that it will significantly resemble the neighbor's house. This is not a hotbed of architectural innovation. At 49 Black Sand Beach, a development at Mauna Lani, a new 8,400-square-foot home is typical of homes being built all around the coast.

The main theme is water. Visitors enter an interior courtyard and take what appears to be a floating walkway across fish ponds and through glass doors into a great room, where glass pocket doors — 30 feet long and 10 feet high — open to the lanai, revealing an infinity pool that makes an unbroken line with the sea. The home's open architecture means circulation between rooms happens mostly outside, not inside.

Its gadgets and goodies include a Viking six-top range, a Sub-Zero refrigerator, antique doors hiding the EuroCave wine cabinet, audio in every bedroom and, overlooking the ocean, a blonde granite pool bar and a spa tub of faux black lava that fits 12.

Vacation palaces like this — where residents will spend a few weeks or perhaps a few months a year — have become standard along the coast, architects and contractors said. They can range from 4,000 square feet to 14,000 square feet or more, and generally adopt what architects loosely call "island style," often characterized by pavilions, natural materials and designs that merge inside with outside.

The ultra rich tend not only to inspire their friends to buy next door, but to share decorators and architects. H. C. Bennett, known as Lucky, a Big Island architect who designed the home at 49 Black Sand Beach, is currently working on two dozen other homes in the area. Shay Zak, a Bay Area architect, figures he has a dozen going on the coast. The designer Jacques Saint Dizier, who now divides his time between the Bay Area and the Big Island, said he was working on his 45th Big Island home.

Some residents have begun to collect the same paintings. Popular now is

Lionel Walden, a "Hawaiian master" who trained in the Paris ateliers of the late 19th century, first visited Hawaii in 1911 and worked in the Islands on and off until his death in 1933. The popularity of his paintings among the Big Island denizens has led to doubling and tripling of prices for his work.

Those who discover the Big Island sometimes trade up before their first homes are even completed. Mr. Davidson said he bought his first place at Hualalai virtually over the phone. But during his first stay there in March 2000, he said he and his wife, Debby, were so enthralled with Hawaii that before they left they traded the two-bedroom condominium for a place about twice the size.

Now, with plans to spend at least half the year on the Big Island, Mr. Davidson is building a 6,000-square-foot home overlooking Uluweuweu Bay.

"Every single person I know came with the idea of spending a limited time here, and spent more time and bought bigger and bigger places," said Mr. Davidson, whose main residence is in Scottsdale, Ariz.

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