

A Place in the Sun

By Wolf Schneider

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At Heritage Preserve, modern-day ranching conservation and luxury real-estate development converge in two New Mexico developments

We're driving into the unspoiled ranchland of central New Mexico where cattle graze on short-stemmed, ultra-nutritious grama grass, horseback riders head for red rocks warmed by the sun, and hikers climb into the high chaparral to discover pottery shards from ancient civilizations. Just over an hour's drive southeast of Albuquerque appears the tiny town of Mountainair. It looks much as it must have decades ago, its sleepy main street looking onto the foothills of the rose-colored Manzano Mountains. To the west, the Cibola National Forest spreads out a wooded blanket of piñons, junipers, and Ponderosa pine.

There are no big-box chains in Mountainair. No fast-food franchises. Only local businesses. And five minutes to the south, Deer Canyon Preserve offers a development dedicated to sustainable growth. Deer Canyon is a conservation easement community with largely 20-acre homesites designed for minimum impact on the earth and wildlife. It's a modern way for ranches to gain equity in real estate while preserving the land. While the rest of the world speeds up, Deer Canyon offers a chance to slow down and immerse in nature's harmony.

Jackrabbits and cottontails scamper in the sagebrush at Deer Canyon. No city noises here--just the chirping birds and the wind rustling through the trees. And then a sound from America's past as one of 100 trains every 24 hours approaches, its whistle sounding faintly in the distance as it zooms through this landscape of pink and white wild cosmos, yellow marigolds, sunflowers, and white asters.

The train is headed for civilization, but Deer Canyon is an oasis from urban life. Weather passes through Deer Canyon just as rapidly as the train: quick-moving thundershowers freshen the ground with the fragrant earthy scent of wild herbs and grasses, then the skies turn blue again minutes

later. Sometimes, the sun shines even as showers sprinkle gently in what the Navajo call a "female rain." New Mexico folklore has it that during such sun showers the devil is beating his wife in the sky. At night, when dusk comes to Deer Canyon, the sunsets stretch in magenta hues streaked with milky blue for hundreds of miles.

Who's Moving In

It all seemed like a mirage when Anita Soluna first drove into Mountainair. "The wide open spaces, the fresh air, the no traffic! The blue skies with white fluffy clouds," describes Soluna, who had been a social worker in Los Angeles whose 35-mile commute to work used to take her an hour each way in heavy traffic. Now, she finds, "It's very spiritual being here. You can feel the power of nature and the history—the spirits of the people who lived on the land are still here."

Soluna, 60, and her husband, Ray Terhorst, 61, had lived in Los Angeles all their lives. He'd been a law-enforcement officer for 34 years, and then he retired and became a mediator. It's a line of work he expects to practice in New Mexico, now that the couple is living here full time, having purchased land at Deer Canyon.

Deer Canyon is a nature conservancy operated by Heritage Preserve, which is a division of Verde Realty, a diversified real-estate investment trust (REIT) headquartered in El Paso, Texas. Buyers at Deer Canyon in phases I and II purchase spacious homesites up to 20 acres which can never be subdivided, and which cost from \$155,000 to \$175,000. The common open space is deeded to a non-profit conservation trust and owned by Verde Realty. Homes cost \$350,000 upwards to construct. The tranquility and lack of stress are priceless.

Recounts Terhorst, "We bought our first day here, in October 2005, and we've never looked back. The appeal was being in a nature preserve where there was conservation and preservation, and the idea that the roads would never be paved and we would keep things as pristine as we could. For me, it's been an adventure in green building. I'm doing a rainwater harvesting project that will allow me to bring the rainwater into the house for use!"

Soluna and Terhorst are supervising construction of their home, complete with a meditation tower. She's taking art classes in town; he's learned to make red-chile mole at a cooking class. She walks for six miles every morning at Deer Canyon, and will soon be substitute teaching at Mountainair's public schools; he plays golf and competitive badminton three times a week at the Mountainair Community Center. Their life isn't about avoiding traffic anymore. It's about sighting deer and jackrabbits.

The two remember a day when they were in the process of relocating. Terhorst, already in Mountainair, left home to drive to Santa Fe at the same time that Soluna left their house in Sylmar to drive to LAX. After 90 minutes, he was in Santa Fe; she was still on the freeway caught in traffic trying to reach the airport. "In L.A., we were feeling suffocated," Terhorst says. "Here, we know when the homesites are sold off; there won't be any more expansion for perpetuity. It's set up by the covenants." Of a total of 446 lots, 153 were sold as of mid-2007.

Soluna and Terhorst are renting a three-bedroom house in Mountainair as they build on their land at Deer Canyon—and this, too, is remarkably stress-free. "We don't have any kind of rental agreement," Terhorst points out. "It's a matter of integrity and honor here. When you shake a hand to make a deal, that's your word. It means something here. In L.A., you shake hands and you still sign 14 pages of documents."

Their neighbors at Deer Canyon include a concert pianist, a botanist, and a nurse. Another Deer Canyon resident just bought the grocery store in Mountainair, population 1,100, and is stocking soymilk, strawberries, and other gourmet items to cater to Deer Canyon's incoming residents. Folks are moving to Deer Canyon from both coasts and from urban centers. What they have in common is an adventurous spirit and an interest in land conservation. Many are animal lovers. Says Soluna, "We came with two dogs, a cat, a parrot, and a turtle. We've added a New Mexico dog. He's a shorthaired blue heeler. Everyone in New Mexico has one of these dogs. The short hair is great because he can run through the brush without sagebrush and burrs and chaparral getting onto him." The new dog's name is Little Bear; they got him from a Mountainair café owner.

New Mexico is the nation's fifth-largest state, yet only has a population of two million. There is currently only one telephone area code for the entire state; that will increase to two in 2008. Being out in nature where he can identify the chirrups of finches, canyon wrens, and mountain bluebirds, yet only 90 minutes from Santa Fe's art galleries via a rural back road that traverses fields of green grass with grazing horses, was the draw for Richard Fagerstrom. A bio-statistician based in Washington, D.C., Fagerstrom, 54, will vacation at Deer Canyon for now, with plans to retire here in perhaps a decade.

"I really love New Mexico—just the clarity of the sky and the air. The sense of the vastness of the landscape! The absence of air pollution really leads to a certain vividness of colors in the sky. The blueness of the sky is just unmatched by anywhere around Washington," Fagerstrom says. "I also find the state has lately become really quite progressive, especially with respect to alternative energy and things of that nature."

Ecologically Sound Development

Deer Canyon Preserve is an approximately 18,000-acre, private nature preserve; 90 percent of this land will remain in open space. Wildlife habitats will remain undisturbed even as the homes are constructed by approved builders. Deer Canyon proves you can do quality development and still protect the land, that land conservation is valuable, and that this value can be preserved into perpetuity. With a conservation easement development such as this, the land is administered under the sanction of a nonprofit land trust; owners must conserve and protect the land according to regulations.

Roads are professionally maintained, and utilities and water run to property lines underground. Through water harvesting and water catchment systems, the water aquifers are replenished. Residents can live here self-sufficiently while conserving energy and resources, and at the same time partaking of Internet service, air conditioning, and the luxuries of modern life.

They can observe the cholla cactus that blooms in June and the views of mountain ranges year-round. Deer Canyon is situated at altitudes from 6,500 to 7,000 feet, where deer bound through the old-growth juniper and piñon, and rabbits

race through the manzanita. Next to Deer Canyon is another 180,000 acres of forested public lands that are available for recreation. Views at Deer Canyon literally stretch hundreds of miles. This is raw country, John Wayne movie country. And yet, stay a night at Deer Canyon's Pueblo Guest House, like Mary and Mike Olivera from Santa Fe did, and you'll find it stocked with wine, steaks, salad fixings, and potatoes. The Oliveras grilled outside, and all they heard was the birds. They watched the sun set on the Manzanos in streaky tangerines and reds, and they realized they could help develop this country beautifully and still save the land.

Business gets negotiated at the Deer Canyon office in downtown Mountainair, where issues of the "Robb Report," "American Cowboy," and "Nature Conservancy" are spread out along with such coffee-table books as "Wildflowers of the Manzanos" and "Rainwater Harvesting." "You can see a rainstorm coming 100 miles away," points out vice president of sales and marketing Justin Ruby, a charismatic blonde-haired Floridian who's traded in his flip-flops for cowboy boots. "There's no ambient light at night, so it's like you can pluck the stars from the sky," he says. The typical buyer? "From their late 40s to their early 60s, someone who's saved money, who's probably from the East Coast or West Coast, who cares about conservation, who wants their acreage in the West, and who's buying a second home that will eventually become a primary residence," says Ruby.

Next door, at Abo Trading Company, they're selling Santa Fe-style furniture, like a carved wooden bench for \$895 and leather bar stools for \$175. Mexican crosses made in everything from barbed wire to wrought iron are priced from \$20 to \$90. Down the street is the Shaffer Hotel & Restaurant, built in 1923, and still furbished with its original pueblo art-deco ceilings. The Shaffer is buzzing at lunchtime when Ruby brings us in.

Montaraz Near Ruidoso Is Next

Ruby divides his time between Mountainair and Ruidoso, a two-hour drive to the south and the site where Heritage is readying to break ground on its newest conservation development in late 2007: Montaraz, formerly the Mesa Ranch. At Montaraz, there will be 253 home sites spread out over 1,365 acres, with from two to 10-acre homesites, and building envelopes limited to one acre. The average

homesite size will be five acres. Here the homeowners are expected to be slightly younger, mostly aged 45 to 55 and more social. Most will be buying a second home that may become a primary home when they retire. They'll be passionate about the outdoors, and particularly about the equestrian options at Montaraz, which will have in-and-out horse stalls, indoor and outdoor arenas, hot walkers, and wash racks at the main stables.

As we approach Ruidoso, the road climbs up and ponderosa pines tower 75-feet high. It looks more like lush Colorado or Lake Tahoe in this mountain town, than like New Mexico. This used to be Smokey Bear country and Billy the Kid country; nowadays Ruidoso is home to the highest-stakes quarter-horse race in the world every Labor Day at Ruidoso Downs: the All-American Futurity.

Ruidoso, population 9,000 and swelling to an estimated 30,000 or more in the summer, is a full-fledged resort with yoga studios, art galleries, fine shopping, gourmet coffee houses, fine dining, spas, and manicures, along with fishing, skiing, hiking, biking, horseback riding, and golfing. During summer 2007, there were performances by Glen Campbell, the Beach Boys, Lynn Anderson, and Pat Benatar. Irises were on sale all summer at the Hondo Iris Farm. The C.S. Lewis play "Shadowlands" was mounted at the Spencer Theater, designed by world-famous New Mexico architect Antoine Predock with glass installations by Dale Chihuly. There are studio tours and rodeos, a casino at Ruidoso Downs, and another at the cushy Inn of the Mountain Gods owned by the Mescalero Apache Indian tribe. The activities are as diverse as equine massage, visits to Dave McGary's Expressions in Bronze Gallery, and motorcycle rallies. Ruidoso Downs Race Track runs from Memorial Day through Labor Day, and hosts festivals for everything from New Mexico wines to pecans. With El Paso only two hours to the south, Texas plates are everywhere in town.

Montaraz (Spanish for "edge of wilderness") itself stands at an altitude of 7,200 feet just outside Ruidoso. Bordering Montaraz on three sides is Lincoln National Forest, providing 1.1 million acres of protected national forest with 6,000 acres for riding trails for Montaraz residents. The Lincoln National Forest comprises portions of the Capitan Mountains, Guadalupe Mountains, Sacramento Mountains, and Sierra Blanca. Elevations rise to 11,500

feet, with vegetation ranging from rare cacti to Engelmann spruce.

In a day's horseback ride, Montaraz residents can venture deep into the Lincoln National Forest for even more remote riding on trails in the White Mountain Wilderness Area, which boasts 50,000 acres without motorized vehicles, bikes or telephone poles. Travel is only allowed by foot or horseback. Consisting of broad forested canyons with a few small streams, the wilderness adjoins the Mescalero Apache Reservation. Deer and elk abound in the alpine meadows along the Crest Trail. "I ride there almost every weekend, looking for elk," says Montaraz site manager Rich Sanborn. "You can ride up to the timberline."

Experiencing Montaraz

The air is crisp and clean the next morning when we drive into Montaraz. The tall western wheat grass sways in a gentle breeze and the mountains are tinged with mauve. There's not a cloud in the cornflower-blue sky. The only evidence of the 21st century is a Stealth jet that swiftly swoops through on a mission from Holloman Air Force Base in nearby Alamogordo. Wildflowers abound--Indian paintbrush, Mexican Hat sunflowers, tiny Easter daisies, and purple verbena.

Rocky Mountain elk transplanted from Yellowstone Park in the 1960s are thriving here. Sometimes 30 or 40 of them thunder through at a time, stopping traffic on the road. It's not unusual to see 100 of them in a day--bull elk with horns, cow elk, and "nursery groups" containing the elk calves born each May. "They like the terrain--it's not real steep and there's a lot of grass and hay. They live at Montaraz and in the national forest," says Sanborn. Mule deer bound about too, browsing on leaves and bushes.

"When it rains, you smell the pines. It's a real clean smell," says Jody Jolly, the longtime groundskeeper for the ranch, which was founded in 1896 as a farming and horse ranch. "There's so many elk and deer out here. They come in close in the morning and the evening. Pretty much all you hear is the elk bugling and the birds."

Jolly oversees the historic adobe house where prospective clients are taken to close their deals. With 12-inch thick adobe walls, intricate woodwork, wood-planked floors, wood-

paneled walls, and a still-functional wood cook stove and stone fireplace, the two-story house was built in 1904. It was the home of rancher Fred (Peg) Pfingsten for many years. In the 1990s, it was purchased by bronze artist Wes Smith, who used it as his studio.

Construction at Montaraz will carefully preserve such natural plants as yarrow, wild roses, and penstemon, along with the plentiful piñon and ponderosa pines, and old growth alligator junipers, whose bark looks like leathered alligator skin. Bird feeders will cater to the hummingbirds, robins, chickadees and mountain jays.

Whereas Deer Canyon is a conservation easement community, Montaraz is a conservation development with smaller homesites, tentatively priced from \$150,000 to \$250,000, and homes estimated at \$300,000 upwards. Explains Sanborn, "Seventy percent of the acreage here is open space—it's never to be built on. We're green oriented, and we have very restrictive covenants that protect the land. Water catchment systems are required, so are low-flow showers, toilets, water wells, and water consumption. We have shared water wells, wildlife corridors, no hunting, and no buildings outside the building envelop. We save old-growth timber and restrict housing styles so the houses blend into the topography."

At Deer Canyon and Montaraz, "The homesites are different sizes but the same planning and conservation techniques are used at both places, with the exception of a conservation easement at Montaraz," sums up Homer Luther, VP of Heritage Preserve and oversees all NM properties. "First we study the ecology of the land and plan the open spaces. Then we are able to fit locations for houses within the needs of a healthy ecosystem. We then provide long term management and remediation which insures that the land will remain healthy, forever."

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