Complete Guide to The Villages Florida

by Ryan Erisman

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www.TheVillagesFloridaBook.com
Recommended Services

The services listed below are those we have either used ourselves or come highly recommended to us by our friends. As you can see we don’t recommend very many services because our standards are pretty high.

Rentals in The Villages

The Premier Website for Rental Homes in The Villages
www.TheVillages4Rent.com

For Sale By Owner Website

This is the best resource we have found for finding homes being sold by owner in The Villages
www.TheVillagesFSBO.com

Moving Services in The Villages

The Village Mover - 352-751-2750
villagemover1@yahoo.com

I’ve used The Village Mover twice now personally, and both moves have been flawless. His crews are super polite and careful, yet quick and efficient. They charge by the hour which I was a little wary of at first, but when you see how quickly they move you’ll be happy.

Real Estate Agents in The Villages


Lyle is a veteran of real estate in The Villages and he has a very informative website.
Chapter 1: An Introduction to Florida

If you are one of the thousands of people thinking of buying real estate in The Villages anytime in the next several years, this book is for you. My goal for this book is to answer the questions that you might have about buying a home in The Villages and eventually moving to Florida to enjoy your retirement.

Though likely inhabited by Native Americans for thousands of years before Europeans set eyes on it, Florida was “discovered” in 1513 by Juan Ponce de Leon who claimed it for Spain. Ponce de Leon named it Florida, because he landed here during “Pascua Florida,” the festival of flowers during the Easter season.

The next several hundred years were a tumultuous time in Florida with various parts of the state changing hands several times between the Spanish, French, and British. After Britain’s defeat in the Revolutionary War, Spain regained control of Florida, but later ceded it to the United States. Florida became the 27th state on March 3, 1845.

Florida Fast Facts
Capital: Tallahassee
Nickname: The Sunshine State
State Flower: Orange Blossom
State Beverage: Orange Juice
State Bird: Mockingbird
State Tree: Sabal Palmetto Palm
Funky Fact: State Pie: Key Lime

Since it became a state, Florida has seen steady and sometimes explosive growth. Today more than a thousand people a day set their sights on
moving to Florida. Most of them are chasing fantastic year-round weather and a slower pace of life.

Why do People Move to Florida?

The two main reasons people consistently name for moving to Florida are the great weather, and the slower pace of life. But let me tell you about another attractive feature of living in Florida.

Taxes

Despite what you may have heard in the news or from other people, Florida is consistently ranked among the states with the lowest tax rate. It has less than half the tax burden per capita as New Jersey, the nation’s highest tax state per capita, making it a haven for retirees as well as businesses. The state sales tax is 6% and the corporate tax is 5.5%. One thing that attracts many people to Florida is that there is no state income tax. Any income that you plan to pull in from investments, pensions, or a second career during your retirement will only be taxed at the federal rate, which means more money for you in the end.

Another advantage is that since January 1, 2007, Florida residents no longer have to file an intangibles tax return on their stocks, bonds, mutual funds, money market accounts and other investments.

Florida Weather

Florida is well known for it's beautiful weather, with plenty of sunshine most days of the year. Thousands of Northerners affectionately referred to as “Snow Birds” flock to the state each winter to escape the frigid winter temperatures up north.
During the winter, temperatures average around the mid-fifties in the north part of the state, and the mid-sixties down south. You won’t find coat closets in most of the homes you see in Florida, but don’t let that fool you. In some parts of the state it can get below freezing, and it has been known to snow.

Florida’s weather is primarily subtropical, largely because it is nearly surrounded by water. In the summertime temperatures can get uncomfortably warm. Lots of folks who move to Florida from up north use the summer months to do some traveling, going back up north to see friends or traveling abroad. This is something that you may want to consider as well. There are days, especially in South Florida, where the mercury can top 100 degrees.

The average temperature in North Florida during the summertime is around 80 degrees while the average in South Florida is in the low to mid-eighties. You can also usually count on an afternoon rain shower or thunderstorm to cool you off a little bit on most summer days. Be careful during those afternoon thunderstorms in The Villages, as Central Florida is known as the lightning capital of the world. Florida has a rainy season that runs from June through October. This rainy season accounts for around 70% of Florida’s annual rainfall, which is between 50 and 60 inches for most parts of the state.

Regions of Florida

Even if you have your heart and mind set on The Villages, it will still be helpful to know a little bit about the other parts of Florida. This overview of Florida admittedly does not do any of the regions justice. This section has been kept brief to make room in the book for the important information you will need to
know about The Villages and Florida real estate.

(Panhandle)

This region is home to the state’s capital, Tallahassee, as well as Pensacola, Fort Walton Beach, and Panama City. People love the tranquility of the Panhandle, as it is one of the least heavily developed parts of Florida. However, as more people discover this region, this tranquility may not last.

(North East)

The areas of Jacksonville, St. Augustine, and Palm Coast are where the bulk of the population in this fast-growing region live. Palm Coast is located in the nation’s fastest growing county, Flagler County.

(East Coast)
Known as the “Space Coast” because shuttle launches take place here from Cape Canaveral, this region includes Ormond Beach, Daytona Beach, Port Orange, New Smyrna, Titusville, Melbourne, and Cocoa Beach. This region is growing rapidly not only because of Northerners retiring there, but also because of people moving up from South Florida, to escape the high home prices and congestion.

West Coast
Tampa, St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Bradenton, and Sarasota are the biggest populations centers in this region of the state. Also known as the Gold Coast, the west coast of Florida offers direct access to the Gulf of Mexico, which is perhaps a more serene option than the Atlantic Ocean.

Central Florida
This part of Florida is best known as a tourist destination because most of the theme parks in the state are located in central Florida. As you probably know, The Villages is located in Central Florida. Some other prominent cities include Orlando, Lake Mary, Altamonte Springs, Winter Park, Kissimmee, Leesburg, Ocala, Gainesville, and Lakeland.

South West
This region is popular with people from the Midwest U.S. who can hop on I-75 and shoot right down. Popular destinations in Southwest Florida include Naples, Marco Island, Cape Coral, Port Charlotte, and Fort Myers. Home prices in some of these cities are known to be among the highest in the state, but the beauty of the area may be unrivaled.

South East
Perhaps best known for Miami and South Beach, South East Florida offers much more. It has long been a retirement haven for people from the Northeast U.S. Home prices in this region can be high, depending on the
area. Major cities include Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, Hollywood, West Palm Beach, Boca Raton, Delray Beach, and Stuart. Most people consider the Florida Keys to be a part of South East Florida as well.

**MyFlorida.com Website**

The state of Florida has compiled a great resource for residents and visitors at its official website, myflorida.com. It's a portal for almost any kind of Florida information you would want or need. Seeking information about how to get a Florida driver's license? Myflorida.com. Want to research the history of Florida? Myflorida.com. Looking for data about taxes, insurance, roadways, employment, recreation, or health care in Florida? Myflorida.com. You can even write a letter to the governor (Charlie Christ, who was inaugurated on January 2, 2007) from the website. Anytime you are not sure where to look for information about Florida, start at myflorida.com.

Visit [http://www.myflorida.com](http://www.myflorida.com)

**Chapter 2: An Introduction to The Villages**

Consistently one of the most talked about, written about, and searched for Florida retirement communities, The Villages is an active adult (55 and over) community located in central Florida. The Villages is located about 60 miles northwest of Orlando, and spans parts of three counties: Lake, Marion, and Sumter. The Villages is the creation of central Florida’s well-known Schwartz family, and continues to be run by the family today.

If you are interested in learning about the demographic make-up of The Villages, check out this site: [http://www.city-data.com/city/The-Villages-Florida.html](http://www.city-data.com/city/The-Villages-Florida.html)
The Villages is a golf cart community, meaning golf carts can be safely and legally driven on special trails built especially for carts and along most of the roads 24 hours a day. This is a huge draw for residents. Being able to drive your golf cart to the grocery store, the post office, to dinner, even the hospital. You’ll read more about golf in The Villages later in the next chapter.

One of the biggest draws of The Villages is the many amenities available to the residents (affectionately known as “Villagers”). From the many golf courses, recreational facilities, restaurants, movie theaters, shopping and other lifestyle options, there’s always something to do in The Villages. You’ll read more about all the fun Villagers are having in Chapter 4.

The Villages is developed and maintained using what's known as a Community Development District (CDD). There are more than 200 communities in Florida that are currently using this form of government. Read more about The Villages CDD’s in Chapter 7.

There are 2 homeowners associations in The Villages. The Property Owners Association (POA) and The Villages Homeowners Association (VHA). You can read more about these in Chapter 8.

**Active Adult / 55-Plus communities**

As I mentioned, The Villages is an active adult community (aka 55-plus community). 55-plus communities are communities where the majority of the homeowners are over the age of 55. For a community to qualify for the 55-plus designation and to be marketed as such, at least 80 percent of the units have to be occupied by at least one person over 55. A common misconception is that everyone must be over 55 but that simply isn’t true. On the other hand, this does not mean that someone under 55 must be allowed to purchase a home. A
community--through its deed restrictions--can legally deny someone the ability to purchase a home if they are not yet 55 years old.

In The Villages the rule is that at least one person who is 55 or older must occupy the home. Those under the age of 19 can visit for a MAXIMUM of 30 days per year, but may not live with you permanently in your home.

**Costs of Living in The Villages**

You’ve worked hard for your money and you’re not one to throw it all away to finance a lifestyle you can’t afford without knowing what all the costs are. Believe me I know. But living in The Villages IS pretty reasonable.

Now, the package that you get from The Villages will have a sheet with a monthly cost breakdown of what they estimate it will cost you to live in The Villages. But let me give you the basics here and you can decide for yourself if it’s within your budget.

**Mortgage payment:** (NOTE that this is NOT included in the Cost of Living Estimates from The Villages, but hey, not all of us can pay cash for our new home.) So, for a $250,000 home with a 10% down payment at 6.5% interest for 30 years your monthly payment would be: $1422.15

**Amenities fee:** Currently $135

**Homeowners Insurance:** Depending on the size and value of your home expect to pay between $80 and $150 per month.

**Property Taxes:** Again this will depend on the value of your home, whether you qualify for homestead, and which county it is located in (more on all this in
Chapter 9). But for a $250,000 home count on paying between $3,000 and $4,500 per year, which works out to between $250 and $375 per month.

**CDD Assessments:** This will vary based on the size and value of your home but range anywhere from $100 to over $600 per month.

**Utilities:** These are your water, sewer, garbage, power, phone, and cable. Budget at least $350-$400 for these combined. Your actual bills may be more or less, based on your usage but this figure is for the basics.

While the “Estimated Monthly Cost of Living” worksheet in your package from The Villages shows a total of under $1,000 per month, as you can see by my estimates here, you could be looking at quite a bit more per month, especially if you have a mortgage. But again, when compared to other parts of the country and other parts of Florida, its a pretty good deal in my opinion.

Plus, you have to think about what all you get in terms of lifestyle and enjoyment just from calling The Villages home. Let’s explore that a bit more in the next couple chapters.

**Chapter 3: Golf in The Villages**

Florida is considered by many to be the golf capital of the U.S. There's even a license plate proclaiming just that. If Florida is the golf capital, The Villages might be considered the golf capital of Florida.

There are now 26 Executive courses in The Villages. Yes, you read that right...24! These nine-hole courses are mostly par 3's with a few par 4's and the rare par 5 sprinkled in for fun.
These courses are free for residents to play...if you live in The Villages, you're in! You'll pay no greens fees and if you want to walk the course it's free. But, there is a small fee for golf cart rental. You can also use your own cart and pay a trail fee either daily, semi-annually, or annually.

In addition to the 24 Executive Courses there are 9 Championship courses in The Villages...most have 27 holes. Residents of The Villages are automatically members of these courses as well, but unfortunately they are not free to play.

The Villages Championship courses are immaculately kept, fun to play courses. Some of them were designed by the games biggest names in golf like Arnold Palmer and Nancy Lopez.

Priority golf memberships are available at 2...3...4...or all Championship courses. Priority membership gives you access to priority tee times and reduced greens fees (ranging from $14 to $30). Plus you are allowed to use all the country club pools and spas, and get a few other benefits. Choosing all of the courses will set you back $925/year for a couple. Not bad. Oh yeah, and cart rentals are just $7.

For more details on the golf choices available to you in The Villages visit [http://www.golfthevillages.com](http://www.golfthevillages.com) or [http://thevillages.com/Golf/golf.asp](http://thevillages.com/Golf/golf.asp)

If you think you might get bored with the courses in The Villages (though this may take a while!) you could check out some of the other courses around. Try [http://www.playfla.com](http://www.playfla.com) and [http://www.floridagolferguide.com](http://www.floridagolferguide.com)

**Chapter 4: Life is More Fun in The Villages**
O.k., maybe you aren’t a golf nut like a lot of the people moving to The Villages. If that were the case with most golfing communities in Florida, you might be out of luck. But not so in The Villages!

To begin with The Villages Recreation Department organizes and runs hundreds of activities and events throughout the week. You’ve of course got your swimming pools (family pools, sport pools for aerobics or laps) and parks, lakes for fishing, softball and sport fields, recreation centers throughout The Villages with things like tennis courts, shuffleboard, bocce, horseshoes, billiard tables and more. For information on everything the Recreation Department puts together visit: http://thevillages.com/recreation/recreation.asp

Then you’ve got lots of organized entertainment in the town squares (Spanish Springs and Lake Sumter Landing) like live music and dancing almost every night of the year. The town squares also house restaurants and shopping galore. Plus there are two movie theaters to choose from, Rialto Theatre and Old Mill Playhouse that show all of todays current big hit movies.

Depending on the night, there are also classic car shows, festivals, parades...you name it! For more information and entertainment schedules visit: http://thevillages.com/lifestyle/lifestyle.htm

Clubs and Organizations

There is also a long list of clubs and organizations that Villagers have joined together to form. Among them are (and this is a SMALL sample):

- Amateur Radio
- Archery
- Badminton
- Ballet
- Basketball
- Billiards
• Bird Watching
• Canoeing
• Ceramics
• Computer Club
• Democrats
• Folk music
• Foreign Film
• Genealogy
• Gin Rummy
• Golf Cart Drill Team
• Harmonica
• Kiwanis
• Knitting
• Mac Users
• Parrot Heads
• Pet Lovers
• Red Hat
• Scrabble
• Scuba
• Table tennis
• Tai Chi
• Wine Club
• AND SO MANY MORE!

For a great list as well as information on contact these clubs and groups visit: http://clubs.the-villages-online.com/

Chapter 5: Getting to (really) Know The Villages

Since you likely live hundreds -- if not a thousand -- miles away from The Villages, the best place to start your search is online. In fact, that’s probably where you found this book, so good thinking!

Visit the website of the local newspaper for The Villages… The Villages Daily Sun … and do some general exploring and reading. You can find information on the history of the area, photo tours, web cams and virtual tours. Don’t forget to scan the real estate classifieds to get a feel for home prices. It will also be helpful to read some local articles and editorials. These can give you a
sense of the feel of the area, and reveal items of interest or concern for the local residents.

_The Villages Daily Sun_

_http://www.thevillagesdailysun.com_

Local Radio and TV news stations also have some excellent resources on their websites. Radio stations can be especially helpful for finding information in line with your interests. For example, a community calendar for a country music station might list events that would appeal to their typical listener. These events would be different than events that might interest an oldies or easy listening crowd.

The Villages has its own radio station, 640 AM (WVLG). _http://www.thevillagesdailysun.com/wvlg/WVLG.html_

It’s also good to check the websites of local news affiliates. Here are the websites of those:

- ABC (WFTV) - _http://www.wftv.com/index.html_
- CBS (WKMG) - _http://www.local6.com/index.html_
- NBC (WESH) - _http://www.wesh.com/index.html_
- FOX (WOFL) - _http://www.myfoxorlando.com_

_Getting Personal_

It goes without saying that you should talk to friends, relatives, or people they may know already living in The Villages, but don’t overlook people in your extended network or sphere of influence. For example, did your golf buddy’s brother-in-law recently move to The Villages? Give him a call and get the scoop.
Spend some time at http://www.talkofthevillages.com At this website, which is sort of an online community/message site for residents and prospective residents of The Villages, you can essentially “spy” on the residents...and of course I don’t mean “spy” on them in the stalker type sense...but you can sit back and listen to their conversations and see what’s really going on in everyday life in The Villages.

Visit other online groups and search for topics involving “The Villages Florida”. Google Groups and Yahoo Groups are great starting places. You can usually count on people being quite frank with their feelings about each topic in these online groups.

Check out: http://groups.google.com and http://groups.yahoo.com

Home Prices

To get a general feel for what the prices of homes are like in The Villages, visit sites like http://www.thevillagesfsbo.com/, http://www.TheVillagesPreowned.com and http://www.Realtor.com

Realtor.com will show you all the homes listed in the Multiple Listing Service for the city or zip code that you specify. Enter your required number of bedrooms and bathrooms as well as your price range and see which homes come up as a result.

Two real estate websites, Zillow.com and Trulia.com, have neat features where you can enter a zip code or city and see a colored-coded map which reveals where the prices are more or less expensive.

http://www.realtor.com
http://www.zillow.com
http://www.trulia.com

Magazines

One magazine you should check out for great articles and content on The Villages and surrounding areas is Lake Magazine at http://thelakemagazine.net/lake.php

Order Your FREE Villages Information Package

Visit http://thevillages.com/freetour/freetour.asp to request your Free Villages information package. This will come neatly dressed in a folder that looks like a suitcase (pretty nice presentation) and includes a DVD and a lot of literature about the homes available as well as information about the general lifestyle of The Villages.

Set up a Visit to The Villages

Now that you’ve gathered a bunch of information on The Villages, its time to make a visit. The Villages offers a “visitation” program where you can go and visit The Villages, stay in one of the home there, and really experience what its like to live in The Villages. While it’s not free, the rates are much better than getting a local hotel room, even a budget hotel at that.


When you visit any area, but especially one you’ve never been to before, there are certain things you’ll want to look for to help you decide if this is an area you might like to live in. Drive through some different parts of The Villages and see if you like what you see.
As you are driving, are you seeing restaurants, businesses, shopping centers and so forth that look appealing to you and that match your ideal lifestyle? Stop in at some different establishments like the many restaurants and stores and take a look around. Ask people you come in contact with what they like or don’t like about living in The Villages. See if they have any recommendations for homes they know are for sale or any other relevant information they are willing to share.

Facilities and Services

Most people agree that there is no shortage of facilities and services in The Villages. But you still need to look for the amenities that are important to you. Is the library nearby and on par with what you want and expect? What about medical facilities? Check to make sure The Villages cultural activities, recreation facilities, parks, golf courses, and whatever else is important to you are available at a level that will fit your needs and desires.

Make a list of your current weekly activities (garden club, rotary, church, etc.) and be sure that the area you choose provides you the opportunities to continue to do what you enjoy.

Chapter 6: Types of Homes in The Villages

Your information package from The Villages that I suggested you order earlier in the book will have full details on the types of homes and villas that are available as well as current pricing and availability. You will also be able to see what the actual floor plans look like.

But, to hold you over until then, here are some of the basics:

Manufactured Homes
You can still find some manufactured homes for sale in older parts of The Villages. Prices typically start below $90k and run up to about $150k.

**Villas**

There are two types of Villas in The Villages, Courtyard Villas and Patio Villas. Besides the manufactured homes these are going to be your most economical (least expensive) housing option when considering The Villages. Currently, pricing on Villas start in the $170k’s (at press time) and go up from there.

**Courtyard and Patio Villas**

These are available in either concrete block construction (“Savannah Style”) or wood frame with vinyl siding (“Keys Style”). The Keys style being less expensive. Sizes range from just over 1100 sq. ft living area to just under 1700 sq. ft. living area.

The patio villas (all wood frame with vinyl siding) are available in two models both under 1200 sq. ft. living area. Prices start in the $200k’s.

**Homes**

There are three types of homes (each with several different floor plans) available in The Villages. These consist of Ranch Homes, Designer Homes, and Premier Homes.

**Ranch Homes**

These are 2 and 3 bedroom, 2 bath floor plans ranging in size from about 1100 to almost 1400 square feet of living area. Ranch Home prices start in the $200k’s.

**Designer Homes**

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www.TheVillagesFloridaBook.com
A step up from the Ranch Homes are the Designer Homes. These are mostly 3 bedroom and 2 bath floor plans ranging in size from just under 1400 square feet living area to just under 2100 square feet living area. Prices for Designer Series homes start in the $240k’s and go up from there.

Premier Homes

The “creme de la creme” in The Villages are the Premier Homes, where prices start in the $500k’s. These range in size from 2300 square feet living area to over 3600. If you’re looking for total luxury (or are used to it already!) these are the homes you’ll want to look at.

New Homes vs. Resale

When considering a home purchase in The Villages one of the first decisions you should make is whether to buy a brand new home, or buy a resale (previously occupied) home. Your decision will depend on several factors including how quickly you need a home, your personal taste, and other factors. Here are some pros and cons of both.

Pros of Buying a Brand New Home in The Villages

One of the best things about a brand new home is that it is under warranty from the builder. If (almost) anything goes wrong while the home is under warranty, you won’t be charged to have it fixed.

Plus, some people just have a mental fixation with “newness”. They won’t buy anything that someone has owned (think used car) or lived in (a house) before. And that’s o.k. This is your retirement, your winter home, whatever...you should be able to decide this and no one else!
Also, another advantage of buying a brand new is that you may qualify for better insurance rates because the home will be built to current building codes.

Keep in mind that when buying a new home in The Villages, you have to take whatever is currently available, there isn’t an option to build and customize from scratch. New homes in The Villages though have had their colors and optional upgrades chosen professionally and tastefully. But hey, you can always redecorate to your liking after you own the home.

Cons of Buying a New Home in The Villages

One of the cons of buying a new home in The Villages is that you will sometimes have to wait for the home to be finished, unless they already have the style of home you want in their inventory (commonly referred to as “spec” homes or “quick move-in” homes). If you are on a tight schedule, or you do not want to find a temporary place to live while your home is being finished, you might want to pass on buying a new home.

Pros of Buying a Resale Home in The Villages

One pro of buying a resale home is that unless you have plans to do some remodeling before you move in, the home is ready to be occupied, and you know exactly what you’re getting.

Most home sellers are open to negotiation on price. Again, this depends on the market, and in some cases why the seller is selling. Helping you negotiate is where your real estate agent comes in handy.

Cons of Buying a Resale Home in The Villages
With a resale home you are not able to choose your décor such as tile and carpet, cabinets and countertops, or make any customization or personalization until after the purchase and, even then, not without a remodeling budget. It is what it is. Someone else has chosen the colors and materials, and their tastes may differ from your own. Something else to consider is that, depending on the age and construction of the home, your insurance may cost more.

Additionally, if you want the protection of a home warranty, it must be purchased separately at your expense, unless the seller provides one. Also, don’t forget you’ll need a home inspection, which you can read more about in Chapter 12.

**Should you Rent?**

Another possibility for you to consider is renting a home for a year or two while you acclimate yourself to Florida and The Villages. This can be helpful for someone who isn’t sure they want to retire in a certain place, or live in a certain neighborhood, or type of home. You can try it out, and when your lease is up, you can decide what to do from there. A good place to start your search for a rental is [http://www.thevillages4rent.com/](http://www.thevillages4rent.com/)

Most experts agree that in most cases buying is better than renting. Not so much because of future appreciation that can take several years to realize, but for the tax benefits of owning, like deducting mortgage interest and real estate taxes. But in a situation where you are the least bit unsure of your decision, renting may be the answer. It would do you very little good to plunk down tons of money on a new home, only to decide you hate the area, and in six months or a year later pick up and find a new home in a new area.

There are other problems with renting as opposed to buying, including the difficulty of finding something that suits your tastes and housing needs. Plus, if
you do find a place, since you don't own the home you’ll be restricted in making any changes to its appearance.

Chapter 7: Neighborhoods in The Villages

The Villages is comprised of several smaller neighborhoods that collectively make up The Villages. Below are the names of some of the more popular neighborhoods, with links to their respective websites (if available).

- Amelia
- Belevedere
- Chatham  [http://users.thevillages.net/chatham](http://users.thevillages.net/chatham)
- Corbet
- Duval  [http://villageofduval.googlepages.com/](http://villageofduval.googlepages.com/)
- Hemingway
- Lynnhaven  [http://home.comcast.net/%7EAskal/](http://home.comcast.net/%7EAskal/)
- Poinciana
- Tierra Del Sol
- Villa Vista
Chapter 8: Common Questions About The Villages

I get asked questions almost every day about The Villages. Listed below are answers to some of the ones I get asked a lot. To see the whole list of questions and answers visit: http://www.thevillagesfloridabook.com/category/questionandanswer/

**Question**: I am considering purchasing in The Villages in the next year - year and a 1/2. Unfortunately, I will not be able to fully retire for a few years and will need to rent my home. Do you have any information on rental costs, advertising, contracts, rental information for both owner and tenant?

**Answer**: This is a common question I get a lot here. Mostly from people who have not lived in Florida or The Villages before and want to try it out for a little while before biting the bullet and buying a home here. This is usually a pretty smart idea. It's also common for people to buy a home several years before they retire and rent it out to help pay the mortgage or get some rental income.

Whatever the case is for you, this is the best source I have found for information about rentals in The Villages: http://TheVillages4Rent.com

**Question**: What is the zip code (postal code) for The Villages?

**Answer**: The most common zip code in The Villages is 32162, but The Villages also includes zip codes 32159 and 32163

**Question**: Are there equestrian activities near The Villages?

**Answer**: The Villages is only 30 minutes from Ocala. Ocala is well known as the horse capital of Florida. According to Wikipedia there are over 1,200 horse farms in total and about 600 thoroughbred farms.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ocala,_Florida

A quick search of google for ocala equestrian should give you some good leads to go on.

http://www.google.com/search?q=ocala+equestrian

**Question**: When does the villages have their car show in February? Have heard so much about this event. Please advise.

**Answer**: The Villages Cruise-In takes place at the Spanish Springs Town Square every 3rd Saturday of the Month 3:30-7:30
Here is the website: http://www.thevalvillagestorationcarclub.org/

**Question:** How old do you have to be to drive a golf cart in The Villages?

**Answer:** Under Florida law, the driver must be at least 14 yrs. old. However you do not need a license to operate a golf cart.

Here you can find more golf cart safety guidelines for The Villages: http://districtgov.org/vccdd/golfcart-safety.asp

**Question:** My family and I are looking into moving to Florida and have heard that some of these communities are looking for younger people to work and live within them.

**Answer:** The Villages is a fast growing place. In fact, its one of the few places in Florida that saw a net increase in people living there in the past year. Because of the growth, there are new restaurants and businesses opening all the time. Commercial growth (businesses, restaurants, etc.) always follows residential growth. Kind of the opposite of “if you build it they will come.” It’s really, “if they come, well I guess you should build it now.”

So as it relates to jobs and employment for younger folks, yes, there are plenty of opportunities in The Villages. I’ve found that Careers in The Villages http://www.careersinthevillages.com/default.asp is probably the best place to start.

**Question:** We have made a reservation to ‘check out’ the Villages in December and forgot to ask if there are any dog parks in the village?

**Answer:** There is “Paradise Dog Park” in The Villages. Also a park called “Doggy Do” in Lady Lake.

I looked to see if either had a website or contact information online but neither one did. You might also try looking here: http://www.districtgov.org/vccdd/recreation/index.asp

**Question:** What are the popular spots as far a restaurants and shopping go? I would appreciate any info that you could give me.

**Answer:** At this site, you will find a list of some of the restaurants, shops, and entertainment (movie theaters, etc.) that are available in The Villages.

http://www.thevalvillagestoragecommercialproperty.com/properties.asp

You can click on each location for a list of current tenants (businesses).
Chapter 9: The Villages Community Development Districts (CDD’s)

Before diving into the CDD’s that make up The Villages, you should get a little background and clarification as to what a CDD actually is.

A Community Development District is a means used by local governments and developers to shift the burden of developing infrastructure, maintaining roads and landscaping, building clubhouses and other improvements to the homeowners in that district.

The way CDDs work is the CDD, run by a board that is chosen by the developer, issues bonds to pay for the infrastructure and other community improvements that new homeowners have to pay back over the course of a number of years, usually 20 to 30. The amount homeowners are assessed for this is typically added to their tax bill. This can be an unexpected extra expense if you are not familiar with the rules of the CDD.

A lot of people think that as more people move into the community, the amount of assessment will go down. This is not always the case. CDDs can be used to fund things such as clubhouses and ongoing improvements. If the clubhouse is running a growing deficit, who do you think pays for that? Of course, the homeowner. CDDs are not necessarily a bad thing though, as they can provide a community with amenities and services it otherwise might not get. You just have to be careful and know what you are getting yourself into before buying in a CDD.

You can learn more about Florida CDDs and search a list of current CDDs by county at: http://www.floridaspecialdistricts.org/OfficialList/
Now on to learning about the most important features of The Villages CDD’s: the fees and dues, and the rules you’ll be required to abide by.

Fees and dues

The amount that you will have to pay in CDD Assessments will vary based on which of The Villages CDD’s your unit is located in. These currently range from about $100 to over $600 per month. You can learn about all the different Villages districts at http://www.districtgov.org/index.asp

In addition to the CDD Assessment, you still have to pay other dues in The Villages (referred to as a Contractual Amenities Fee) which are currently $130 per month. This fee includes the free golf on executive courses I mentioned earlier, swimming, tennis, all the organized activities put on by the Recreation Department, fishing lakes, parks, walking, biking and fitness trails, 24 hour neighborhood watch service, and more.

Failure to pay your Contractual Amenities Fees or the CDD Assessment can result in a lien on your property and eventually foreclosure if you get far enough behind on your payments.

As a prospective purchaser in The Villages, you encouraged to review the budget. I also encourage you to attend a CDD Orientation which you can find out more about by visiting: http://www.districtgov.org/vccdd/school.asp

Common Rules and Regulations

Another aspect of communities with CDD’s is that they involve rules and regulations, or as they are referred to in The Villages, Deed Restrictions and Covenants. Be sure to ask for a copy before you sign any purchase agreement,
and make sure that the agreement is contingent on (depends upon) your understanding and approval of the Deed Restrictions and Covenants.

Some of the rules and regulations that are included in the documents are rules regarding:

**Changes to the exterior of your home**

The Villages requires that an architectural or design review committee approve any changes you wish to make to the exterior of your home. This includes things such as adding a screened-in patio, swimming pool, or painting your home a different color. Even changes to your landscaping must be approved.

There is a form called an “Architectural Approval form” they have you fill out on which you must describe in detail any changes you plan to make, including a list of materials to be used, who will do the work, and so on. You are also typically required to submit any drawings or plans that show how the change will look when complete. This is to keep everything in the neighborhood looking nice and congruent.

**Pets**

Only domestic pets are allowed, and they have to be on a leash when not inside your home. You are also required to pick up after your pet.

**No Fences**

This is a tough one if you like your privacy. There are no fences allowed (except where they have been installed by the builder/developer such as in the Patio Villas, for instance) and no hedges taller than 4 feet are allowed.
Boats, Trailers, RV’s

These are only allowed to be parked at your house with the permission of the Neighborhood Watch and only for a maximum of 72 hours. So, if you have one of these items you'll need to start looking for off-site storage facilities. If it fits in your garage though, there is no problem with that.

Keep in mind that this is not a complete list but you can find a longer more complete list online at http://districtgov.org/vccdd/deedrestrict.asp

It can sound like a pain to have to pay these fees and abide by these restrictions especially if you are coming from a community that doesn’t have any fees or restrictions. But all these fees and rules, as inconvenient as they may sometimes seem, do serve the important purpose of protecting your home values. If you are going to pay a quarter of a million dollars or more for your new home here in The Villages, you want to know that someone is looking out for you and your investment.

Chapter 10: The Villages Property Owner’s Association (POA) & Homeowners Associations (HOA)

You may be used to seeing new developments in Florida that are run by Homeowners Associations which in turn are run by the developer for communities that are still being developed and built. But the normal functions of the HOA like you’re thinking of are taken care of by The Villages CDD’s.

But that didn’t stop residents from forming an POA and an HOA of their own to serve as kind of “watchdog” groups for residents of The Villages.
The Villages Property Owner’s Association

The Villages POA is a group of residents not affiliated with the developer that acts as sort of a watchdog group for The Villages. Dues are just $10 yearly (includes a membership card and discounts at local businesses). Visit the POA website (address below) for some great information on current issues in The Villages.

I encourage you to join so that, if nothing else, you at least give the people making decisions concerning the future of The Villages the impression that someone is watching what they are doing and are concerned about the decisions they make and their impact on current and future residents.

The following in italics is from the POA Website which you can visit at: http://www.poa4us.org

POA Mission Statement

“The Property Owners’ Association of The Villages is an independent organization devoted to the home ownership experience in The Villages.

The Vision/Objective of the POA is to make The Villages an even better place in which to live, where Residents’ Rights are respected, and local government is responsive to the needs and interests of residents.

Specific POA attention is focused on housing, community, neighborhood, and government issues. Special emphasis is directed at Community Development Districts (CDDs) and the Florida Chapter 190 law that regulates CDD operations in The Villages.
The POA serves residents of The Villages through programs of education, research, analysis, representation, advocacy, and legislative action.

The POA also functions as a "watchdog" organization overseeing the actions of the developer and our local governments.

The POA has no ties or obligations to the developer of The Villages that might compromise the POA position or its advocacy of Residents' Rights.

The POA, founded in 1975, is the original homeowners' association in The Villages. Membership is open to all Villages residents.”

The Villages Homeowners Association

Similar in function to the POA, the HOA is a group of residents that serve the purpose of “protecting and enhancing the value of [your] lifestyle and homes [in The Villages].”

Dues for two years are just $12 and again, membership also gives you discounts at several local businesses. Again, you are encouraged to join as there is strength in numbers and civic value in letting your voice be heard.

From the HOA website (in italics) which you can visit at: http://thevillagesvoice.com

Our Goal: To protect and Enhance the Value of Our Lifestyle and Homes.

Our Mission: To enable and encourage constructive communications between the residents and the local government agencies and the developer.
The Association is a "not for profit corporation" organized under Chapter 617 Florida Statute. The specific purposes of the Association are:

* To promote and foster goodwill among all residents.

* To encourage a harmonious relationship and better communication between residents and Developer.

* To serve as a constructive and reasonable voice in dealing with resident/Developer and governmental issues.

* To act as a negotiator for the VHA membership in matters that are voted on by the members.

* To serve as an educational, as well as social stimulus to our members.

* To exercise all rights and powers conferred by the State of Florida upon nonprofit corporations.

Chapter 11: Property Taxes in The Villages

When people who are looking to buy in Florida ask me about the taxes I like to share a little bit of humor. I say Florida has no state income tax, so they make up for it with real estate taxes and speeding tickets. Speeding tickets is the funny part. The real estate taxes, on the other hand, are not so funny for some.

The real estate taxes that you pay on a home in The Villages can vary widely depending on which part of The Villages you are buying the home in.

Why the difference? Well, as I mentioned before, The Villages spans three counties, so you’ve essentially got three local county governments deciding what
residents of each will pay, not to mention other entities such as school boards, water management districts, etc.

Which is an interesting side-note. People often ask why residents of The Villages have to pay taxes to cover schools (which by the way can end up being almost 1/3 of your tax bill). The answer is really as simple as understanding that the tax burden must be spread around in a reasonable way and this is the only way the government sees fit to do it at this time.

Property Appraisal

The property appraiser’s office has the task of putting a value on your home. This will help determine the amount of tax you will be required to pay. However, the property appraiser is not the person who determines what your taxes will be. The local government does that when they set the millage rate.

Luckily, most of the time, you won’t pay taxes on the entire price of your home in The Villages. In Florida, property appraisers have a duty to assess your home at “just value.”

The typical property valuation is targeted between about 85-95 percent (but these are sometimes lower and sometimes higher) of what they think a particular property would sell for. If you just purchased a property, you are assessed at 85-95 percent of the amount you paid for it, that is, your contract price.

The property appraiser’s job involves figuring out a reasonable range of values that buyers would pay for a particular property. Property assessments are usually set at the lower end of that range, which is normally around 85 percent. This is a practice used in almost all Florida counties.
Many people wonder why the figures of 85-95 percent are used and not 100 percent. The lower figures are used to allow for closing costs, transfer taxes, and real estate commissions that may have been built into the final sales price but are not really part of the “value” in the home.

Some property appraisers are even taking into account the recent run-up of home prices in 2004 and 2005. Most realize it was a high percentage of investor demand that was driving the increase in values, as opposed to “real” demand, and to compensate they are assessing some homes in the 70 to 85 percent range.

While the above information is good to know, in order to get the possible “worst-case scenario” idea of what your taxes will be, use the 100 percent value for your financial planning. Then when you get your tax bill, if it happens to be lower, you will hopefully be pleasantly surprised.

**Millage Rate**

An essential element to figuring out how much your taxes will be is the millage rate, commonly referred to as “mil rate.” The millage rate is expresses as “mils per thousand.” For example if the millage rate is “17”, then you will pay $17 per $1,000 of assessed value.

Each taxing district will set its own millage rate which can be determined by dividing the total proposed budget of the taxing district (city, county, school district, etc.) by the total taxable value of all real estate in the district after exemptions are deducted for.

You will be taxed by your city, county, school district, water management district if there is one, and others. The local property appraiser’s office will be
your best resource for figuring out which of these apply to you based on where in The Villages you decide to purchase a home. (See links below)

It is also important to note that real estate taxes in Florida are paid in arrears, and you will have an opportunity to get a small discount for paying them early.

Links to the property appraiser’s offices that relate to The Villages:
Lake County Property Appraiser: http://www.lakecopropappr.com/
Marion County Property Appraiser: http://www.pa.marion.fl.us/
Sumter County Property Appraiser: http://www.sumterpa.com/

Once you find out the millage for the area of The Villages you are buying a home in, you can use this formula to figure out an estimate of your taxes:

How to figure out what your taxes (non-homesteaded) will be on a home you are purchasing:

Price you pay for the home (Contract price) $250,000
times x
90% (assuming middle of 85-95% range) 90%
equals =
“Just Value” $225,000
Divided by 1,000 /1000
equals = 225
Times mil rate (we’ll assume 17 mils per thousand) X 17
Equals your tax liability $3,825

State of Florida Homestead Exemptions

The state of Florida does provide some much needed tax relief in the form of homestead exemptions.

$50,000 Homestead Exemption
Florida’s constitution provides homeowners the right to receive a homestead exemption provided they meet certain residency requirements. Every person who has “legal or equitable title (you own it) to real property (your home) in the State of Florida and who resides on the property on January 1, and in good faith makes it his or her permanent home is eligible for a homestead exemption.” This exemption reduces your “just value” by $50,000 (note: this used to be $25,000...Florida voters elected to double it in January 2008), which could save you around $1,000 on your property tax bill, depending on what the millage rate is for your area. For this example I assumed a 2% tax rate (20 mils).

HOWEVER, the second $25,000 that Florida added in 2008 to this exemption does not apply to school taxes (which equate to about a third of most tax bills). Therefore, the actual benefit from this is closer to $15,000 (for a total benefit of $40,000....$25,000 + $15,000). The tax savings from a $40,000 exemption where this tax rate is 2% would be $800. Still not a bad chunk of change.

You have to make application for the exemption between January 1 of the previous year and March 1 of the year you want the exemption. For example, for the 2008 tax year, you would have been able to apply for homestead exemption from January 1, 2007 to March 1, 2008.

When filing your homestead exemption for the first time, you will be asked to provide evidence that you are a legal resident, such as a voter registration card or a Florida driver's license. Most counties have automatic renewal programs so there is no need to reapply each year as long as you are in the same home. If you move, however, you will need to reapply.

If you are a part-time resident using your home in Florida as a vacation home or second home, you will not be eligible for this exemption. However, since the new property tax amendment passed in January 2008, your property tax
increases are now capped at 10% per year. “Big deal” now you say... but if there's ever a time like 2001-2006 when property taxes nearly doubled for some folks, you'll be happy with this change.

Other Possible Exemptions

In addition to the new $50,000 Homestead Exemption, there are other exemptions available that could possibly reduce your tax bill.

Additional Homestead Exemption for Persons 65 and Older of up to $25,000

This exemption is available on a county-by-county basis, and not all counties offer it.

$500 Widow’s and Widower’s Exemption

$500 Disability Exemption

Any Florida resident who is totally and permanently disabled may claim this exemption with proper documentation of the disability.

$5,000 Disability Exemption for Ex-Service Members

An ex-service member who is disabled at least 10 percent in war or another service-related incident might be entitled to this exemption.

$500 Exemption for Blind Persons

In order to claim this exemption, you must have a certificate of blindness issued by the Division of Blind Services of the Department of Education, the Federal Social Security Administration, or the Veteran’s Administration.

These exemptions can be combined with each other. Certain other rules and restrictions apply to the above exemptions. You should contact the local property
appraiser’s office for more information on the county in which you are interested.
For links to the property appraiser’s offices throughout Florida visit: http://
myflorida.com/dor/property/appraisers.html

Save Our Homes

The Save Our Homes amendment is a piece of legislation, loathed by many and loved by some, which helps limit the tax burden of those residents who own homesteaded property in Florida. Over the period of 2001-2005 home prices rose by as much as 100 percent or more in many parts of Florida. Most people would have a hard time handling a property tax bill increase of 100 percent in such a short period of time. In fact, in such situations, many homeowners of modest means on fixed incomes would no longer be able to afford the home they live in because they wouldn’t be able to pay the taxes.

The amendment states that the assessed value of a homesteaded property cannot exceed 3 percent of the assessed value of the property for the prior year or the percentage change of the Consumer Price Index as reported by the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, whichever is lower.

For example, the Consumer Price Index rose 3.40 percent in 2006, so the increase in assessed value was capped at 3.00 percent. Let’s assume that between 2005 and 2006 the value of your home in Florida doubled from $100,000 to $200,000. (This is not likely to happen in such a short period, but it makes for a clear example.) With the Save Our Homes cap, you could only be taxed on $103,000 ($100K + 3 percent) instead of the full value of $200,000.

The new property tax amendment passed in January 2008 provides for “portability” of up to $500,000 of any Save Our Homes benefit you may have accrued. If you are moving to The Villages from out of state this doesn’t effect
you. Only if you live in Florida, are homesteaded, and have built up Save Our Homes benefit does it apply.

Property Tax Disclosure

Once a home changes ownership, it is reassessed at its full value, and the Save Our Homes amendment does not go back into effect until a year after the property is homesteaded again. This is assuming the new owner is not bringing built up Save Our Homes tax savings with them like I mentioned in the last paragraph (ie: they are moving from out of state, etc., as most people moving to The Villages are).

Consider this scenario. You are looking at a house on the market for $400,000. The Multiple Listing Service printout that your agent gives you on the property states that the amount of property taxes paid by the owner for the prior year was $2,500. It is a very common but costly mistake for buyers to assume their property taxes will be that same amount. I’ve heard “but it says right there on the sheet, Property Tax: $2,500” too many times. The truth is that your taxes will be much higher because you will be required to pay taxes on the amount that you pay for the property. The current owner is paying taxes based on what they paid for the property, which assuming they bought the property even just a couple of years ago, could be considerably less.

A sharp agent will catch this and make you aware of what your new property tax burden could be. The Florida Legislature thought that not enough people buying homes were being made aware of this fact so they introduced a new Property Tax Disclosure which must be in all residential real estate contracts after January 1, 2005.

It reads:
Property Tax Disclosure Summary

A buyer should not rely on the seller’s current property taxes as the amount of property taxes that the buyer might be obligated to pay in the year subsequent to purchase. A change of ownership or property improvements triggers reassessments of the property that could result in higher property taxes. If you have any questions concerning valuation, contact the county property appraiser’s office for information.

This clause is very easy to miss, as it is usually not presented on a separate disclosure, but is included in the standard contract form. Hence, many people do end up missing it and later wishing that they had read this book!

The best resource for calculating what your taxes will be on a particular property is, again, the local Property Appraiser’s office. They are there to help you. Here’s the website listing for the Property Appraiser’s offices in Florida: http://myflorida.com/dor/property/appraisers.html

Most have calculators on their website that you can use to get an idea of what your taxes will be.

Florida’s 2007 Millage Rate Rollback and Cap

In 2007, the Florida legislature also decided to roll millage rates back to 2006-2007 levels (basically 1-year) and to cap local government spending to the prior year’s budget + PCI % (Per Capita Income) for that area.

Chapter 12: Homeowner’s Insurance

With four hurricanes hitting the state in 2004, and the widely publicized destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina the next year, it doesn't take a genius to
understand that insurance might be a little expensive or hard to come by in some areas of the state. In fact many news outlets are reporting that the homeowner's insurance industry, particularly in Florida, is in shambles and just a bad hurricane away from being defunct.

In addition to the obvious need to protect your investment, the ability to get homeowner's insurance is of utmost importance when getting a mortgage on your property. No mortgage company will loan you money without you first having insurance on the property. In some instances your mortgage lender can even foreclose on the property if you fail to carry insurance. While no one can predict what the future will bring, I have done my best to compile for you the facts and resources, as they now stand, to help you navigate the homeowner's insurance minefield in Florida.

**Getting Started**

Presumably you now have homeowner's insurance on your current residence, wherever that might be. My first piece of advice is to ask your current insurance agent if their company writes homeowner's insurance policies in Florida. If you are with a large national insurer with operations in Florida like Nationwide or Allstate, the odds are good that they do, at least at times (more on that in a moment), write homeowner's policies in Florida. By doing this, you are taking the path of least resistance, and you will probably be able to get pretty decent rates through what are called "multi-line" discounts assuming you have other property such as cars, jewelry and the like already insured through them. You are welcome to shop around and price out other insurers, but from what I've seen, if you are comfortable with the company you have now, switching carriers to save a few bucks isn't worth the hassle.

**Important Note:** State Farm, who I have had my homeowner’s insurance with for many years has decided to stop writing homeowner’s policies in Florida.
altogether. This was announced in February 2009. This is unfortunate for folks like me who had State Farm, but the bright side is that I have found other insurance companies to offer the same amount of coverage for as much as 50% less than State Farm was charging me.

**Ask Around**

If the above scenario does not work out for whatever reason, my next step would be to ask any family or friends presently living in Florida who they have as their homeowner's insurance carrier. If they have no useful information, ask a real estate agent or potential new neighbors for a recommendation.

Because of the ever present risk from hurricanes as well as rising reinsurance rates (yes, insurers get insurance to protect themselves against losses on the insurance they issue you), many insurers in Florida have recently dropped customers in damage prone areas, stopped writing new policies in those same areas, or stopped writing new policies in the state altogether. You are going to have to do some serious legwork, phoning different agencies to see who is doing what at the time when you need insurance. Many have a one policy out, one policy in type of arrangement, where they will place you on a waiting list and when a policyholder does not renew for whatever reason, they can pick you up.

**Next Option**

If you’ve tried all of the above and still are not able to acquire coverage, your next step is to visit the website of the Florida Market Assistance Program at [http://fmap.org](http://fmap.org). FMAP is a free on-line referral service, created by the Florida legislature and designed to connect those who are not able to find coverage with insurers who are able to write new policies. You register at the website and submit a request for quotes. Agents will typically then call or e-mail you if they can offer assistance to you based on where your home is located, its age, and
other factors.

For more information visit http://www.fmap.org

The Last Resort

If all of the above options fail and you are not able to find private homeowner’s insurance coverage, Citizens Property Insurance Corporation is your last available option besides self-insuring. This is commonly referred to as “going naked,” which I promise you is not as fun as the name suggests.

The Florida Legislature created Citizen’s in 2002 to help Floridians who cannot get traditional coverage. More than a million homeowners in Florida turn to Citizens for their homeowner’s insurance coverage. Here is fair warning, though. Because Florida law mandates Citizen’s rates, they are much higher than the rates of private insurers. This is by design, so that Citizen’s does not directly compete with private insurers. So the bottom line is don’t turn to Citizens unless you absolutely have to.

For more information visit: http://www.citizensfla.com

2007 Property Insurance Legislation Update

In January 2007, Florida legislators passed a bill that may lower property insurance premiums and bring other insurance relief to millions of property owners. Among the highlights of the 167-page bill are means to lower rates for homeowners by allowing owners to exclude windstorm and contents coverage, allowing owners to choose higher deductibles so that their premiums will be lower, removing the requirement that Citizen’s charge the highest premiums, and allowing non-homesteaded properties to be eligible for Citizen’s.
In order to further protect policyholders, the bill requires insurance companies to give 100 days notice of their intent to cancel a homeowner’s policy that would be effective during hurricane season, requires insurance companies to expedite payments of claims after storms, and prohibits excess profits by insurers.

The bill also makes an effort to expand the property insurance market in Florida by requiring insurance companies that write homeowners policies in other states and auto insurance policies in Florida, to write homeowners policies in Florida.

Insurance companies lobbied heavily against this bill, and there are fears of companies pulling out of Florida altogether. Just like the property tax issue, it’s a matter of “wait and see” before we can determine the effects of this legislation.

Types of Coverage

When shopping for homeowner’s insurance, there are various types of coverage available for you to choose from. Perhaps the most important is guaranteed replacement cost coverage.

Guaranteed Replacement Cost Coverage

No matter which insurance company you eventually go with, you need to make sure that all rates that you are being quoted are for what is called guaranteed replacement cost coverage, as opposed to actual cash value coverage. Guaranteed replacement cost coverage means that even if you are insured for, let’s say, $200,000, if your home is destroyed and it costs $250,000 to build at today’s construction costs to be put back into use as it was before, then that's what the insurance company will pay.
This type of coverage will cost more, as you might imagine, but it provides the policyholder with much more protection. One way to mitigate the rise in your premium is to raise your deductible. When you raise your deductible, or the amount you pay out of pocket to file a claim, your yearly premiums will go down.

**Endorsements and Additional Coverage**

Your homeowner's insurance policy may not cover certain items in your home against damage or theft. Always have your agent explain anything you don't understand and read your policy carefully.

Items like fine art, coin or gun collections, jewelry and furs, or electronic equipment beyond the standard televisions and DVD players, must usually be accounted for and covered under a separate policy or endorsement for an additional premium amount. But if you have any of these items, it might be wise to look into the coverage available to you.

**Inventory**

Always maintain a current inventory of the items in your home, including pictures or video of your property. This inventory should be kept in a safe place outside of the home like a safe deposit box at a bank. This way, if your home and personal belongings are destroyed, you have evidence of what was damaged to show the insurance adjuster. This step alone can save you several hours, days, or sometimes weeks of hassles and delays in getting your insurance claim processed.

**Flood Insurance**

There are two facts that most people do not know. First, flooding is the number one natural disaster in the United States; even properties not near water
can be susceptible to flooding. Second, losses due to floods are not covered by your homeowner’s insurance policy.

The Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) puts out “flood maps” that show which areas tend to be most prone to flooding. I often hear people ask, “is the property in a flood zone?” and usually people describing homes in low-risk areas will say “no, it’s not in a flood zone.” Well, the correct answer is that every property is in a flood zone. It’s just a matter of whether it is in a low, moderate or high-risk flood zone.

Your real estate agent might be able to tell you which flood zone the property you are looking at is in. But it is your insurance agent who will use a Flood Insurance Rate Map or FIRM, to ultimately determine your flood risk. Be aware that federal law requires you to purchase flood insurance if you have a federally backed mortgage and reside in a high-risk area.

Flood Zones Explained

Here is a break-down of the various flood zones in which you may find a property located.

Moderate to Low Risk Areas
(Flood insurance is not required, but recommended)

Zones B, C, and X
These are flood zones with a less than 1% chance of flooding each year.

High Risk Areas
(Flood Insurance is Mandatory)

These areas have a 1% chance of annual flooding and a 26% chance of flooding over 30 years.

Zone AR
This is a flood zone with an increased temporary risk due to the construction or restoration of a levee or a dam.

Zone A99
Areas with a 1% chance of annual flooding that will be protected by a levee or dam where construction has reached specified legal requirements.

High Risk - Coastal Areas
(Flood Insurance is Mandatory)

Zone V, VE, V1-V30
Coastal Areas with a 1% or greater chance of flooding annually and subject to the additional hazard of storm waves. Also has a 26% chance of flooding over 30 years.

Undetermined Risk Areas

Zone D
Possible but undetermined flood hazards.

Better Safe than Sorry

Everyone, no matter where in Florida they live should carry flood insurance available through the National Flood Insurance Program. It is relatively inexpensive, especially if your home is in a low-risk flood zone. A single-family home is limited to $250,000 coverage for structural damage and $100,000 for contents. I have those amounts of coverage on my home in a low-risk flood zone.
and my premium is just over $300 per year. For less than a dollar a day, I can
sleep easy at night when the rain from the latest tropical system is pouring down.
It’s a no-brainer.

*For more information on flood zones, flood maps, and flood insurance contact
your insurance agent or visit* [www.floodsmart.gov](http://www.floodsmart.gov)

**Chapter 13: Real Estate Contracts and Disclosures**

Now I will walk you through the standard contract for sale and purchase
approved by both the Florida Association of Realtors and the Florida Bar, simply
referred to as the “FAR/BAR contract.” This by no means should be construed as
a complete contract or explanation of it, nor is this legal advice. What I want to do
is highlight the major sections of the contract so that when you find your dream
home and this contract is placed in front of you, you will hopefully feel a little
more comfortable with it.

Please also note that this contract will not always be the contract used.
For example, new home builders typically have their own contracts. It is,
however, the contract most commonly used in Florida today.

**Demystifying the Florida Contract for Sale and Purchase**

**Lines 1 through 15**
These have blanks to be filled in with the seller’s name(s) and buyer’s name(s),
the legal description and address of the property, and items of personal property
that are included and excluded from the sale. This section also has legal
verbiage stating that the "seller shall sell" and the "buyer shall buy" the property
in question.
Lines 16 through 24
This section covers the purchase price, how much deposit is given (including where the deposit is to be held, which is usually a brokerage escrow account, title company, or attorney's escrow or trust account), how much financing the buyer is going for, and how much money will be required at closing.

Lines 25 through 32
Include the time for acceptance of the contract as well as the effective date (the date when both parties came to an agreement and entered into a bilateral agreement). The buyer will typically make an offer, and the seller will have a certain amount of time to agree to the terms or make a counteroffer. If the seller fails to respond in the allotted time frame, the offer can be withdrawn and the deposit returned if the buyer so desires.

Lines 33 through 49
Cover financing. If the buyer is paying cash, there are no contingencies for financing. If you are getting a mortgage to pay for part of the purchase, you should make the contract contingent (check line 35) upon you applying for and receiving this mortgage.

Lines 50 through 55
Include when you will receive the title insurance policy and who will pay for it. Customarily the seller pays, but this is a negotiable point and the buyer is sometimes asked to pay.

Lines 56 through 58
Outline the closing date. This is a date mutually agreed upon and negotiated between the seller and the buyer. Something that comes up from time to time during hurricane season is that an insurance company might not write an insurance policy on a home you are buying if there is a hurricane, tropical depression, or tropical storm within so many miles of Florida. In the case of this,
the closing may be legally delayed for up to 5 days after the coverage becomes available again.

**Lines 59 through 65**
Explain that the seller will provide you with "marketable title" subject to certain restrictions, easements, and limitations. The seller is also stating that there are no violations that would prevent you from using the property for your specific purpose, usually as a residence.

**Lines 66 through 69**
Discuss occupancy, and basically states that you the buyer, will get occupancy at the time of closing. This can be modified if you agree to let the seller stay in the home past the closing date.

**Lines 70 through 73**
Goes over provisions typed into or written into the contract. Also, whether or not you may assign the contract is covered here.

**Lines 74 through 90**
Cover disclosures. This is a very important section that you should be sure to read. It discusses disclosures such as radon, mold, special assessments, lead based paint, homeowners' association disclosures, and more.

**Lines 91 through 96**
This section covers repair costs and home warranties. Here it is spelled out how much of the repairs deemed necessary by the home inspection report the owner is willing to pay for. This includes figures both for damage caused by termites, and for damage not caused by termites. Also, if you will be receiving a home warranty, it is spelled out here what company it will be with, what the cost will be, and who will pay for it.
Lines 97 through 103
Riders, addenda, and special clauses to the contract are discussed here. It is the best practice to have any special typewritten or handwritten clauses added into the contract to be written by an attorney. However, this does not always happen, and problems can sometimes arise even with the simplest of clauses.

Lines 104 through 112
More disclosures, including a statement indicating that by signing you affirm that you have read the Standards for Real Estate Transactions A through Y which I will go over in the next few pages.

Lines 113 through 123
Spaces for the buyer’s signature and seller’s signature, as well as blanks for addresses and phone numbers for notification purposes. Also, any listing or cooperating brokers are listed on the bottom.

“FAR/BAR” Standards for Real Estate Transactions

As previously mentioned, there are 25 "standards" lettered from "A" to "Y" in the standard FAR/BAR contract. Here is a brief explanation of each of them. Once again, you should have an attorney explain to you anything that you do not understand or do not feel comfortable with.

A. Title Insurance
This tells you who must issue your title policy, when you will receive a copy, and what will happen if it is determined that the title is not clear or marketable.

B. Purchase Money Mortgage; Security Agreement to Seller
This only applies in the case of the seller providing you with financing. It tells you what the consequences and timeframes involved are for foreclosure, as well as spelling out the duties of both parties.
C. Survey
This allows for you the buyer, at your expense, to have a state registered
surveyor conduct a survey of the property. If you are getting financing, your
lender will require this. If you are not getting financing, it is advisable to get a
survey done anyway. It is not very expensive and a good thing to have down the
road as you will need it if you ever want to get a permit to make changes to your
home. The main objective of the survey is to ensure there are no encroachments
on the property, which would constitute a title defect.

D. Wood Destroying Organisms
Defines the term "Wood Destroying Organism" and lets you know that you have a
right to have a Florida Certified Pest Control Operator inspect the property for
their existence. This service is usually piggybacked with the home inspection.
Also provides for possible courses of action should evidence of infestation or
damage be found.

E. Ingress and Egress
Simply states that you will have access to and from the property for its
designated purpose (i.e. to reside there) without infringing on anyone else's
property rights.

F. Leases
Spells out what must be done if there is a tenant living in the property you are
buying. For example, the seller must give you copies of the lease, tenant names,
and any security deposits being held.

G. Liens
Instructs the seller to provide you with an affidavit at closing stating that there are
no liens on the property, for example financial liens and construction liens.
H. Place of Closing
This states that the closing should be held in the county where the property is located. The party paying for title insurance usually chooses where the closing will take place, whether it is at an attorney's office, or the office of another closing agent.

I. Time
This section tells you how to account for weekends and holidays. It also includes a very important phrase, "time is of the essence." This means that all dates and times in the contract are of extreme importance and should be followed exactly.

J. Closing Documents
This states which documents must be furnished by the seller (deed, bill of sale, certificate of title, etc.) and which documents must be furnished by the buyer (Mortgage, mortgage note, etc.)

K. Expenses
This standard designates which party shall pay which expenses. Typically, the seller will pay for documentary stamps on the deed and recording, but this is a negotiable point. The buyer is typically expected to pay for their entire loan closing costs as well as the recording of the mortgage.

L. Prorations and Credits
Tells how prorations and credits for homeowner's association dues, insurance, taxes and the like, will be handled.

M. Special Assessment Liens
Any pending special assessment liens will be assumed by you, the buyer, as of the closing, so make sure there are not any pending liens that you are not already aware of.
N. Inspection and Repair
It is very important that you understand this standard of the contract. It says that the seller, unless otherwise specified in the Seller’s Disclosure, states that all components of the home are in working order (definition of "working order" is contained within the paragraph). Note that cosmetic flaws (definition of "cosmetic" is also in the paragraph) are not covered here. The buyer is allowed to inspect the home or pay someone with proper credentials, such as a state certified contractor or someone from a firm specializing in home inspections (my suggestion) to inspect the house and report any substandard findings to the seller in writing within 20 days of the effective date of the contract. If you fail to do this, you waive your right to the seller's warranties of unreported defects. The seller is required to repair up to the amount specified in line 93 of the contract, or 1.5% of the contract sales price if this line has been left blank. So, bottom line, get an inspection done, and do it in a timely fashion.

O. Damage Prior to Closing
If the house is damaged by fire or other event before the closing, the seller is required to make repairs, so long as the amount to repair the house does not exceed 1.5% of the contract sales price. If the cost exceeds 1.5% you can take the property as it is and the Seller can credit you the 1.5% plus any insurance proceeds at closing, or you may request that your deposit be returned and the contractual obligations of both parties will terminate.

P. Closing Procedure
This standard outlines the procedure that should be followed for closing.

Q. Escrow
This standard describes how funds that are held in escrow should be handled and disbursed.

R. Attorney's Fees; Costs

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This states that should litigation occur and legal costs are involved, the winner of those proceedings shall be entitled to recover their attorney's fees and related costs.

**S. Failure of Performance**
Tells you what the options are of both parties should anyone fail to complete their contractual obligations. Basically, deposit can be returned or kept, depending on the party. Or, either party can sue for specific failure of performance, in an effort to get the other party to go through with the deal.

**T. Contract Not Recordable; Persons Bound; Notice; Facsimile**
States that the contract is not recordable. All parties and their successors are bound by the contract. Notice given by one party’s agent or attorney is as good as that themselves giving notice. Faxed copies that are legible are considered an original.

**U. Conveyance**
States how seller should convey title. Also states that any personal property should be covered in a separate bill of sale.

**V. Other Agreements**
Covers how any other agreements should be handled.

**W. Seller Disclosure**
Seller states that, to the best of their knowledge, there are no problems with the property, unless otherwise specified, which are not readily observable.

**X. Property Maintenance; Access, Repair Standards; Assignment of Contracts and Warranties**
States that seller needs to maintain the property (such as keeping the grass cut and the shrubs trimmed) while the contract is in force. Also states that the seller
needs to keep all necessary utilities (power and water) on for buyer’s appraisal, inspection, and walk through prior to closing. Any repairs should be made in a good, workmanlike manner using materials equal to the quality of the material present to begin with. Any assignable repair or treatment contracts shall be assigned to buyer at closing.

**Y. 1031 Exchange**

In the rare case of a party wishing to enter into a like-kind exchange, the other party shall cooperate reasonably to facilitate the exchange. You can read more about 1031-Exchanges in the next chapter.

**Common Florida Real Estate Disclosures**

In addition to the standard “FAR/BAR” contract, there are several other disclosures, addenda, and types of contracts you may see in different situations along the way. Here are a few of the more common ones.

**Buying a Home “As-Is”**

Sometimes in your search for a home you will come across a home being sold "as-is". This means that you are allowed to have your inspections done, just like a normal sales scenario but the owner will not be responsible for fixing anything you may find wrong with the place. Many people errantly believe that any home being sold "as-is" is a “handyman’s special” that will require lots of work to be made habitable. This is simply not always the case.

It’s true that is sometimes the owner's reason for selling a place "as-is," but in my experience the reason the seller chooses this route is more often just a matter of convenience. Another reason might be as a point of negotiation. For instance, you may make an offer for twenty thousand less than what the seller is asking for a home, and the seller could agree but add the caveat that you must
buy it "as-is." You the buyer, of course, will have to do your own research to see which of these scenarios are true for the house you are considering.

Should you decide to contract for a home being sold "as-is," the contract can be done one of two ways. It can be prepared as a normal contract would be done with an "As-Is" Rider attached to made part of the FAR/BAR Contract for Sale and Purchase, or it can be prepared as a separate "As-Is" Contract for Sale and Purchase.

"As-Is" Rider to the FAR/BAR Contract for Sale and Purchase

This is a document to be completed and initialed by both parties, buyer and seller, which becomes part of the Contract for Sale and Purchase. This document effectively deletes Standards D (Wood Destroying Organisms), N (Inspection and Repair), and X (as it relates to Repair Standards) of the Contract for Sale and Purchase. The seller is still required to disclose all known facts that affect the value of the property. However, the seller makes no representation as to the physical condition of the property.

As the buyer in this scenario, you are given the right to inspect the property as you would under normal circumstances, but you are also given the right to cancel the contract, should you not be satisfied with the findings of the inspection or do not wish to pay for the repairs that need to be made. You will be given a certain number of days to conduct your inspections and you must let the seller know of your intention to cancel in writing during that allotted time, should you decide you do not want to proceed with the purchase.

"As-Is" Contract for Sale and Purchase

The first thing you'll notice is that at the top of the page "AS-IS" in LARGE BOLD letters, so you can't be confused as to what you are signing. The main
differences between this contract, and a normal contract we discussed previously is the deletion of standard "D" (Wood Destroying Organisms) and standard "N" (Inspection and Repair). Another difference is the addition of another standard, standard "Z". Standard “Z” in the "As-Is" Contract for Sale and Purchase says that you the buyer waive all claims against the seller, or any real estate agent involved in the transaction, should you discover any defects or damage after closing. The seller is still required to disclose all known defects or damage, and of course you have the normal time period for inspections to be conducted.

**Homeowners’ Association Disclosure**

The Homeowners’ Association Disclosure, required by Florida Statute 720.401 is one of the more plainly written documents you will come across during your real estate transactions here in Florida. There are eight statements on the current Homeowners’ Association Disclosure.

1. Simply lets you know that you will be obligated to be a member of a Homeowners’ Association.

2. States that there are or will be restrictive covenants that govern the property.

3. If there is a fee (assessment) to be a member of the homeowners’ association, the fee is noted here. Also, if there are any special assessments owed it will be noted here.

4. Gives you warning that if you do not pay the above-mentioned assessments, a lien can be placed on your property.

5. If there is a mandatory fee to use certain facilities in a community, it will be noted here. For instance, some associations have pools or clubhouses that you
are required to pay to use.

6. Lets you know whether or not the covenants or rules of the association can be changed without the approval of the association membership. It is preferable that they cannot be changed without the approval of the association membership.

7. Tells you that the statements in the disclosure are only summary in nature and that you should read the covenants and restrictions of the association before purchasing property there.

8. This lets you know that a homeowners’ association's covenants and restrictions are a matter of public record and can be obtained from the record office of the county where the property is located.

Just above the signature lines in BOLD CAPS is the following statement:

"IF THE DISCLOSURE SUMMARY REQUIRED BY SECTION 720.401, FLORIDA STATUTES, HAS NOT BEEN PROVIDED TO THE PROSPECTIVE PURCHASER BEFORE EXECUTING THIS CONTRACT FOR SALE, THIS CONTRACT IS VOIDABLE BY BUYER BY DELIVERING TO SELLER OR SELLER'S AGENT OR REPRESENTATIVE WRITTEN NOTICE OF THE BUYER'S INTENTION TO CANCEL WITHIN 3 DAYS AFTER THE RECEIPT OF THE DISCLOSURE SUMMARY OR PRIOR TO CLOSING, WHICHEVER OCCURS FIRST. ANY PURPORTED WAIVER OF THIS VOIDABILITY RIGHT HAS NO EFFECT. BUYER'S RIGHT TO VOID THIS CONTRACT SHALL TERMINATE AT CLOSING."

This simply means that if you completed a contract before receiving this notice, you may be able to void your contract if you so desire, within three days after having finally received this disclosure.
Florida Building Energy Efficiency Rating Disclosure

As the purchaser of a home in Florida you have the right to have the energy efficiency of the home tested. This can be helpful in determining what the annual energy use of the home might be, and how it compares to other homes used as "yardsticks" for means of comparison. You should be notified of this right either before doing a contract or at the time of contract. Most contracts will have verbiage in them alerting you to this fact.

There is a brochure available explaining all that you should know about the Florida Building Energy Efficiency Rating System as well as giving you suggestions to increase your home's energy efficiency at: http://www.dca.state.fl.us/fbc/committees/energy/EnergyBrochure-110602.pdf

Florida Homeowner’s Construction Recovery Fund

The Florida Homeowner's Construction Recovery Fund, previously known as the Construction Industries Recovery Fund, is a fund paid into by all licensed contractors who build, renovate, or remodel homes. The fund, first created in 1993 in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew, was set up to provide relief to those who suffer monetary damages as a direct result of the actions of a Florida licensed contractor performing one of those functions.

Money for the fund is basically collected as part of a half-cent per square foot surcharge that contractors pay when getting their permits. (I qualify this with "basically" because the half-cent actually goes first to the Professional Regulation Trust Fund, and the Building Code Administrators and Inspectors Fund, with any excess going to fund the Florida Homeowner's Construction Recovery Fund). Payouts per violation are capped at $50,000 per homeowner, and the cap against each contractor is $500,000.
Only specific events are covered, such as the builder abandoning a job for more than 90 days; causing financial harm to a customer by misconduct or mismanagement; or, signing false statements saying that work is bonded, that all payments to subcontractors have been made, or falsely claiming to have provided proper worker's compensation and insurance.

For more information or to request a claim form, call the Construction Industry Licensing Board at 850-487-1395 or visit: http://www.myflorida.com/dbpr/pro/cilb/cilb_index.shtml

Insulation Disclosure for New Construction Homes

If you are buying a new construction home in Florida, you must be given an Insulation Disclosure, either in the contract or as a separate rider attached to the contract. The type, thickness, and R-value of the insulation in the interior walls, exterior walls, and the ceilings in all areas should be disclosed to you.

A disclosure may look something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location:</th>
<th>Type:</th>
<th>Thickness:</th>
<th>R-Value:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ceiling/Batt</td>
<td>Fiberglass</td>
<td>10&quot;</td>
<td>R-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceiling Blown-In</td>
<td>Fiberglass</td>
<td>13&quot;</td>
<td>R-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exterior Walls</td>
<td>Foil</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>R-4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior walls/Batt</td>
<td>Fiberglass</td>
<td>3&quot;</td>
<td>R-11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 14: Home Inspections and Warranties

Home inspections and home warranties are two tools available to you that will help to ensure that the present and future condition of your new home in The Villages is satisfactory.
Home Inspections

Before finalizing the purchase of a home, you should always have a home inspection done. This point cannot be stressed enough. A home inspection could be the best money you ever spend. Home inspectors conduct a thorough evaluation of the home that can help you understand the condition that the house is actually in before you take ownership. Remember, that sometimes looks can be deceiving, and nobody likes unexpected surprises or costly repairs once they move in. Even if the house is fairly new and appears to be in good condition, you never know what could be hiding out of plain sight.

Most home inspections don’t reveal much of anything, maybe faucets that need tightening, or caulking that needs to be done. The point of an inspection is not to convince you that so much is wrong with the house that you are discouraged to buy it. It is rather to give you an accurate depiction of the current condition of the house, as well as an idea of how certain things will hold up in the future.

When major items are found, such as a failing air conditioning unit, or bad wiring, the parties must look to the real estate contract to see who will be required to make the repairs. Home inspections typically cost anywhere from $200 and up, depending on the size of the home. After the inspection is complete you will be given a detailed report of all the inspector’s findings, whether good or bad, usually accompanied by digital photos.

A typical home inspector will inspect the structural elements of the home consisting of the roof, outside and inside walls of the home, patios and driveways, as well as parts of the foundation if visible. They will go into the attic to inspect the trusses, the underside of the roof decking for water intrusion, and insulation. The systems of the home will be inspected including the electrical, HVAC, and plumbing systems. All appliances that are staying with the home are
inspected and tested for proper operation, and usually a random spot check of electrical outlets, windows, and doors will be done.

Other items that a home inspection company might perform for additional fees include radon gas and mold testing, water analysis, and pool and spa inspections. Most home inspectors subcontract for a termite inspection that may be at an additional cost to you, but it is a very important part of any home inspection here in Florida.

Some home inspection companies with branches in The Villages for you to look into are:

*Amerispec*  
http://www.amerispec.com

*Pillar to Post*  
http://www.pillartopost.com

Many local home inspection companies perform just as well and may have specialized knowledge of the homes in the area. Ask your real estate agent, or friends and family for referrals.

**Home Warranties**

If you are buying a new home from a builder, one of the advantages you have is that your home will usually come with a warranty provided and paid for by the builder. But this doesn't mean that you're out of luck if you decide to buy a resale home. There are several home warranty options available to you, no matter the age or condition of the home you are buying.
Home warranties for average homes under approximately 5000 square feet will cost you between $300 and $400 dollars per year. You can renew these on a yearly basis. Most plans do not require an inspection of the property before they take effect. Depending on the company you choose and the specific plan you go with, an additional amount may be needed to warrant some items like the A/C, refrigerator, washer/dryer, and a pool or spa.

Typically covered items include the plumbing, electrical, and heating systems, water heater, most appliances, disposal, smoke detectors, and exhaust fans. You need to read the warranty contracts carefully to see exactly what is and what is not covered. For example, a warranty might cover your refrigerator motor, but not the shelving inside the refrigerator.

Should something that is covered by the warranty break down, there is usually a service call fee, anywhere between $40 and $80. Other than paying that, you will not be required to pay out any money for the repair or replacement of a covered item. Most home warranties are pretty simple to acquire, fairly inexpensive, and are usually worthwhile.

Some national home warranty companies to consider are:

**American Home Shield**
http://ahswarranty.com

**Old Republic Home Protection**
http://www.orhp.com

**Chapter 15: Real Estate Financing**

Real estate financing in Florida and in The Villages, for the most part, is no different from real estate financing in any other state. However, if it has been a
few years since you last went through the process of getting a mortgage, you could use some refreshing on the world of real estate finance.

Types of Lenders

While shopping for financing during your home buying process, you may encounter several types of mortgage lenders. Here is an explanation of some of the more common types of lenders you may encounter along the way to homeownership.

Mortgage Brokers

Mortgage brokers are essentially middlemen in the mortgage process. They serve as intermediaries between lenders and borrowers. Mortgage brokers typically have the widest array of loan programs available, because they have relationships with several lenders. The term “middleman” is usually associated with extra expense, but mortgage brokers can actually save you money by helping you comparison shop and find the best mortgage for your particular situation. Mortgage brokers will assist you with things such as filling out and submitting your loan application, running your credit report, scheduling an appraisal, and helping to coordinate your closing.

However, the mortgage broker does not make the decision to fund your loan. A person called an underwriter, who is employed by the lender, makes that decision. Mortgage brokers are paid a fee for their services, sometimes charged to the borrower in the form of points or origination fees, but they can also be paid by the lender, or often times a combination of the two. Sometimes this fee can be negotiated in your favor, or you can also ask that the broker just charge a flat fee, a strategy that is recommended by many industry experts.

Mortgage Bankers
Mortgage bankers are in the business of originating loans and then selling them to the secondary mortgage market (more on that in a moment). Mortgage bankers often have appealing loan rates and programs, but oftentimes do not have access to as many sources as the previously mentioned mortgage broker.

**Banks and Credit Unions**

Most banks and credit unions also offer mortgages. Funds for these loans are obtained from their customers through checking and saving accounts as well as certificates of deposit. The bank or credit union will sometimes service the loan themselves (if it’s a large bank) or sell the loan to the secondary market.

**Secondary Mortgage Market**

It is common for lenders that provide home loans to sell these loans to the secondary market, made-up of investors such as Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Selling your loan provides lenders with the funds they need to issue new mortgages. If your loan is sold, it will not affect the terms of your mortgage or your payment. It will however affect who your payments are made payable to, so if you are using an online bill payment method make sure you are paying the correct entity and sending your payments to the correct address.

**Types of Mortgages**

Just as there are many sources for your new mortgage, there are also several different types of mortgages. Here are some of the most common types of mortgages.

**Fixed Rate Mortgage**
The most common type of mortgage, a fixed rate mortgage, is one in which your interest and principal payments remain the same (constant) over the life of the loan. Bear in mind that your total payment may fluctuate (usually upwards) as real estate taxes and homeowner’s insurance rates change over the life of your loan. Different terms are available for fixed rate loans, from as short as 10 years to new 40 and even 50 year mortgages, loan periods which were recently introduced. Keep in mind that the shorter the term, the higher your monthly payment will be. However, the longer the term of the mortgage, the more interest you will end up paying over the life of the loan.

**Adjustable Rate Mortgage (ARM)**

Adjustable-rate mortgages are mortgages in which the interest rate on the mortgage fluctuates over the life of the loan. The rate will initially be fixed for a specified period of time. For example, with a 5/1 ARM the rate will be fixed for 5 years and adjust every year after that. Rate adjustments are made based on changes to a defined index. The interest rate is determined by adding a fixed number of points to the index. The attraction with adjustable-rate mortgages is that rates are initially lower than that of fixed-rate mortgages. If you do not intend to live in a house for longer than the initial fixed rate period, you will not be subjected to the adjustments in the rate. The disadvantage of an ARM is that during times of rising interest rates, your payments can increase dramatically after the fixed period is over.

**Balloon Mortgage**

A balloon mortgage is a short term mortgage, usually 2 to 7 years in length, that is amortized over 30 years with the balance becoming due in a lump sum at the end of the term. Again, rates are lower than fixed-rate mortgages, but some people do not want to have to refinance or pay a large lump sum at the end of the loan term.
Reverse Mortgage

Reverse mortgages have been around for many years but are just recently gaining notoriety. A reverse mortgage is a mortgage where the lender pays you either one lump sum or a smaller amount each month, as opposed to you paying them. This can give you extra money to pay your bills and do the things you want to do but otherwise might not be able to afford.

When you pass away or decide to move, your heirs or new owners get ownership of the home and must repay the mortgage. This is most commonly accomplished by selling the home. Reverse mortgages are only available to people over the age of 62, and should only be considered in specific circumstances. In fact, before obtaining a reverse mortgage you must be counseled by an HUD approved reverse mortgage counselor.

VA Loan

Veterans of the United States Armed Services with more than 180 days active duty during peacetime, or 90 days during times of war may be eligible for a VA loan through Uncle Sam. VA loans can be used to purchase a home, manufactured home, or condo. In order to obtain a VA loan, the law requires that:

• the applicant be an eligible veteran who has available entitlement
• the veteran must occupy or intend to occupy the property as a home within a reasonable period of time after closing
• the veteran must have satisfactory credit
• and, the veteran and spouse must show stable income sufficient to meet the mortgage payments.

The advantages of VA loans are that they require no down payment, they are available from most lenders, and the VA prohibits lenders from requiring PMI,
or Private Mortgage Insurance. The VA is guaranteeing the loan, so there is no need for a lender to require the veteran to pay for additional insurance against default.

On the downside, VA loans carry a one time funding fee ranging from one and a quarter percent to three percent, depending on the veteran’s service, as well as other factors.

*For more information on VA loans, visit [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov) or call the Florida VA Regional Loan Center at 1-888-611-5916.*

**Special Financing**

There may be times when a conventional real estate loan will not meet your needs. For these cases, special types of real estate financing may be available to you.

**B/C Credit Mortgages**

B/C loans, sometimes referred to as sub-prime loans, are for those who do not meet the credit guidelines established by Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac. Through B/C loans, borrowers are able to obtain financing for a temporary period of time, when their credit history excludes them from receiving “normal” loans. Recent bankruptcy, divorce, foreclosure, or late payments that show up on your credit report can bump you into this category. You should be aware though that loans of this type carry higher interest rates than those of “A” credit borrowers.

**Bridge Loans**

Just as Citizen’s Property Insurance is the insurer of last resort, a bridge loan should be your "financing of last resort". Let’s say you look at a home in The
Villages, fall in love and have to have it. But, you haven't yet sold your home in New Jersey (or wherever you're from). A bridge loan will allow you to purchase the new home in The Villages without having to first sell your home up North. There are essentially two ways for a bridge loan to be structured.

The first way is you get a bridge loan for enough money to pay off your current home and make your deposit on the new home in The Villages. Then you would just get a regular mortgage on the new home. You won't have to make payments on the bridge loan for a predetermined amount of time, say 6 months or a year, but in the meantime, interest is accruing. The rub lies in that if you don't sell your home in the allotted time, you will have to start making payments on the bridge loan, meaning you'll now be making two mortgage payments. Once your home up north sells, you pay off the balance of the bridge loan and any interest that has accrued.

The second way to structure a bridge loan is to use the equity in your home up north to make the down payment on the home in The Villages. Now you have two loans, your original mortgage, and a second home equity mortgage. Then, you'll get a mortgage on the new house. So, essentially you have three loans. But, you aren't usually expected to pay on all three, just your original mortgage and your new mortgage. Again, once your home sells, you'll pay off your original mortgage and the bridge (second equity mortgage) as well as any interest that has accrued.

Experts only recommend getting a bridge loan if you know that you can afford to make two mortgage payments if you had to. Usually, a lender won't give you a bridge loan unless you have enough cash to make both payments anyway. Also note that the rates on a bridge loan will be significantly higher than say, a typical 30-year mortgage. It can pay to shop around to different lenders to see what types of bridge loans they may offer and what the rates are.
Interest Rates

News of interest rates is everywhere, your local newspaper, online and on television. Some people in the real estate and finance worlds hang on every eighth-of-a-point fluctuation in interest rates. For most of us, however, there is little need to do this. A quarter-point here or half-point there shouldn't affect your plans for purchasing a home in Florida, so long as you have planned wisely in the financial department. For average size mortgages these fluctuations won't add but a paltry sum to your mortgage payment. But it is important to know a few things about interest rates, in hopes of better understanding how they could affect you.

How Interest Rates are Determined

Mortgage interest rates, contrary to what many people believe, do not follow the Federal Reserve Board's lowering and raising of rates. Instead, they actually anticipate the fed. A closer tracking device for mortgage interest rates is the 10-year Treasury note. If you want to know what mortgage interest rates are doing, follow the 10-year Treasury. But as mentioned before, slight changes in rates are nothing to lose any sleep over.

Rate Locks

The typical escrow (time from contract to closing) on a home is 30-60 days, but interest rates are constantly changing. In order to protect yourself in an environment of rising interest rates, get a rate lock. With a rate lock the lender holds or guarantees the interest rate for you for a predetermined length of time. Sometimes they will do this for free for a minimal amount of days, say 15-20, and for longer periods they will charge you a fee. A 60-day rate lock will be more costly than a 30-day rate lock.
Sometimes during escrow, rates will drop, leaving you paying a higher rate than the market rates at time of closing. To avoid this, ask for a rate lock with a one-time float. If the rate goes lower anytime before closing, you can float down to the lower rate. Again, some lenders offer this feature for free, with others you will have to pay. Shop around because the market is always changing and so are lenders' terms and policies. Competition among lenders can run high, especially in slow markets.

**Interest Rate Buy Downs**

An interest rate buy down is a reduction in the interest rate that you pay on a mortgage. There are temporary buy downs and permanent buy downs. Temporary buy downs are common as an incentive for builders; they pay the lender a fee to get the buyer a lower initial rate for a set period of time, usually a year or two. This is also an incentive sometimes offered by home sellers to entice someone to choose their home over another.

As a buyer, you can also acquire a permanent buy down. With a permanent buy down, you pay a fee up front to have your interest rate lowered or "bought down" for the life of the loan. You should only do this if you plan on keeping the mortgage for a long time, as it will take a while for the lower rate to recoup the money you paid out to buy it down. Check with your mortgage lender to see if a buy down might make sense for you.

**Applying for a Mortgage**

The mortgage application is going to be mostly what you would expect. It will ask for your name, social security number, your address for the past two years, a copy of your driver’s licenses, a list of all your assets as well as debts along with monthly payments, employment information, sources and amount of all your income, and more. The type of lender and type of loan you choose will
determine the additional information that the lender will ask you to submit along with your mortgage application. These can either be faxed, e-mailed, mailed, or hand delivered to the lender, depending upon your location and theirs. Just to give you an idea, some of the items they may need include:

• a copy of your sales contract (if you’ve executed one)
• proof of your deposit (copy of the cancelled check, bank statement, etc.)
• pay stubs for the last 30 days if you are still working
• your past two years of tax returns
• statements for all your bank accounts and investment accounts for the past three months
• a copy of your current mortgage statement if you have one
• if you are divorced, they will probably ask for your divorce decree
• if you are self-employed they will need a current profit and loss statement
• if you receive a pension or social security the lender will ask for proof of such

Again, depending on the lender and type of loan you are applying for this list can be longer or shorter.

**Good Faith Estimate**

Within three days of applying for a loan, you should receive a “good faith estimate” as well as a HUD guide to settlement costs from the bank or mortgage company that you applied to. The good faith estimate is just that, an estimate of the costs that you will be expected to pay at closing. Costs that will be reflected on the good faith estimate will include costs for appraisals, surveys, attorney’s fees, recording and transfer fees, doc stamps, mortgage origination fees, and more. Never fully commit to a lender until you have reviewed and are comfortable with their good faith estimate.
Your Credit Score

Most everyone has heard of a FICO score, created by Fair Isaac Corporation. In case you haven’t, it’s one score that lenders will look at to determine how good of a credit risk you are, and consequently how much money they will lend you and with what terms. FICO scores range from 300 to 850 and the median score nationwide is 723. If your score is above that median, you are doing pretty well as far as most lenders are concerned and you should qualify for the best rates when shopping for a mortgage.

The big three credit reporting agencies, Equifax, Experian and Transunion also produce individual credit scores based on the information they have about you and your history. The problem, however, with credit scores is that they are generally unpredictable, and can vary widely from different reporting agencies.

The problem that a lot of people face is that they have no clue going in to apply for a mortgage what their credit score is and when they find out it’s too late to do anything to improve it. Experts recommend that at least six months before applying for a loan you should visit www.MyFico.com to get your score. There is a fee involved with this but the knowledge you will be armed with after finding out your score could prove to be invaluable.

Ways to Improve Your Score

There are several ways to beef up your credit score in the months leading up to applying for a loan. Most important, experts agree, is to keep your credit card balances below 25% of what your available credit limit is. Thought you might escape those library fines since you’re leaving town? Not so fast. If they are turned over for collection, they can damage your score, so make sure you are all square with the house. Also, do not open or close any credit accounts,
including car loans, in the time leading up to applying for a loan. Both can hurt your score.

Your Credit Report

Your credit score is based upon the information that can be found in your credit report. Everyone is entitled to a free copy of his or her credit report once a year. Simply visit www.annualcreditreport.com to get a copy. Be sure to check your report for any errors, such as erroneous bad debt claims and the like, which can drag down your score.

For more information on credit scores and credit reports visit:
http://www.myfico.com
http://www.annualcreditreport.com

Chapter 16: Your New Home Walkthrough

The walkthrough, or new home orientation as it is sometimes called, is one of the most important phases in the purchase of your new home in The Villages. Not to be confused with a proper home inspection like I talked about in Chapter 12, it is a time for you to meet with the builder and let him or his representatives acquaint you with your new home and all of its components. If buying a resale you won’t have the convenience of a guided walkthrough, but you should conduct one on your own anyway.

The walkthrough is a time for you to give your new home the once over, looking for any issues not up to quality standards. Here is what could be considered the ideal walkthrough in detail.

Allow Enough Time
Allow ample time to go through your new home. In my experience an hour and a half to two hours is sufficient for average sized new homes. Also, leave any pets, kids, or curious friends and relatives at home. There will be plenty of time for them to experience and enjoy your new home in due time. The walkthrough is serious business and should be treated as such. Minimizing distractions is critical.

**What to Bring**

To ensure a successful walkthrough bring along several pens or pencils, a black permanent marker, a packet of neon green dots available at office supply stores, a pad of legal paper, some bottled water, and a ton of patience. Understand that everything might not be perfect once you start the walkthrough. It’s just the nature of home building that no matter how careful, the builder can’t catch everything. But, if you follow my advice, the builder and his employees, or in the case of a resale home the previous owner, will be in the position to get things corrected for you in a timely fashion.

The order of the walkthrough is not really important as long as everything gets covered. As you find items not up to standards, place one of the neon green stickers I suggested you bring on the item and write it down on your legal pad or a punchlist provided by the builder, or both if you feel it necessary. Green dots can mysteriously disappear but if you write it down it can’t be forgotten for long.

**Breaker Box and Electrical System**

You will of course be tempted to head for the front door and bask in the glow of your fresh new home. But not so fast. Let’s cover some things in the garage first. The garage houses several important components of your new home and you should become familiar with them. The first item on the list is the
breaker box. This is where the electricity that comes into your home is regulated. The walkthrough representative should show you where it is and how to operate it.

Make sure that each breaker has been clearly labeled for you. This will eliminate headaches down the road. Also, there should be some GFI outlets in the garage. Now is a great time for the walkthrough representative to test those in front of you, and to show you how they work. Also, make sure they test the GFI outlets inside the home when you get in there.

**Hot Water Heater**

Be sure to check the hot water heater. Make sure the size, measured in gallons, is what you contracted for. The walkthrough representative should show you how to turn it off so you will know how to when necessary. There are timers available for your hot water heater that can easily be installed that will save you some money on your electric bills. If your hot water heater comes with a timer, have the walkthrough representative show you how to set it.

**Water Shutoff**

The main water shutoff valve to the home will usually be located inside the garage or sometimes on the outside. The walkthrough representative may advise you to turn the water off if you will be leaving the home for days at a time. This is probably good advice, at least initially until you’ve lived in the home a while and made certain there are no leaky toilets or pipes.

If you do turn off your water, make sure that you also turn off the breaker for the hot water heater. The hot water heater has coils inside that can burn up if there is no water passing through. When you return home, it is very
IMPORTANT to make sure you turn the water back on before turning the hot water heater back on.

**Air Handler and Air Filter**

The air handler, which distributes the heated or cooled air throughout your home, will usually be in the garage as well. Make sure the walkthrough representative opens the filter door to show you how to change the air filter. Using the black permanent marker, make note of the filter size in a conspicuous place on the front of the air handler. You should change the air filter about every month for best performance.

**Garage Door**

While you’re still in the garage, open and close the garage door to check for proper operation and make sure the remote controls work. If your garage door opener came with an outside keypad, ensure that it too works. In the event of a power outage you may need to open the garage door manually. Have the walkthrough representative show you how to do that.

**Kitchen**

Once inside the home, the best place to usually start is the kitchen because there is so much to cover there. Make sure that there are no scratches on the kitchen countertops or cabinets. Open and close a random selection of cabinet doors to make sure they are working properly. Make sure the hinges are tight, and the cabinets aren’t sticking or rubbing against anything as you are opening and closing them. The representative should give you care and cleaning instructions for both your counters and your cabinets.
Turn on the kitchen faucet and set it to the hottest setting. Here we are checking to make sure that the hot water heater is working properly. As long as you’ve got hot water after what you feel is a reasonable length of time, you’re doing just fine. Have the walkthrough representative show you how the sink disposal works, and how to clear it if it gets clogged. Also have them show you where the individual shutoff valve is for the water in the kitchen as well as the locations of the GFI outlets.

Appliances

Examine the appliances that came with your home. First, examine the outside of them to make sure there are no scratches or dents. Accidents do happen during construction, but assuming you bought new appliances, and not scratch-and-dent specials, they should be in brand new condition. Turn the stovetop on, check that the burners are working, and then try heating the oven. Assuming everything is working thus far, start the dishwasher to run through a cycle. This is to mainly make sure that there are no leaks in the dishwasher, either when it fills or when it drains.

While the dishwasher is running do a quick check of the refrigerator. If there are integrated ice and or water controls in your refrigerator make sure they work. Don’t use the first batch or two of ice; just discard it in the sink. Also, most manufacturers suggest running through and pouring out the first couple of gallons of water from the refrigerator. This is to make sure that the water line becomes clear of any debris that may have gotten inside during construction and installation.

If your home came with a microwave, also check to make sure it works. In the laundry room, start both the washer and the dryer if provided and make sure they are working correctly. Make sure the dryer vent hose is connected.
All of the appliance instructions and warranty information should be kept in one easy-to-access location. Some of them may have cards for you to fill out and mail in to the manufacturer to record your warranty.

**Drywall and Flooring**

Before leaving the kitchen, examine the flooring for quality. Also check the walls for any drywall imperfections and check the paint for any spots the painter may have missed. As you see things that don’t meet your standards, write them down on the list and place a green dot on or near the problem area. This is so that the drywallers or painters know exactly where to look to correct the problem areas.

Continue your flooring and wall inspection throughout the remainder of the home. Don’t forget to look up every now and then and inspect the ceilings.

**Systems and Components**

As you are going through the home, have your walkthrough representative show you how various things work, such as how to set and control the thermostat, how to use the security system and intercom if there is one, and how to operate the central vacuum if you bought one. If your home has a fireplace, whether it is wood burning, gas, or electric, have the walkthrough representative show you how it works. Make sure you are given instruction booklets on each of these items and that you place them with your appliance booklets.

**Bathrooms**

Visit the bathrooms and check that the plumbing works. Again turn on the hot water, then the cold water to check the functioning of each. Be sure to check the showers and baths, as well as the sink. Water lines sometimes get reversed.
Hot will be cold, and cold will be hot, but this can be easily corrected. Flush the toilets and make sure they have adequate water flow and don’t remain running long after you flush. Check the tile work inside the showers to make sure that there are no holes or gaps in the grout or caulking. You don’t want water getting behind your tile in there. Examine the vanity tops for scratches and cabinets for loose hinges.

**Exterior**

Be sure to inspect the outside of your home as well. The walkthrough representative should familiarize you with where the hose bibs are located, the sewer cleanout, the A/C unit and anything else that is important. Make sure all of the exterior walls of the home are evenly painted, and do an inspection from ground level of the roof to make sure there are no shingles that look loose or out of place. If your home comes with a sprinkler system, you should be shown how to operate that.

**Warranty**

After you feel you’ve examined the home top to bottom and have made note of anything that is not satisfactory, you should have the walkthrough representative go over any warranty paperwork that is given to you, so you have an understanding of what items in the home are covered and for how long. Most warranty plans cover most everything for a short period of time, usually the first year. The systems of the home, things like plumbing, electrical, and HVAC, will be covered for a little bit longer, maybe up to two or three years.

There will also be a warranty on the structure. This is the longest lasting component of the warranty. When you hear a builder say a ten-year warranty or 15-year warranty, they are referring to the warranty on the structure. The structure is usually deemed to include the foundation and footings, beams, lintels, columns, walls, roof framing systems and flooring systems.
When things settle down a little bit and you have some time, it can never hurt to read over all of the warranty information. This will help you feel more comfortable with the warranty claim and repair process should you ever need to go through it in the future.

**Emergency Information**

The walkthrough representative will usually give you a list of subcontractors who worked on your home so you can call them if you have a problem with something. You should also be sure that you have a list of repair people to contact should an emergency arise on a weekend or during any non-business hours.

These people should include the heating and A/C contractor should the heat or air break; the electrical contractor if you lose power due to something other than a loss of overall power from the power company; the plumber for if your hot water heater breaks or if there is a sewer stoppage; and finally the number for the roofer if you get a roof leak. I also recommend having the number for a 24-hour water extraction company handy, just in case a pipe breaks or a water heater bursts and your home is flooded.

Write all of these numbers down on one piece of paper and tape them to the inside of a cabinet so that you can find them easily in an emergency.

**Sign Here Please**

To conclude the walkthrough, the walkthrough representative will typically have paperwork for you to sign stating that he walked you through and familiarized you with everything in the home, and that all the workmanship was satisfactory. Just make sure that the items you found to be unsatisfactory are either on this paperwork or will be attached to it in some form or fashion.

It is not absolutely critical that these items all be completed before your closing, so long as they are documented as needing repair. Invariably in the days
and weeks after you move in, you will find more items needing the builder’s attention. Just write all these items down as you find them and bring them to the builder’s attention.

Chapter 17: Real Estate Closings

There are basically two places where real estate closings take place in Florida. The first and most common place is at a title insurance company, and the second is at an attorney’s office.

Title Insurance Companies

Because of their importance in your real estate transaction, most title insurance companies provide closing services. It is very common for closings on property in Florida to take place at a title insurance company office. The title insurance company will act as a neutral third party to ensure that all terms of the contract have been met, and they will collect and disburse funds according to the terms of the contract.

What is Title Insurance?

Before the closing on your home in The Villages, a title insurance company will conduct extensive research into public records, surveys, and other recorded documents to ensure that no party (other than the seller) holds an interest in or has a lien upon the property you are trying to purchase. According to the American Land Title Association, nearly one-third of all title searches reveal a problem with the title. Unknown heirs, divorces, tax liens, and fraud or forgery can cause title problems. Thankfully most can be resolved before your closing.

Upon completion of their research, the title insurance company issues an owner’s policy to the buyer, and a lender’s policy to the lender. The seller will
customarily pay for an owner’s policy but, as with most other costs, this is negotiable. If you do end up having to pay for it, the cost will be $5.75 per $1,000 up to $100,000, and $5.00 per $1,000 thereafter. If you are financing, your lender will require you to pay for the lender’s policy, but this does not cost very much. It will be usually be only a couple hundred dollars or less because you are getting what’s called a simultaneous reissue credit with the owner’s policy.

**Attorneys’ Offices**

Many states require that an attorney conduct the real estate closing, but that’s not the case here in Florida. Even so, many people prefer the peace of mind that an attorney can bring to a real estate transaction. If your closing is being held at an attorney’s office, it will most likely be the seller’s attorney, since they usually pay for the title insurance policy. If that is the case, make sure that your attorney gets a copy of what you will be signing and has a chance to review it before you go to the closing. It is not critical for your attorney to attend the closing. Often times your real estate agent will attend as a courtesy to you, just be sure to ask.

**Closing Costs**

There are costs other than the sales price that are incurred in every real estate transaction. As the buyer, your share of these costs will typically range from 1% to 2% of the sales price. The closing costs that you pay will be a function of a couple factors including what you have negotiated in the real estate contract and whether or not you are getting a mortgage. Costs that are customarily paid for by the buyer include:

- Recording of the deed
- Documentary stamps on the deed* ($.70 for every $100 of the sales price).
*This is typically paid by the seller in a resale transaction, but I included it here because the builder often requires the buyer to pay this
- Documentary stamps on the mortgage ($.35 for every $100 financed)
- Intangible tax on the mortgage ($.002 times the mortgage amount)
- Lender’s title insurance policy
- Taxes
- Prepaid interest
- Prepaid HOA Dues, capital contributions, or transfer fees
- One year of insurance in full
- Appraisal Fee
- Underwriting Fee
- Flood certification fee
- And more…

How should you take title?

How you take title to your home in The Villages is an important question that should only be answered after consulting an attorney, and your accountant, due to tax and estate-planning implications. How you take title establishes proof of ownership of a property, and often determines who will inherit your home when you die.

Sole Owner

Also known as owner in severalty, sole ownership is how you might take title if you are single, divorced, or widowed. Should you happen to die while owning the property, the property will be passed on according to your will. If you do not have a will, it will be passed on by descent to your heirs.

Tenancy by the Entireties
Tenancy by the Entireties is the most common way to take title in Florida for those who are married. In this case, if one spouse dies, the remaining spouse automatically becomes the owner.

Tenancy in Common

If you are in a second (or third, or fourth) marriage and you have children from a previous marriage, you may want to consider a tenancy in common. In this case, if you should die, your share of ownership in the property can be willed to your children.

Joint Tenants with Right of Survivorship

If you and the person you live with are not married, but you want to ensure that they receive full ownership of the property when you die, then joint tenancy with right of survivorship may be for you. The surviving owner will own the property outright, and the heirs of the deceased will have no claim to the property.

Taking Title in a Trust

Another option many boomers may want to consider is to take title in a trust. Speak to an estate planning attorney or a real estate attorney as to how and why you might take title in this way.

Chapter 18: Maintaining Your New Home

There are several things you should do after you move in to your new home in The Villages to keep it looking and operating like new.

Periodic Maintenance
These include monthly maintenance like changing your air filter, cleaning your disposal blades by running ice cubes through it, and checking for leaks around toilets and under sinks. Periodically check all grout and caulking for any cracks, as this can occur due to shrinkage. Of course, you’ll want to maintain your appliances and have them repaired at the first sign of trouble.

Twice a year you should have your roof (please don’t try to do this yourself) and the exterior of your home inspected. Check the operation of all windows and shutters if you have them. You should have your heating and air conditioning system inspected and serviced twice a year as well, once at the start of summer, and again before the winter heating season.

Your home warranty information provided by your builder may have additional hints and tips for keeping your home in tip-top shape year round.

Also, to request warranty service from the builder online visit: https://www.thevillages.net/homeWarranty/warrantyClaimForm.asp

Pest Control

In Florida and The Villages, having a pest control service company come to your home regularly is essential in keeping your home both comfortable and free of insects and other pests. Without it you may have some unwanted roommates. Most non-native Floridians, especially Northerners are surprised at the amount of pests in Florida, but unfortunately the climate helps them thrive. The great weather might be what brought you here, and the bugs like it just as well.

The pest control company will usually start you off with an initial "kill everything in sight" type of service and maintain regular visits every 60 to 90
days. If you are still seeing bugs in your home, most companies will come out in between scheduled visits to try and get rid of the problem. Look in the phone book under "pest control" for companies providing service in your area.

**BONUS CHAPTER: FLORIDA RESOURCES**

This is a Bonus Chapter that I decided to include for you in this e-book. While it doesn’t strictly apply to The Villages, it provides a lot of great information about Florida that I think you’d enjoy knowing.

**Population and Growth**

Florida has 67 counties, fifteen of which are among the fastest growing in the nation. This statistic includes the nation’s fastest growing county, Flagler County, located on Florida’s east coast, between Jacksonville and Daytona Beach. As a result of the growth, Florida’s population has almost doubled, from roughly 9 million in 1980, to close to 18 million in 2006.

Florida is currently the fourth most populated state behind California, Texas, and New York, and Florida is projected to move ahead of New York by 2011.

Florida’s rapid population growth is due, in part, to the thousands of baby boomers moving into the state each year. At the time of this writing, experts project that Florida’s population is growing by almost 370,000 people per year. This works out to more than 1,010 people a day.

These statistics might make you want to stop and say hmmm…maybe Florida will be too crowded for me when I am ready to move there. Luckily, this is not likely to happen soon. Florida’s local governments and developers are now well aware of Florida’s growth rate, and are rapidly, if not frantically, preparing
the state with extra infrastructure, housing developments, and resources necessary to accommodate the large influx of residents.

One of the best ways to mentally grasp the geographical distribution of Florida’s population is to look at Florida’s most populated areas. Distributed around the coastal areas and Central Florida’s east-west corridor, almost three quarters of the state’s population live in and around 10 major areas.

**Florida’s Top Ten Metropolitan Statistical Areas**

1. Miami/Fort Lauderdale/Miami Beach – 5,428,962
2. Tampa/St. Petersburg/Clearwater – 2,636,972
3. Orlando/Kissimmee – 1,953,354
4. Jacksonville – 1,277,763
5. Sarasota/Bradenton/Venice – 672,231
6. Cape Coral/Fort Myers – 549,442
7. Lakeland – 541,840
8. Palm Bay/Melbourne/Titusville – 531,970
9. Deltona/Daytona Beach/Ormond Beach – 494,649
10. Pensacola – 440,066

**Hurricanes**

In Florida, hurricane season is a fact of life. The season officially begins June 1 and runs through November 30, with most activity typically occurring in late August through September. For many people in Florida, hurricanes are an excuse for a party. Most everyone who has lived in Florida for longer than a few years has been through at least one hurricane and several tropical storms. Though they are nothing to dismiss or joke about, with proper planning and precautions you’ll be able to weather the storms like a native.
Tropical depressions, tropical storms and hurricanes, when present, dominate the weathercasts here in Florida. The attention is for good reason. Hurricanes produce extreme winds, tornadoes, torrential rain, and storm surge, which can cause severe flooding of coastal areas. In fact, nearly 60 percent of hurricane fatalities occur as a result of flooding. Other effects are of course property damage, power outages, temporary loss of public services, bridge and road closures, loss of communications, and hospital closures.

A hurricane usually begins as a tropical wave that develops into a low-pressure system known as a tropical depression. Tropical depressions are not very organized but they have the potential to become stronger and evolve into more organized storms. You can, and if you move to Florida most likely you will, track storm developments on-line at sites like www.weatherunderground.com or http://nhc.noaa.gov.

Tropical depressions have sustained winds of up to 38 mph. Should the storm gain strength, the next level is called a tropical storm, with winds between 39 and 73 mph, strong enough to cause pretty severe damage to older, unprotected structures.

**Hurricane Watch versus Hurricane Warning**

- A Hurricane Watch indicates the possibility that you could experience hurricane conditions within 36 hours. This watch should trigger your family’s disaster plan, and protective measures should be initiated.

- A Hurricane Warning indicates that sustained winds of at least 74 mph are expected within 24 hours or less. Once this warning has been issued, your family should be in the process of completing protective actions and deciding the safest location to be during the storm.
Hurricanes are rated on a scale of 1-5 on the Saffir-Simpson Scale. Here are some defining characteristics of the five categories of hurricanes, and recent Florida sightings of each:

Category One Hurricane:
Winds 74-95 mph.

Category Two Hurricane:
Winds 96-110 mph.

Category Three Hurricane:
Winds 111-130 mph.
Recent category three hurricane making landfall in Florida: Jeanne, 2004.

Category Four Hurricane:
Winds 131-155.

Category Five Hurricane:
Winds greater than 155 mph
Recent category five hurricane making landfall in Florida: Andrew, 1992.

The category ratings are based on the strength of the hurricane, not an expected level of its potential for destruction. Hypothetically, a category one hurricane hitting a highly populated area could cause more destruction than a category five hitting a less populated place. To read more about hurricane categories and the Saffir-Simpson scale visit: http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/aboutsshs.shtml
If you do become a property owner in Florida, you should take great care in preparing your property and your household for the threat of hurricanes. Don’t assume that because you live in the center of the state that you are immune from storm fallout. Be prepared. Have a written hurricane plan. At the beginning of hurricane season, check your disaster kit, batteries and non-perishable food supply. Tips for developing a plan and building a hurricane kit can be found online at http://redcross.org, http://flash.org, or similar websites. Local television news stations usually put out hurricane tracking guides, which have tips on what you should do to prepare. These are usually available in local grocery stores.

Also, no matter how secure you may feel in your home, if you are asked by local authorities to evacuate, you should do so and do so early. Prepare for traffic congestion and long lines at the gas pumps. It helps to have a plan in place regarding where you will go and what you will take with you. Yes, it is a pain and inconvenience to pack up your essentials, secure your home, and drive to safe territory, but it could also save your life.

If you plan on buying a resale home not built within the last two years, visit the Federal Alliance for Safe Homes at http://www.flash.org or My Safe Florida Home at http://www.mysafefloridahome.com for tips on how to prepare your home to withstand a hurricane.

**Getting Around Florida**

Florida is a lot bigger than most people think. The distance top to bottom is 447 miles, and 361 miles side to side. Lucky for you The Villages is centrally located.

Florida is the twenty-second largest state, with 58,560 square miles. Florida’s longest river is the St. John’s River, which is 273 miles long. Lake Okeechobee is its biggest lake at 700 square miles, making it the second largest
freshwater lake in the continental United States, ranking just behind Lake Superior.

**Air Travel**

Getting to Florida by air is pretty easy, no matter where you are going in the state. Florida currently operates 14 international airports, with Orlando International Airport being the busiest with more than 34 million passengers a year, followed closely by Miami International Airport with approximately 31 million passengers a year. Florida also has several regional airports, and many smaller executive and community airports which can be a good choice for avoiding long lines and big crowds at larger airports, assuming you can get flights to where you need to go.

Florida airports are serviced by all the major airlines as well as discount and charter airlines. Search your favorite travel site to see how convenient and (usually) inexpensive it is for you to fly to Florida. If you plan to keep a second home here, it should be convenient for you to fly in and fly right back out without much trouble, cost, or inconvenience.

**Florida’s International Airports (with Airport Codes)**

Daytona Beach International Airport (DAB)
Fort Lauderdale/Hollywood International Airport (FLL)
Jacksonville International Airport (JAX)
Key West International Airport (EYW)
Melbourne International Airport (MLB)
Miami International Airport (MIA)

**Orlando International Airport (MCO)** - This is the airport you are most likely to use if you live in The Villages. There is even a shuttle bus that runs to and from

Orlando Sanford International Airport (SFB)
Palm Beach International Airport (PBI)
Panama City International Airport (PFN)
Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport (SRQ)
Southwest Florida International Airport (in Fort Myers) (RSW)
St. Petersburg/Clearwater International Airport (PIE)
Tampa International Airport (TPA)

**Major Interstates**

Florida’s major interstate highways are I-95, I-75, I-4, and I-10. They primarily connect the state north to south and east to west.

I-95, which runs up and down the east coast of the United States, reaches Florida north of Jacksonville, and runs the length of the east coast of the state, ending in Miami. It meets with I-10 in Jacksonville, and I-4 in Daytona Beach.

I-75 connects the west coast of Florida with the Midwest states, making cities on the west coast, including Tampa, Sarasota, Bradenton and Naples, hotbeds for Midwest vacationers, second homeowners, and retirees. I-75 begins in Florida about 45 miles west of Jacksonville. Once it snakes its way to the west coast of the state, it passes through Tampa (where it meets up with I-4), Bradenton, Fort Myers, and finally Naples. Here it begins to run east-west to Fort Lauderdale.

I-4 runs through the central part of the state, connecting Tampa, on the west coast, with Daytona Beach on the east coast. Interestingly, in 2004 Hurricane Charley became known as the “I-4 Hurricane” because it entered
Florida near Tampa, and followed the path of I-4 very closely before exiting the state just north of Daytona Beach.

I-10 runs the width of the Panhandle of Florida and connects Pensacola with Jacksonville. If you were to keep driving west out of Florida on I-10 you would eventually end up in the Pacific Ocean near Santa Monica, California.

**Road Construction**

In a continuing effort to prepare the state’s roadways and interstates for Florida’s growth, road construction projects are always underway. If you’d like to find out where they are located before making a trip, visit the Florida Department of Transportation online at [http://www.dot.state.fl.us](http://www.dot.state.fl.us). Here you can also find other valuable information such as the mileage between major cities and the locations of Florida’s rest areas, toll roads, and speed limits.

**Speeding**

Don’t speed. The Florida Highway Patrol and other law enforcement agencies are the butt of jokes such as: “Welcome to Florida, may I have your license and registration please.” Be aware that speeding fines are doubled in work zones in Florida. Speeding might leave you with a couple hundred bucks less to spend on your new home here.

**511 Traffic Info**

Florida offers an in-state travel information system that you can access by dialing 511 from a cell phone or landline. From 511, you can get updates on traffic for major roadways and interstates, as well as construction information, lane closures, and special alerts. The system is also available online at [http://www.FL511.com](http://www.FL511.com)
Florida Driver’s License

If you’ll be moving to Florida full time, you’ll want to get a Florida driver’s license. Part-time Florida residents can also keep their out-of-state license and get a Florida license that states “Valid in Florida Only.” This could be handy for situations where you need to provide proof of residency (like to get discount theme park tickets). Either way, you can get that process started at the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles website at http://www.hsmv.state.fl.us

Save time getting your license by taking advantage of online appointment scheduling. After you get a Florida license, in some cases, you can even renew online or by telephone.

Driving Miss Daisy

Some people moving to Florida will be bringing their elderly parents to live with them, many of whom will continue to drive in their seventies, eighties and nineties. The state of Florida offers a great resource covering many aspects of elderly driving at http://www.floridagranddriver.com

Distances Between Major Cities

To find the mileage between Florida cities visit: http://www3.dot.state.fl.us/mileage/

Employment

If you plan to continue working after you move to The Villages, or if you wish to start a second career, opportunities abound in Florida. The state’s job
market grew in 2006 and the jobless rate in Florida was the third lowest in the nation.

When looking for work in Florida, start with where you work now. If you like your current job, ask your manager if there might be an opportunity for you to continue working there by telecommuting. With so many boomers retiring, many companies are starting to see their company-wide levels of knowledge and experience start to dwindle. In order to keep that from happening, your company may want to keep you on board, even if you are hundreds of miles away in Florida.

If you’re going to live in The Villages why not work for The Villages? Visit http://www.careersinthevillages.com for more details.

Looking for something new? If it’s part time work you are after, check the classifieds in the local paper. Both local and national companies with locations in Florida actively recruit older employees. Part-timers and those looking for temporary or seasonal work can look to companies like Kelly Services, Manpower, and Spherion.

In addition to looking for opportunities in the local paper, don’t forget to search online jobs portals such as www.Monster.com and www.hotjobs.com for opportunities that might be available.

This is your new life. What you choose to do with your time is completely up to you. Just make sure you fill it with things you enjoy.

**Community Service**

April has been proclaimed Florida Volunteer Month by the state cabinet, but don’t wait until then to do something for the community. Invariably when you
are ready to move to The Villages, it will not be your parent’s retirement with
time spent solely on the golf course, napping in a hammock, or playing bingo
everyday. You are likely to want to spend at least part of your time volunteering
for a worthy cause.

Luckily, there are plenty of opportunities for you to get involved in
community service in The Villages. Whether you choose to help out at a local
school part time, join the local chapter of the Red Cross or United Way, or help
build homes for Habitat for Humanity, your time and experience will be highly
valued and appreciated.

As you probably already know, you’ll feel great about yourself for doing it.
Getting involved in volunteer work naturally increases your quality of life. Many
volunteer agencies actively seek out older volunteers for their expertise and
availability. Some even organize special task forces made up of their members
who are 50 or 65 years old or more.

For more information on volunteer opportunities for baby boomers visit http://
www.getinvolved.gov and visit http://www.volunteerflorida.org for more
information on the Governor’s Commission on Volunteerism and Community
Service.

Continuing Education

One way to fill your time is to take some classes at a local college or
university. Classes range from foreign language classes, to cooking classes, to
photography classes and more. Maybe you want to learn to speak Italian before
a big trip to Florence, or learn the intricacies of Thai cuisine to impress your
friends and family. With 11 state universities and nearly 30 independent colleges
and universities, whatever you would like to learn, there’s bound to be a school
nearby that offers it.
Don’t be intimidated in thinking that these classes will be full of late teen and twenty-somethings. Boomer participation in continuing education, especially when it comes to subjects that support their hobbies, is rapidly growing. As well, many schools have organizations for students of non-traditional age. There’s bound to be a friend or two to make, and a good time had, no matter what type of subject you choose to study.

Also, be sure to take advantage of telecommuting opportunities offered from many institutions. The classes can either be self-paced or have assignment deadlines posted by the instructors. Often, students interact with teachers via email and with other students on class bulletin boards. Like traditional courses, online education runs the gambit from mathematics to art.

The Villages Lifelong Learning College offers Villagers the chance to pursue lifelong learning right there in The Villages. Visit http://www.thevillageslifelongcollege.com for full details.

Museums and private organizations also offer classes. You can learn about Florida history, butterfly gardening, or surf fishing, explore yoga, take up sailing, or join the crowd at Bike Week by taking a motorcycle safety course.

For more information on Florida’s colleges and universities as well as links to each institution visit http://www.flidcu.org or http://www.fldoe.org

Health Care

Close to 20 percent of Florida’s population is over age 65. This is the highest percentage of all states, and almost 50 percent higher than the U.S. average. Consequently, there are more than 200 community hospitals in Florida, some of which are regarded as being among the best in the nation. You can be
assured that there are cutting edge facilities close by, no matter which part of the state you move to.

The Villages Regional Medical Center is just a short golf cart ride away for The Villages residents to get quality health care in their own back yard. Visit: http://www.tvrmc.org/ for details.

Florida does a great job of supplying its residents with the information they want to know. Nowhere, perhaps, is this information more important than in the field of healthcare. Be sure to check out the following websites.

MyFloridaRx.com

Prescription drugs can account for a large portion of your health care bills, especially if you don’t have insurance, aren’t old enough for Medicare, and don’t qualify for Medicaid. This site, developed by the Florida Attorney General and the Agency for Health Care Administration, lets you compare prices for the 100 most commonly used prescription drugs. MyFloridaRx.com also lets you see which pharmacy in your area has the best drug prices. http://www.myfloridarx.com

FloridaHealthStat.com and FloridaCompareCare.gov

Two more sites dedicated to providing information to Florida’s health care consumers are FloridaHealthStat.com and FloridaCompareCare.gov. These sites go several steps beyond comparing prescription drug prices. At these two sites you can compare hospitals, pharmacies, physicians, nursing homes and even health care plans, based on different criteria relevant to each.

At FloridaHealthStat.com your search options include prescription drug assistance programs, physicians by specialty, HMOs and insurance and health
facilities. Also, if you have elderly parents who may need a nursing home soon, check the Nursing Home Watch List at FloridaHealthStat.com before sending them.

At FloridaCompareCare.gov you can view hospital and care center profiles, which include the types of care available at each location and facility mortality rates. This site also has a facility locator so you can find the type of care you need close to your new home.

http://www.floridahealthstat.com
http://www.floridacomparecare.gov

Hospitals

According to U.S. News and World Report’s 2006 List of America’s Best Hospitals, eight can be found in Florida. These include:

Gainesville

Shands at the University of Florida
http://www.shands.org/hospitals/uf/

Jacksonville

St. Vincent’s Medical Center
http://www.jaxhealth.com/

*Note that Jacksonville is also home to a world renowned Mayo clinic
http://www.mayoclinic.org/jacksonville/

Miami
Bascom Palmer Eye Institute
http://www.bpei.med.miami.edu/site/default.asp

University of Miami, Jackson Memorial Hospital
http://www.um-jmh.org/

Orlando

Florida Hospital
http://www.floridahospital.org/locations/fhsouth/index.htm

Sarasota

Sarasota Memorial Hospital
http://www.smh.com/

Tampa

H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center and Research Institute
http://www.moffitt.usf.edu/

Tampa General Hospital
http://www.tgh.org/

VA Medical Facilities

A high percentage of people moving to Florida have served in the military and are entitled to health care benefits from the Veteran’s Administration. There are several VA Hospitals and Clinics throughout the state as well as VA Outpatient facilities located near most major cities.
For a complete list of VA hospitals, clinics, and outpatient facilities visit http://www1.va.gov/directory/guide/allstate.asp

Arts and Cultural Activities

If you’re into the arts, cultural events, and festivals, Florida will not disappoint you. There are more than 340 museums, more than 30 theatre companies, more than 200 outdoor festivals, and countless galleries and craft shops dedicated to the Arts. Most major Florida cities have symphony orchestras. The addition of theme parks, and world-class beaches and state parks means that there is no reason for you or your visiting kids and grandkids to ever be bored. In fact, there is so much to do in all parts of Florida that they should be begging to come visit. And because the weather is so nice, most of these places and events can be visited and enjoyed year round.

Museums

Let’s take a look at some popular museums throughout Florida. Keep in mind this is not even close to being a comprehensive list, just a few highlights. For a comprehensive list of museums in Florida, visit the Florida Association of Museums website at http://www.flamuseums.org

Ringling Museum of Art

The name should ring a bell if you’ve ever been to the circus. This museum, containing over 10,000 works of art including paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints, photographs and decorative arts, is located on the west coast of Florida in Sarasota. Created by circus owner John and his wife Mable, the Ringling Museum has been in operation since 1927 and is now run by Florida State University.
For more information visit http://www.ringling.org

Salvador Dali Museum

Visited by over 200,000 people each year, the Salvador Dali Museum is the largest collection of Dali’s work in the world. Previously housed in Cleveland, Ohio, the museum opened in St. Petersburg in 1982. The museum has such an extensive collection that it frequently loans its work out to other institutions throughout the world.

For more information visit http://www.salvadordalimuseum.org

Florida Museum of Natural History

Located in Gainesville at the University of Florida, this is the largest museum of natural history in the southern United States. The Florida Museum of Natural History holds over 20 million specimens of mammals, birds, reptiles, mollusks, fish, butterflies, and fossils. One highlight of the museum is a 6,400 square feet Butterfly Rainforest exhibit.

For more information visit the museum’s website at http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu

Southeast Museum of Photography

Located in Daytona Beach on the campus of Daytona Beach Community College, the Southeast Museum of Photography is one of less than 12 facilities in the United States dedicated exclusively to photography and is the only one in the southern United States. A special cultural and educational resource for anyone interested in photography, the museum features exhibitions covering a wide variety of photographic styles, and lectures featuring prominent photographers and critics.
For more information visit their website at http://www.smponline.org

World Golf Hall of Fame

The website sums it up: “If you love golf, you’ve got to go!” Previously located in Pinehurst, North Carolina, the World Golf Hall of Fame moved to St. Augustine and a new multi-million dollar facility in 1998. The museum contains historical artifacts and personal memorabilia from all the game’s biggest stars. Also on the grounds of the museum is an 18-hole natural grass putting course and an IMAX Theater. There are also two golf courses in what is called World Golf Village. The courses are King and Bear, co-designed by Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus, and Slammer and Squire, designed by course architect Bobby Weed, who consulted with Sam “The Slammer” Snead and Gene “The Squire” Sarazen. The World Golf Village offers “stay and play” packages so that you can visit the museum as well as play the courses while in town.

For more information visit http://www.wgv.com

Theme Parks

There’s perhaps no better way to spend quality time with your kids and grandkids when they come to Florida than to visit one of the many theme parks that Florida has to offer. Most of Florida’s theme parks are located in central Florida, making them easy to get to from almost anywhere in the state. There are a few things you need to know, however, before you go.

Price of Admission

Admission prices change frequently, though you are easily looking at over $100 for two people at most of the parks listed below. Discounts are
usually available for Florida residents, senior citizens, members of the military, AAA members, and young children. Annual passes are also available and can provide good savings if you plan to visit a park several times a year. Visit the parks’ websites for current admission prices and information on any discounts currently available.

When Not To Go

The best times to avoid the theme parks are during the summer, spring break, or winter break when millions of kids are out of school and family vacations are underway. Nothing’s worse than waiting in line for hours on end in 95 degree heat, packed in with thousands of people, especially when you are seemingly the only person there who remembered to apply deodorant that morning. Also, try to steer clear of most major holidays. If you plan to live in Florida at least part time or visit frequently, this still leaves you with plenty of time to enjoy the theme parks at times when they are less crowded.

Theme Park Guides

If you would like more information on Florida’s theme parks, two of the best guides are Lonely Planet: Orlando & Central Florida by Wendy Taylor (Lonely Planet Productions, 2003) and Frommer’s Walt Disney World and Orlando 2007 by Laura Lea Miller (Frommer’s 2006). Both are available at amazon.com or ask for them at your local bookseller.

Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom

The granddaddy of them all, the house of the mouse, is what got this whole Florida tourism based economy started. Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom, which opened for the first time in 1971, is one of the most visited and famous theme parks in the world. Enjoyed by millions of youngsters, adults, and
championship winning sports teams alike (“I’m going to Disney World!” – Various), Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom should be at the top of your list of things to see and do, at least once, while in Florida.

The park is open 365 days a year and features--in addition to the rides of course--several parades, shows, and exhibits geared towards the enjoyment of the whole family.

**Epcot**

Mickey’s neighbor, Epcot Center is equally enticing with its cultural charm. Epcot features rides like Mission: Space, and exhibits as well as festivals throughout the year such as the International Flower and Garden Festival, and the International Wine and Food Festival. There’s something for everyone at Epcot, as the park is divided into different foreign country themed “pavilions,” such as China, Mexico, Germany, France, and more. Many people make a special trip to Epcot just to eat, wanting to sample cuisines from all over the world in one location.

**MGM Studios**

Also part of the Disney family of theme parks, MGM Studios offers its visitors the chance to immerse themselves in their favorite movies. They have rides based on movies such as Star Wars, and Twilight Zone Tower of Terror as well as shows based on hit films such as Beauty and the Beast and the Little Mermaid.

**Walt Disney World’s Animal Kingdom**

Disney’s newest addition to its theme park lineup is perhaps its most exciting. Celebrating the wonders of nature and wildlife, Animal Kingdom has
rides, shows, and attractions that rival those at its older brother and sister parks. In addition to several animal encounters, rides such as Kilimanjaro Safaris, Kali Rapids, and the new Expedition Everest will make a trip to Animal Kingdom worth your while.

For more information on all of Walt Disney World’s parks, hotels and other attractions visit: http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/wdw/index

Universal Studios/Islands of Adventure

Just down the road from Walt Disney World are the formidable competitors Universal Studios and Islands of Adventure. Here you will find two distinct movie themed parks, with a “City Walk” in between them, flanked by three exciting themed hotels-- The Portofino Bay, The Hard Rock, and The Royal Pacific-- all connected by a unique and ultra-cool ferry system. It all combines to create one of the most fun environs in all of Florida. World famous rides such as the Incredible Hulk and Revenge of the Mummy provide the thrills, while staples such as Spider-Man and Shrek 4-D provide all-ages entertainment. At Universal City Walk there is an Emeril’s and Jimmy Buffet’s Margaritaville restaurants and other eating and drinking establishment such as Pat O’Brien’s and City Jazz. A two-story, 20 screen Loews movie theatre provides yet another opportunity to be entertained. My advice is to reserve a room at one of the hotels mentioned above and take a couple days to experience all Universal Studios, Islands of Adventure, and City Walk have to offer. Plus, with your room key you can gain special front of the line access to the rides in both parks as well as discounts at some of the restaurants and shops.

For more information on Universal Orlando’s theme parks, hotels, and entertainment visit http://www.universalorlando.com

Sea World
Located in Orlando, Sea World is one of the most famous marine life oriented theme parks in the world. There are shows and attractions featuring various forms of sea life such as dolphins, penguins, stingrays, sharks, killer whales, and more. If these shows aren't exciting enough, the park has added rides and roller coasters in recent years for guests of all ages to enjoy.

For more information regarding Sea World, its hours of operation and other information visit [http://www.seaworld.com/seaworld/fla/default.aspx](http://www.seaworld.com/seaworld/fla/default.aspx)

**Marineland: The Original Sea Park**

Marineland first opened in the late 1930’s as the world’s first oceanarium, providing visitors the first glimpse available of ocean life here on dry land. It was originally called “Marine Studios” and served as the site for filming of several Hollywood productions. Today, Marineland is a research and education facility, but the park itself is still open to the public. The main attraction at Marineland is the dolphin show. Marineland is located on the east coast of Florida, just south of St. Augustine. It might not warrant a special trip from far away, but if you are in the area, it’s worth your time to see it.

For more information visit [http://www.marineland.net](http://www.marineland.net)

**Busch Gardens Florida**

If you are looking for the adventure of an African Safari but don't want the hassle of updating your passport, Busch Gardens Tampa Bay may be a great alternative. Like most other theme parks, Busch Gardens also has rides, roller coasters, shows, and attractions but all with a Safari-themed twist. Most visitors though, go for the animals, and there are plenty there for you to see.
For more information on Busch Gardens visit http://www.buschgardens.com/BGT/default.aspx

Kennedy Space Center

Located on Florida's East Coast near Cocoa, Kennedy Space Center is the site of all United States space shuttle launches as well as the launch of many military and civilian rockets carrying satellites. If you’ve never seen a shuttle launch in person, put it on your list of things to do, and do it. There's nothing quite like it. There is also a visitors’ complex featuring exhibits, shows, and other attractions.

For details about Kennedy Space Center, as well as launch schedules visit http://www.kennedyspacecenter.com/

Festivals

Most every weekend in Florida offers a wide range of events and activities in which you may partake. If you’re not too busy visiting the beaches or enjoying the parks and other attractions, be sure to check out some of these exciting festivals throughout the state.

Strawberry Festival

Every year Floridians in-the-know flock to Plant City, located between Tampa and Orlando, to partake in some good old-fashioned fun. The Strawberry Festival is much like a county fair in that it offers amusement rides and games, shows, big-name entertainment, and of course, all the strawberry shortcake you could ever hope to eat. Fortunately, you are not just limited to shortcake, as you will find strawberry ice cream, strawberry sundaes, strawberry milkshakes,
strawberry cobbler, and the list goes on and on. It’s one festival you’ve got to check it out, at least once.

For more information on the Florida Strawberry Festival visit the festival website at http://www.flstrawberryfestival.com

Florida International Festival

Once every two years Daytona Beach plays host to the Florida International Festival, a musical event featuring symphonic and concert artists from all over the world. The Festival’s centerpiece, concerts performed by the London Symphony Orchestra, draws attendees from all over the country to see music at its best.

For more information visit http://www.fif-lso.org

Winter Park Sidewalk Art Festival

One of the nation’s most prestigious outdoor art festivals takes place each year in the city of Winter Park, on the outskirts of Orlando. More than 350,000 visitors flock to the show to see almost 1,500 artists showcase their work and compete for cash prizes in a variety of categories. In addition to art, the show also features music and entertainment, food, and children’s activities.


Florida Film Festival

It’s not quite Sundance, but some would say that’s a good thing. Every year in Orlando, filmmakers and film lovers alike come together to celebrate the world of film in what has become “one of the most respected regional film events
in the country.” In addition to screenings of movies, the festival includes seminars, educational forums, glam parties, and other special events.

For more information, visit the festival website at http://www.floridafilmfestival.com

Parks

The Florida Park Service, managed under the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, runs one of the largest park systems in the country with 159 parks spanning more than 723,000 acres and 100 miles of beaches. Activities available for you to enjoy include swimming, diving, or snorkeling in Florida’s rivers and springs, bird watching, fishing, and hiking on scenic nature trails. Florida’s parks, combined with wonderful weather, offer year-round fun for all ages. Events such as battle reenactments and Native American festivals celebrate Florida’s past, while art shows, museums and lighthouses offer a look into Florida’s cultural heritage.

For more information on Florida’s park system and a comprehensive list or parks visit http://www.floridastateparks.com

Dry Tortugas National Park

It's not the easiest place to get to, but if you're up for an adventure, take a day trip to Dry Tortugas National Park. Considered part of the Florida Keys, the Dry Tortugas are actually closer to Cuba than they are the United States. Discovered in 1513 by Juan Ponce de Leon, the park can only be reached by seaplane or boat.

There is plenty to see and do at the Dry Tortugas National Park, including snorkeling, fishing, boating, and touring the site's historic Fort Jefferson. Visit the park’s website for more information at http://www.nps.gov/drto
Beaches

When one’s thoughts turn to Florida, the first image that comes to mind for many people is a beach: white sand, gentle breeze, and the hypnotic sounds of the lapping of the waves. Ah, this is why we live here. Florida has more than 1,100 miles of coastline, the majority of that being white sandy beaches bathed in glorious sunshine for you to enjoy. Each beach in Florida is unique, and you are sure to enjoy visiting several different beaches around the state to see which is your favorite. Whether your pastime is surfing, boating, kayaking, or just floating around, you’re sure to find a beach that fits your mood close by.

To learn more about Florida’s beaches and view an interactive guide visit:  http://www.visitflorida.com/experience/beaches/

Lighthouses

People are continually enchanted by the history, lore, and romance embodied by lighthouses. Visiting and learning about lighthouses has become a passion for people of all ages. Being that it's nearly surrounded by water, Florida has a large number of lighthouses. Many are open to the public for tours, and some are even available to climb.

According to the Florida Lighthouse Association, there are 30 remaining historic lighthouses in Florida. Some of these are among the nation’s oldest and tallest, such as Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse (2nd tallest in U.S.), the only Florida lighthouse registered as a National landmark. The Florida Lighthouse Association, whose mission is to preserve Florida’s remaining lights, offers some great information on the history of lighthouses in Florida at the website http://www.floridalighthouses.org. If you are interested in seeing these maritime marvels first-hand, then surf on over to http://www.visitflorida.com/cms/d/floridas_lighthouse_trail.php.
Fishing and Boating

Not many places in the world, let alone in the United States, can beat Florida when it comes to the quality of fishing and boating. In fact, with 7,700 lakes, 10,550 miles of rivers, and 2,276 miles of tidal shoreline, Florida is the “fishing capital of the world” and some would consider it the boating capital of the world also. Florida has a large variety of species of fish, from largemouth bass in the fresh waters, to redfish along the shoreline to sailfish offshore. More anglers come to Florida to fish than anywhere else in the nation.

Florida has the third highest number of boat owners in the nation, ranking behind Michigan and California. And why wouldn’t it, with water everywhere you turn? Boating is a favorite recreational pastime of many Floridians and visitors to the state and an excellent way to relax and spend time with friends and family. No matter where you are in Florida: North, South, East or West, inland or on the coast, good fishing and boating are just outside your door.

For more information on fishing and boating in Florida, as well as license information for both, visit: http://www.fishingcapital.com and http://www.myfwc.com/boating.

Professional Sports

Most everyone enjoys a live sporting event now and then, and it will be an even more special experience for your kids and grandkids when they can experience it as part of their visit to you in Florida. Some of Florida’s professional teams include:

NFL
Jacksonville Jaguars
Miami Dolphins
Tampa Bay Buccaneers

**NBA**
Miami Heat
Orlando Magic

**MLB**
Florida Marlins
Tampa Bay Devil Rays

Major League Baseball Spring Training is also a big hit in Florida, with 18 teams calling the sunshine state home in February and March.

**NHL**
Florida Panthers
Tampa Bay Lighting

Florida is also home to the Professional Golf Association (PGA) of America headquarters (Palm Beach Gardens), the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) headquarters (Daytona Beach), the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP Tour) headquarters (Ponte Vedra), and the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) corporate headquarters (Daytona Beach).

*For more information on professional sports in Florida and links to all teams, visit the Florida Sports Foundation’s website at [http://www.flasports.com](http://www.flasports.com). Once there, you can also request free guides published by the Foundation for information on golf, fishing and boating, spring training and more.*
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