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HAVENS | THE HOCKING HILLS OF OHIO

A Landscape That the Glaciers Overlooked

By SAM HOOPER SAMUELS

FLAT. During the last ice age, about three-quarters of Ohio was steamrolled to pancake perfection by glaciers. Ohio takes in nearly 45,000 square miles, yet its highest point is only about 1,000 feet above its lowest. So, yes, flat.

But tucked into Ohio's southeast corner, near where it touches West Virginia and Kentucky, lies a protected pocket the glaciers never bullied, a densely wooded but thinly populated region of rugged slopes and cool hollows, of spring-fed creeks and cascading waterfalls, known as the Hocking Hills. For years, city dwellers from Columbus, only an hour away, have sought refuge there in retreats hidden among oak, cherry, walnut and hickory forests.

Murley Miller, a fund-raiser for the James Cancer Hospital and Solove Research Institute at Ohio State University in Columbus, and her husband, Alan, president of the Gongwer News Service, bought a 2,100-square-foot weekend home last December on 35 acres in the town of South Bloomingville in the hills. The house, which cost \$275,000, has three bedrooms, an outdoor hot tub, a campfire pit and a large stone fireplace, and is just 50 miles from Columbus, where the Millers live.

They like to tromp through the woods and explore their own private hollow, which includes a 50-foot waterfall and a pond stocked with catfish. "We're so anxious to see all the seasons here," Ms. Miller said. "The May apples, the daffodils, the narcissus. Everything. The hills are famous for fall colors." Though, she added, "nothing can replace sitting in our hot tub on the deck while the snow falls around us."

The region is a sprawling area of about 500 square miles in several counties, with some of the best scenery in Hocking County. Within the region there are several small towns, the largest of which is Logan, the Hocking County seat. But most second-home owners don't think of themselves as residents of Logan or Laurelville or South Bloomingville; they think of themselves as living in the hills.

Buying in the Hocking Hills can take patience. The Millers shopped for their house for more than two years. During that time, their agent showed them only two houses that met their requirements. For those in a hurry, an increasingly popular option is to buy land and build.

Frank Danik, an anesthesiologist from Lima, Ohio, and his wife, Terri, bought two wooded acres in the hamlet of Creola in February 2005, without even a road leading into the property. Last October, their three-bedroom log house was finished at a cost of \$535,000.

"We really wanted a big space so we could entertain," Dr. Danik said. The Daniks' primary residence is two and a half hours away, and they often bring a crowd with them for weekends. "We've slept 10 here," he said.

A good number of second-home owners in the hills eventually retire there. Denny Cooke and his wife, Barbara Andreas, built a house on 80 acres that was once a Boy Scout camp in South Bloomingville. Ms. Andreas is a botanist who teaches at Kent State University, and Mr. Cooke is an aquatic ecologist retired from Kent State. "Here in the hills," he said, "there are 10 or 12 couples with similar histories to ours."

Mr. Cooke, 69, likes to invite friends for a little target practice, firing a rifle at a target nailed to a fallen tree. A cross-country runner, he takes part in local distance runs, and has even run the 60-kilometer Hocking Hills Indian Run.

The Scene

The Hocking Hills is all about the outdoors. Hiking boots and cross-country skis easily outnumber high heels and wingtips. The region has several state parks and federally protected areas, which include caves and waterfalls.

Logan's Main Street, lined with small shops, is friendly if sleepy. The Sandstone Restaurant has been a local favorite for years, situated behind a solid brick wall and offering a similarly solid menu of beef and seafood, with the optional wedge of iceberg. Those meeting for breakfast or lunch tend to default to the Bob Evans restaurant just outside the center of town. Known for its sausages, the main question that lingers in the air is: Links or patties?

And Logan is home to the Columbus Washboard Company, which sponsors a festival each June that draws washboard musicians and jug bands nationwide.

But most second-home owners choose lots far from town for the views and the privacy. For some, the big social event is the annual spring cleanup of Route 56 on the Saturday before Easter. In July, there is an annual lily festival that features area artists and musicians; it drew 8,000 visitors last year.

There are restaurants in Logan that cater to discerning palates. At the Inn at Cedar Falls, crab-stuffed flounder or plum-glazed pork tenderloin can be eaten in an 1840 log cabin. And the Grouse Nest Restaurant at the Hocking Hills Resort serves a signature venison meatloaf.

Pros

In addition to its natural beauty, the region is also friendly and safe. Newcomers say they are welcomed by full-time residents and long-term second-homers alike. And residents say there is virtually no theft or vandalism. Property taxes are modest; the tax bill for a three-bedroom house on significant acreage can be just \$2,500 a year.

Cons

Though Columbus is close, the Hocking Hills are isolated. "We're not around a lot of designer shops," Mr. Cooke said. "Be prepared for cheap wine and beer." Cellphone coverage is spotty, with lots of dead zones.

The Real Estate Market

Despite sharp increases in tourism the last 10 years, prices in the region's second-home market have held steady.

"The demand for full-time homes has increased," said Larry Menchhofer, a real estate agent with more than three decades experience in the Hocking Hills. "But the demand for second homes has remained static. Prices have been stable for 30 years, with continuous increases at a modest rate."

A typical retreat in the hills may sit on as few as two acres or as many as a few hundred. House prices tend to be modest, mostly \$100,000 to \$300,000. There are a surprising number of oil and gas wells; 15 percent of homeowners get free natural gas as part of a lease agreement in exchange for the gas or oil rights to their property.

The influx of professionals from Columbus and other big cities, though, has created a small market for houses in the \$500,000 range. One recent sale involved an 85-acre estate with a horse arena and a 4,400-square-foot house for \$1.3 million.

LAY OF THE LAND

POPULATION Nearly 29,000 in Hocking County, according to a 2006 estimate by the Census Bureau. Logan has a population of about 6,700.

SIZE Hocking County is 422 square miles; Logan is about 3 square miles.

WHO'S BUYING Empty nesters who want a base for weekend retreats and extended family gatherings, and families with children. Most live in Ohio, especially Columbus, with the occasional Floridian looking to escape the relentless sunshine and heat.

GETTING THERE From Columbus, it's an hour's drive southeast on Route 33.

WHILE YOU'RE LOOKING The Inn at Cedar Falls (21190 State Route 374, Logan; 740-385-7489; www.innatcedarfalls.com) is a rustic bed-and-breakfast where guests have the choice of a room, a cottage or a log cabin. Weekend room rates start at \$129 in winter and \$149 in the peak season (mid-March through November). The Glenlaurel Inn (14940 Mount Olive Road, Rockbridge; 800-809-7378; www.glenlaurel.com) has a rural Scottish theme. A garret above the carriage house is \$149 a night on weekends, while a full cottage is \$319.

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