

# The New York Times

## Like a College Visit, Minus Kegs



Michael Temchine for The New York Times

**TRYOUT** For many older people, staying at a retirement community for a few days is the only way to know whether to move in. Jackie and David McMakin, above in their McLean, Va., home, are leaving next month for a community in Shelburne, Vt.

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**JACKIE McMAKIN** and her husband, David, are not the least bit apprehensive about moving next month from their home of 33 years in McLean, Va., to a retirement community in Shelburne, Vt. “We can’t wait,” said Ms. McMakin, who is 75 and a retired vocational counselor. “It suits our style perfectly — casual and sporty — the L. L. Bean of retirement communities.”



David and Jackie McMakin tried about a half-dozen retirement communities.

They know, because they stayed several days at the community, [Wake Robin](#), to get a feel for the place. “We stayed overnight at about a half-dozen different communities before we made our decision,” said Mr. McMakin, also 75 and a former director of management operations for the [United States Agency for International Development](#). The cool climate and nearby bike

paths were selling points, but most of all, he said, “We liked the people and they all seemed to love being there, which is always a good sign.”

Homes at Wake Robin range from \$138,685 for a 557-square-foot one-bedroom apartment to \$562,200 for a 2,448-square-foot two-bedroom cottage, with monthly fees from \$2,407 to \$6,160, depending on square footage. The price and fees cover lifetime use of the home, one meal a day, housekeeping, general home maintenance, utilities, wireless Internet, transportation, use of the fitness facility, classes and social events, as well as unlimited assisted or nursing care if needed.

In a bid to attract residents in a tight economy, more retirement communities are offering overnight stays similar to what colleges offer prospective students.

But instead of being matched with an upperclassman and staying in a dorm, retirees are squired around by community residents and stay in a model home or apartment. They eat in the dining room, use the fitness equipment, attend social gatherings, go to any scheduled classes and generally experience life there.

“It’s pretty much the same as a college campus visit, just without the keg parties,” said Maggie Stark, marketing director at the [Kendal Retirement Community](#) in Oberlin, Ohio, which has at least four potential residents a month taking advantage of its Try-It program — eight a month in peak times during the spring and fall.

With those over 55 now almost a quarter of the population, more age-restricted communities have sprung up to meet their needs. They range from sprawling active-adult communities with the amenities and carnival atmosphere of cruise ships to small, intimate communities where karaoke night would be anathema. The housing ranges from small apartments to large private homes with styles that span Southwest adobe to Swiss chalet.

“These communities are all so different that it’s smart to spend a significant amount of time at the places you are considering and not make a decision sight unseen,” said Elinor Ginzler, the senior vice president for livable communities at the [AARP](#).

While the idea of offering no-obligation overnight stays dates back to the development of the Sun City, Ariz., retirement community in the 1960s, it is only recently that such extended trial visits have been widely offered and actively promoted. Ms. Ginzler said the poor economy has led to more-aggressive marketing, and the large and growing population of older adults has created more interest. “We’re talking 78 million Americans,” she said. “They have to live somewhere.”

Many choose continuing-care retirement communities, which offer independent living as well as on-site assisted care and nursing care. The security of having help and support if needed is what motivated the artist Lois Manookian to move to such a facility. “I lived alone on 10 acres on the

rural edge of Appalachia, and when I turned 75, I decided it was time to move while I could still make my own decisions,” said Ms. Manookian, now a vigorous 81.

She took advantage of trial-stay programs at three communities before moving in 2006 to a high-rise continuing care community in Portland, Ore., called [Holladay Park Plaza](#), known by residents as the Plaza. “There’s a lot of pressure to make the right decision when you know that this is going to be your last stop,” said Ms. Manookian, who teaches art classes to fellow residents at the Plaza. “Staying a couple of days at a place is the only way to get a sense of what it would be like to live there.”

She had thought she wanted to live in a community in Minneapolis but decided against it after spending several days there. “I liked it, but it was started by Lutherans and although it wasn’t still affiliated, it retained a faint flavor,” she said. “I went into the library and the periodicals and books indicated a worldview that was different from mine. I realized I would not be happy there.” Besides, in Portland, she loved the vibrant local arts community, the Plaza’s views of Mount Hood and the convenient public transportation. It’s also closer to her daughter, who lives in Olympia, Wash.

Trying out a retirement community for a few days usually requires a nominal fee. [Robson Communities Inc.](#) charges \$30 to \$40 to stay three days and four nights at one of its seven resort-style adult communities in Texas and Arizona. The fee covers one dinner and one round of golf. At [Foulkeways](#), a Quaker retirement community in Gwynedd, Pa., the charge is \$99 for individuals and \$149 for couples to stay three days and two nights. Dinner and breakfast are included as well as access to the pool and fitness facilities. And [Pulte Homes’ Del Webb](#) subsidiary, which has 50 active adult communities in 20 states, offers \$50 a night Vacation Getaways at some locations. Guests stay in a model home with a golf cart in the garage for roaming around. They also get a round of golf, a meal at one of the on-site restaurants and access to the fitness facilities.



Lois Manookian tried three places before picking this one in Portland, Ore.

The catch is that guests taking advantage of these offers must meet with a salesperson at some point during their stay. “It’s just an hour info session at the sales office — no pressure and no toaster ovens given out afterwards,” said Steve Soriano, chief accounting officer at Robson. And while some people come for the inexpensive vacation with no intention of moving to the community, he said it is nonetheless the company’s most effective marketing tool: “One percent sign up if they just come for a tour and 18 percent decide it’s for them if they come on the guest program.”

Dorothy Lehmkuhl, a 72-year-old retired professional home and office organizer from Estes Park, Colo., decided she wanted to move to a Del Webb active adult community called Bridgewater in Brownstown, Mich., after she took advantage of its trial-stay program. She spent three days in one of the community's model homes last year while her husband, Bruce, 69, a retired IBM marketing manager, was on a fishing trip in the area.

"He told me, 'Don't you dare like it,' " she said. But after a laughter-filled evening with a group of residents who took her to a local Hungarian restaurant, a morning spent playing bridge in the clubhouse and a luncheon with several women who live in the community; Ms. Lehmkuhl was sold. "I loved the people and the high energy level," she said. Moreover, two of their three sons live in Michigan.

She went back a few months later and stayed again, this time with her husband. He was so impressed that they bought one of the remaining lots on a small lake in the center of the community. After they selected an exterior style and floor plan from the developer's catalog, their new house was built in 81 days, in time for the holiday season.

"It's perfect for us," Ms. Lehmkuhl said in a cellphone conversation last month as she and her husband drove from Colorado to Michigan hauling a fishing boat packed full of Christmas decorations. "We're ready for our next adventure."