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**POOLS**

The Great Escape

by Iyna Bort Caruso

A gorgeous pool can add value to a luxury home. Better still, it can add value to a luxury lifestyle.

The most lavish pools are fantasies, transformative escapes from the daily grind. Your house may be a stately Tudor or classic Colonial, but your pool can ooze a Cannes or Cancun aesthetic.

A pool is the ultimate liquid asset.

These days homeowners are carving up their most dramatic acreage for signature swimming pools. Doodle a design and it can be built. Technology is being driven by the demand for increasingly sophisticated designs and materials in the high-end market, says Greg Darvin, owner of Pristine Pools in East Hampton, N.Y., and a consultant on pool projects in the Caribbean and Europe. "We're blessed or cursed, depending on how you look at it, by having the opportunity to work with the best materials in world, which are usually the most expensive materials in the world. In communities like East Hampton, clients are more open, willing and able to push the envelope."

Trends start in places like Beverly Hills, Miami and the Hamptons, where pools are prevalent and homeowners have deep pockets. In fact, California, Florida and New York account for 43% of total in-ground pools in the United States, according to the Association of Pool and Spa Professionals. The cost for trendsetting an elaborate pool can be upwards of \$250,000 (not including surrounding landscaping)—or close to the price of a modest home.

Darvin likens the personal enjoyment of a pool to owning a fine piece of jewelry or a classic car collection. "Our clients work very hard; they've paid their dues. They're okay spending money on themselves and their family and having a space where they can get some peace and quiet."

Some homeowners clearly know how to get their money's worth. In Arizona, a pool strategically situated on the edge of a mountain is breathtaking by day and magical at night when the white city lights of downtown Phoenix glow from below. There's a "dive-in" theater on an estate on the Maui coast that embraces the homeowner's desire for upscale Hawaiian-style outdoor entertainment. With a backdrop of palm trees and the ocean, a 20-foot-wide projection screen emerges from a watertight teak bench on the side of the pool. Then there's the negative edge, or infinity pool, on a remote point in Montezuma, Costa Rica, that seemingly disappears into the Pacific.

Every fabulous pool starts with an idea. Darvin typically finds inspiration on the site. "Some feature will catch my eye as soon as I'm at the property," he says. It could be a tree or a hill, maybe an architectural element of the house like French doors. "I'll use that as the cornerstone. I find it's the best way to get started on size, shape and broadstroke design ideas." Clients are happy to make the investment. "On the real estate end, they found out in a seasonal area like the Hamptons, a good

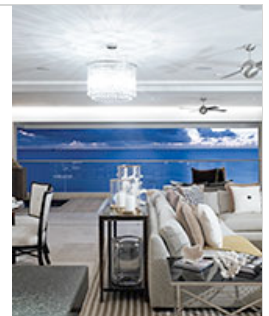
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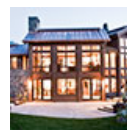
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swimming pool and patio space can really sell the home.”

Mark Attarha of East Bay Sotheby's International Realty in San Francisco's Bay area covers two counties, Alameda and Contra Costa. In the latter, where new construction is common, about 40-50% of homes have built-in pools. Attarha says in homes valued at less than \$1 million, pools can be a detriment, but in higher price ranges, they “bring value to the table in terms of quality of life and resale value.” Not all pools generate the same reactions, however. “The main thing is to be creative. Buyers are very excited about having a pool that's been architecturally designed, and the quality of materials is very, very important. The more dramatic the pool, the more appealing it is.”

Dressing up the investment are elaborate add-ons like sheer descent waterfalls, fountains, color-changing lights and spas. Some homeowners incorporate climbing walls, grottoes and hand-sculpted mosaic murals that create optical illusions. These are the next generation of luxury swimming pools, and everything about them is being redefined, including maintenance. Still picturing dad skimming debris from the pool? Those days are over thanks to robotic vacuums and automatic control systems.

Erika Paul of Hallmark Sotheby's International Realty in Hopkinton, Mass., about 25 miles west of Boston, says pools are common on estates in the million-dollar plus range. “If there's no pool, prospective buyers are asking about the ability to put one in.” Pools that blend into the landscape are turning the most heads. Paul and her colleague, Michael Lefebvre, share the listing for a \$6.4 million home in Sherborn situated on 23 acres. The pool is a jewel. “Stones from the property itself were incorporated into a waterfall and coping around the edge of the pool, so it's not this bright blue eyesore in the middle of the backyard,” says Lefebvre. “It looks very natural.”

Three years ago, Paul built a similar pool in her own backyard. She had a custom- shaped design created that incorporated a lap lane and then had it lined with a pebble finish she says adds a sense of warmth and color. What will her return be? Paul isn't sure but she's nevertheless thrilled with the investment. “Most pools are about lifestyle, and this is the lifestyle we wanted. I have a vacation in my backyard.”

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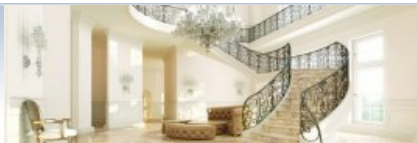
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