



A Man-Made Lake in Alabama Is Giving the Gulf Coast a Run for Its Money

Lake Martin is drawing wealthy vacationers willing to spend big on waterfront homes

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After Bruce Pearl discovered Lake Martin in east-central Alabama, he dreamed about owning a piece of property along its shoreline.

Pearl, who has been head coach of Auburn University's men's basketball team for roughly a decade, began visiting the lake in 2014 on the recommendation of a friend. In 2019, after he coached his team to the NCAA Men's Final Four, a bump in pay allowed Pearl, now 63, to build his family a vacation home on the lake.

"There's just no way you'd expect, in the middle of Alabama, to have this amazing lake, these incredible golf courses and these multimillion-dollar homes," he said.

Lake Martin is a man-made lake that is fed by the Tallapoosa River and surrounding creeks and supported by the Martin Dam. Its roughly 40,000 acres include a sinuous shoreline of

over 800 miles. Surrounded by the small Alabama cities of Alexander City, Dadeville and Tallassee, Lake Martin has dozens of its own residential neighborhoods including Willow Point, The Ridge, The Heritage and StillWaters. The area has long attracted a high-net worth clientele made up of CEOs and business owners from nearby cities including Birmingham, Montgomery and Auburn, according to local agent India Davis of Lake Martin Realty.



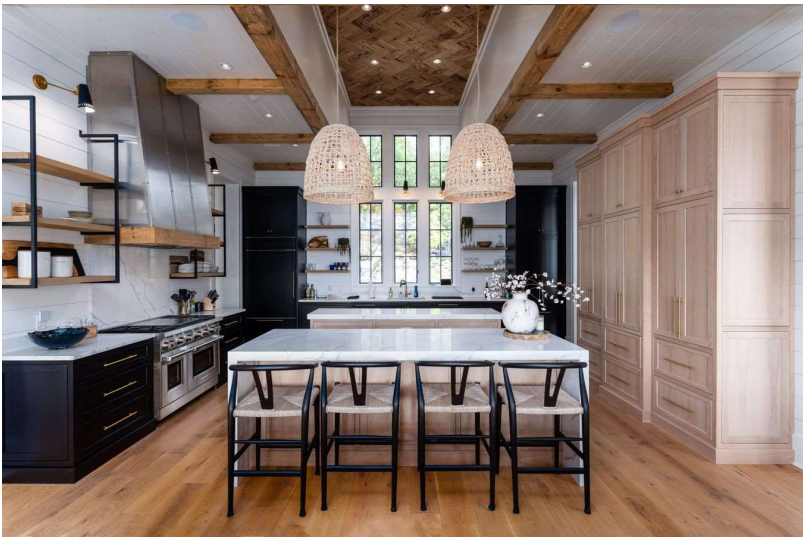
Bruce Pearl, head coach of the Auburn University men's basketball team PHOTO: KEVIN C. COX/ GETTY IMAGES

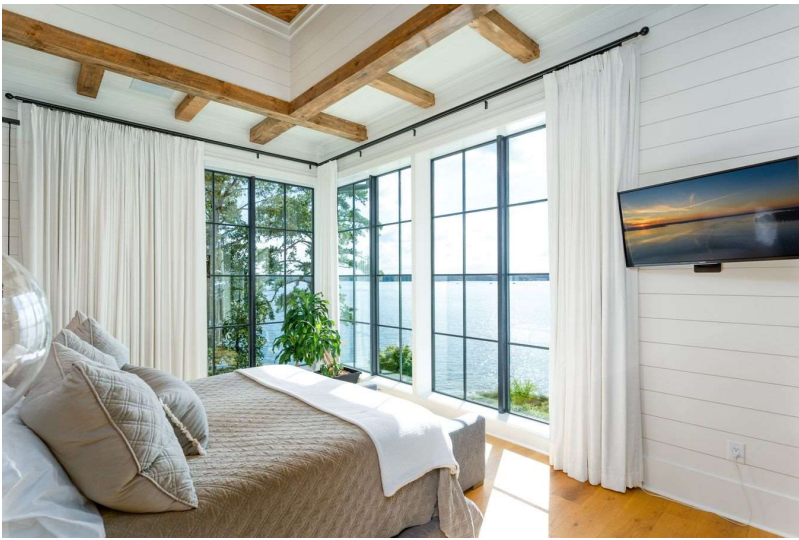
While the area has experienced a steady rise in prices for decades, it saw a growth spurt over the last roughly five years. In July, the annual average sales price for single-family homes along the Lake Martin shoreline was around \$1.3 million, up about 95% from about \$668,000 during the same period in 2019, according to data provided by Steve Arnberg, vice president of real-estate sales and company broker at Russell Lands, which, among other things, is a major developer of Lake Martin property.



ILLUSTRATION: JASON LEE

Arnberg said that Lake Martin's central location, ongoing development and family-friendly lifestyle are key attractions for Alabama-based vacationers, some of whom used to travel four to five hours to visit the Gulf of Mexico, but now opt for the one to three hours it takes to drive to Lake Martin. The area has also seen a recent rise in out-of-state home buyers, said local agent Amanda Scroggins with Re/Max. Many of them are from Florida, Tennessee and Georgia. One draw for these out-of-staters, according to Arnberg, is Russell Lands' new Wicker Point Golf Club, which will have a Coore & Crenshaw-designed golf course and is scheduled to open late September. Home lots near it are getting multiple bids, many over \$1 million, he said, and are going into contract well over list price.





Bruce Pearl's home overlooks Lake Martin in The Ridge neighborhood.

JUSTIN CLAYTON (5)

In 2018, Pearl, who is based in Auburn, Ala., said he bought a waterfront lot in The Ridge for around \$900,000. His intention was to eventually build a home on it. “At the time, I didn’t have the money to do both, buy land and build a home,” he said. Nor did he have the time. “So I bought it as an investment and I said, ‘Someday I’m going to build my dream home. And it’s going to be a family home, a place my children and my family can all use forever.’ ”

That day came sooner than Pearl expected. In 2019, Auburn’s NCAA Men’s Final Four appearance propelled Pearl’s career and earned him an extended contract with the university with a higher salary, he said. This provided the wherewithal to spend the next year and a half building a home on Lake Martin with his wife, Brandy Pearl. “Because we have western exposure, I wanted really big decks that feel like outdoor rooms,” he said, adding that they love to watch the sunsets. “In the fall, you can be outdoors all day and have a fire at night when it gets cool.”

The building cost of the roughly 8,000-square-foot, five-bedroom house was around \$3 million, Pearl said, and it now serves as his family's getaway. In 2020, to increase privacy, he combined his property with an adjacent lot, which he bought for \$380,000, according to property records. On summer afternoons, Pearl and his family cruise in their Barletta Pontoon boat and ride their Jet Skis, he said. For dinner, they often boat to one of several dock-and-dine restaurants along the lake or grill in his outdoor kitchen while his grandchildren swim in the pool.

Lake Martin was created by the Alabama Power Company in the 1920s to generate hydroelectric power. The land acquired for the creation of the lake included the farming towns of Irma, Susanna, and parts of Benson, a notable Black community founded by a former slave, John Benson, after the Civil War. It had farms, manufacturing facilities, a railroad and a school, said Thomas T.C. Coley Jr., a Tallapoosa County commissioner and local historian. Alabama Power acquired the land to create the lake piecemeal, taking some by eminent domain, buying some as a result of legal settlements, acquiring smaller power companies that owned land, and buying some parcels directly, records show. The company was unable to provide records regarding how much compensation was paid to landowners.





Popular destinations around Lake Martin include SpringHouse restaurant, an equestrian center, a dock-and-dine restaurant called The Landing at Parker Creek, and the popular cliff-jumping spot Acapulco Rock. STACY K. ALLEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (4)

Benjamin Russell bought land around the lake in the 1920s and 1930s and launched its hospitality industry by renting out small cabins around it, said Arnberg. The power company and Russell Lands are now the area's two largest landowners.

The Russell Corp., a company founded by Russell, unveiled the Willow Point Golf & Country Club in the 1960s. Russell Lands acquired the course in the 1970s and began major development around the lake, sectioning off neighborhoods and selling residential lots.

Over the next few decades, Russell Lands continued to sell lots and invest in commercial development, including Russell Crossroads, a town center serving Lake Martin communities. The center is home to a community square, an equestrian center and several dining options including SpringHouse, which was designed by Birmingham architect Jeffrey Dungan in the mid-2000s. It was around this time that demand started picking up for large homes around the shoreline, said Dungan, and it began to evolve into a year-round destination.

Miami residents Matthew Meehan, 43, and his husband, Rod Hildebrant, 66, first heard about Lake Martin in 2015 from one of their employees. After three visits, they were hooked. "You can jump off the boat, swim down and see 10 feet under the water. The water is that clean and that clear," said Meehan.

Shortly after their visit, Meehan and Hildebrant, serial entrepreneurs, bought three waterfront lots in The Ridge, totaling around 6 acres, for just over \$3 million, according to Meehan. They combined the lots and spent the next five years and about \$22 million building a roughly 26,000-square-foot vacation home.



Robert Cobb's son-in-law, Tom Flournoy, and his grandson, Connor Flournoy, ride personal watercraft on Lake Martin.
PHOTO: STACY K. ALLEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The couple's home was completed in 2020 on the day the governor of Alabama declared a state of emergency because of Covid-19. They hunkered down at the lake during the first year of the pandemic. In 2021, they began using it as a vacation spot. A typical summer day at the house begins with sipping their morning coffee in the yard, sometimes while watching a bald eagle resting in the trees. Then they hop on their boat, pick up some of their neighbors and explore nearby islands, while making stops at food and ice cream boats on the lake.

"Anytime we have a newbie coming to the lake, they look at us and say 'Alabama? Why Alabama?'" Matthew Meehan said. "But when they arrive at our home and they walk to our back veranda, sit down and look out to the lake they say 'All right, I see why you like it here.'"

When sales for the most recent phase of residential lots near Wicker Point Golf Club opened this summer, 22 of the 27 available lots sold in a single day, with an average contracted price of around \$1.13 million, according to Arnberg. About a quarter of the demand for these empty lots, he said, comes from existing homeowners around the lake who are looking to upgrade.



Robert Cobb has vacationed on the lake since the late '90s. PHOTO: STACY K. ALLEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

For Robert Cobb, the opportunity to upgrade his Lake Martin home came in 2016 when he learned the lot across from him, with better views and a nicer breeze, was for sale. The former CEO of Cobb Theaters and his wife, Mary Cobb, began visiting friends at Lake Martin in the late 1990s. Before that, he and his family made the roughly five-hour drive to the Gulf of Mexico for vacations. The Birmingham-based couple fell in love with the lake's serenity, he said. In 1998, the couple bought their first home on the lake for \$630,000, according to property records. The roughly 5,000-square-foot home in the Willow Point neighborhood was their family's vacation home for about 20 years until Cobb sold it last year for \$2.375 million, records show.

Their new lot cost \$800,000 in 2016, according to public records, and Cobb spent about \$5 million building a roughly 6,000-square-foot home on it, said Dungan, who designed the home for him. Completed in 2022, the six-bedroom home has a 25-foot great room and a sitting room, each with large stone fireplaces, said Cobb. His favorite features, he said, are the pecky cypress-beamed ceilings and the sound the rain makes when it hits the deck's metal roof.

Mary Cobb died just before the house was completed last year. Cobb, 74, spends most summer weekends at the new home, and frequently visits in the winter, too. Even after about 25 years since his first visit, he still considers Lake Martin one of his favorite places to be.

“You just can’t help but enjoy yourself here,” he said. “It’s so peaceful and serene.”

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