

It's a buyer's market in Central Florida, where property now is as cheap as it was 13 years ago. We recommend some buying spots there, whether you're looking for a lettable holiday home or a more permanent residence

WORDS LIZ ROWLINSON

# IT'S ALL GO IN ORLANDO



**Y**ou may have heard agents saying this for a few months already, but now might just be the best time to buy a home in Florida.

There are persuasive signs that both prices have really bottomed out and that a recovery is nigh.

In February prices in Orlando hit their lowest level since November 1997 – with a median home price of \$94,950 (£59,000), according to the Orlando Regional Realtor Association – as sales are dominated by cheap cash deals.

What's more, tourism is also booming – helped by new theme parks such as the popular Wizarding World of Harry Potter and much-anticipated Legoland on its way.

Another green shoot of recovery might be detected in the rise in home loan applications, as US buyers rush to take advantage of a slide in mortgage rates.

Recently there have also appeared some mortgages for overseas buyers, typically requiring 30-35 per cent deposits and with rates of seven per cent per annum.

“Now is a great time for anyone thinking of buying a home in Florida to make that decision,” said Patricia Fitzgerald, President of the Florida Association of Realtors, who reported a 14 per cent rise in sales in January.

“Mortgage rates are historically low and conditions remain very favourable for buyers with a range of housing inventory and attractive prices.”

So on that basis, where is best to buy in Central Florida, if you want to short-term let – or if you don't?

## A home for holiday lets

In Central Florida, or the Orlando area, you can only let out your home to holidaymakers if it's in the Short Term Rental (STR) zone, which is south-west



### Main left

A residential street in Orlando

### Inset, above and left

Two of many theme park rides in Orlando, a major draw for holidaymakers, many of whom rent privately owned vacation homes

Proximity to Disney is king but whilst there's a healthy supply of rentals in the very British-oriented Davenport (best for supplies of PG Tips) and Kissimmee, there's room for more inventory in Haines City and Clermont



**FOR SALE: SHORT TERM RENTALS**

**Where:** Kissimmee  
**Price:** \$150,000 (£93K)  
 This four-bed, four-bathroom home with a pool is 20 mins from Disney.  
*British Homes Group: 001 407 396 9914; www.britishhomesgroup.com.*



**Where:** Haines City  
**Price:** \$219,900 (£135K)  
 A four-bedroom, two-bathroom home on Southern Dunes Golf Course, 20 mins from Disney.  
*CB Feltrim: 0844 669 5990; www.cbfeltrim.com.*

of Disney It's also known as the "Golden Triangle" or "Four Corners Area" because it's where four counties converge: Orange, Lake, Osceola and Polk.

According to www.holidaylettings.co.uk, proximity to Disney is king, but whilst there's a healthy supply of rentals in the very British oriented Davenport (best for supplies of PG Tips) and Kissimmee, there's room for more inventory in Haines City and Clermont.

Proximity to the coast (around 55 minutes from Orlando city) is less of a factor for would-be renters than the theme parks, malls and golf courses.

For Howard Thorne whose Homes of America manages rentals as well as sales, Orange Tree and High Grove are the two best performing developments for STR in the Lake country area, each pulling 26-34 weeks rental a year.

"But operational costs are relevant to buyers and the difference is that Homeowners Association [upkeep] fees are \$2,000 (£1,235) a year at High Grove, compared with \$400 (£247) p.a. for Orange Tree," he says (www.homesofamerica.co.uk).

At High Grove (six minutes from Disney, also golf, Cagans Crossing restaurants and shops) a four-bed home costs \$214,000 (£132K); at Orange Tree (10 minutes from Disney, near supermarkets and restaurants) homes cost \$145,000 to \$269,000 (£90K-£166K).

"Note that by the time you factor in spending \$20,000 on furniture

and repair costs necessary for bank-owned properties, there's often little difference in price between that and a regular one," he adds.

Other good performers he suggests with 30-42 weeks rentals are Tuscan Hills in Polk County, 12 minutes from Disney and Watersong (Davenport, 18 minutes from Disney).

At both, prices kick off around \$140,000 (£86K) for a three-/four-bedroom short-sale.

For Gary Kenny of Coldwell Banker Feltrim (sales and rentals), however, Tuscana four miles from Disney is a good performer with 70 per cent occupancy (around 33 weeks) expected this year.

"It's got a tried and tested rentals programme, is 12 minutes from Disney, 20 miles from the new Legoland, and next door to Champions Gate golf course," says Kenny (www.cbfeltrim.com).

He is selling two-bedroom furnished units there for \$89,500 (£55K), which were selling for \$365,000 (£225K) in 2008 (www.tuscana.net).

Another choice is Haines City, much closer to Disney (20 minutes) since the widening of highways 4 and 27.

"It's grown into a good location, with great shops – including the new Posner shopping centre," says Kenny, who is selling one-bedroom condos (unfurnished, bank-owned) on the Southern Dunes golf resort from \$39,000 (£24K) through to villas for \$175,000 plus.

"Occupancy is closer to 60 per cent

**CASE STUDY**

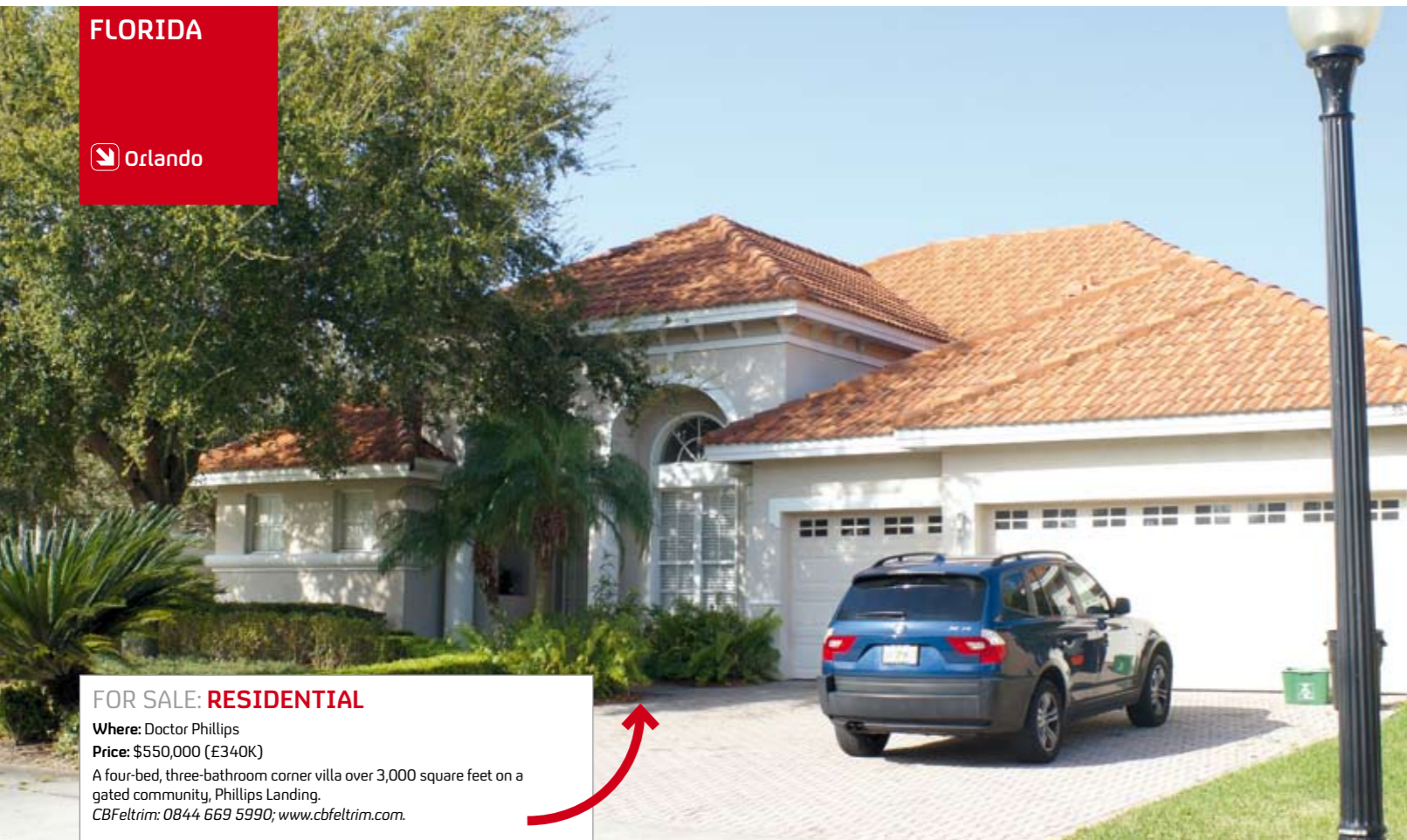
**"Our Sunshine State bargain"**



Pharmaceutical consultant David Jakobsen and his wife Nicola recently bought in the Haines City/Davenport area of Orlando.

The couple, from Liverpool, paid \$175,000 (£108K) for a four-bedroom villa in the gated community of Calabay Parc at Tower Lake. Their property, which they purchased through agent CB Feltrim, was originally priced at \$300,000 (£185K).

Calabay Parc, off Highway 27 and next to a large natural lake, is a 15-minute drive from Disney, 10 minutes from golf courses and just five from the nearest supermarket and restaurants.



**FOR SALE: RESIDENTIAL**

**Where:** Doctor Phillips  
**Price:** \$550,000 (£340K)  
 A four-bed, three-bathroom corner villa over 3,000 square feet on a gated community, Phillips Landing.  
*CBFeltrim: 0844 669 5990; www.cbfeltrim.com.*



**Where:** Winter Garden  
**Price:** \$325,000 (£201K)  
 Four-bed, three-bathroom villa in a lovely community in a superb area.  
*Jerry Barker Vacation Homes: 001 407 286 8170; www.jerrybarker.com.*

Howard Thorne has condos in Doctor Phillips from \$175,000 (£108K) but also recommends next-door Windermere (Orlando's own Lake District and home of Tiger Woods) as having the "most desirable zip code - 34786".

"But there are both cheap and expensive properties there: a four bedroom home in the Summerport area costs \$200,000 (£123K), or in Isleworth/Lake Butler Sound you can get a short sale five bedroom home for \$685,000 (£423K)," he says.

Winter Park, an upmarket northern suburb of Orlando city on a chain of lakes is also a good choice according to Bill Cowie of the British Homes Group ([www.britishhomesgroup.com](http://www.britishhomesgroup.com)).

"It's a cosmopolitan, Chelsea-like area of restaurants, theatres and pubs - five minutes from downtown Orlando - where prices have remained firm," he says. "You are looking at \$300,000-\$400,000 (£185K-£247K) for a single family home."

He also suggests the Disney master-planned community of Celebration might appeal to those seeking something safe, clean and well-managed - though some might find restrictions on curtain-colour

a little stifling. "Location-wise it is great, the bulls eye of the road network, and it's got a world-class hospital and is close to the shopping outlets of the I-99 corridor. Baby condos start from \$100K (£62K) but \$350,000 (£216K) will get you a four-bedroom single-family home."

Jerry Barker ([www.jerrybarker.com](http://www.jerrybarker.com)) of the eponymous vacation homes agency also says Celebration is a favourite choice, as is another recommendation of Cowie's - Lake Nona out by Orlando airport.

"What's special about this area - apart from the great golf courses (Nick Faldo has a home there) is it's getting a \$2-billion (£1.23-billion) world-class medical facility which is drawing buyers," says Barker.

According to Cowie, four-bed single-family homes start at around \$800K (£494K). But Winter Garden - north-west of downtown Orlando - is an excellent "mid-range" choice for Barker, offering access to the Florida turnpike access for Tampa/Miami.

"It's quaint old America with homes with porches, yet it's got a fabulous new mall area, top-class schools and it's 20 minutes from Orlando city," he says.

because there are some people who want to be 10 minutes not 20 from Disney," he adds.

**Best for Residential**

For those not needing or wanting short-term rentals the net widens - and the Doctor Phillips outlying suburb of Orlando ticks a few boxes for those wanting to stay a few months in Florida.

"It's close to Restaurant Row on Sandlake Road [a street full of high-end restaurants] as well as the prestigious Bay Hill golf course, the Millennium Mall, as well as having very good schools and being 20 minutes from downtown Orlando," says Gary Kenny. He is selling properties from \$300,000 (£185K) on the leafy gated community of Turtle Creek, but really recommends Phillips Landing - a community of around 350 homes built around a lake - if you have a budget of \$500K (£309K) plus.