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Oxnard, the Un-Malibu



Jill Connolly for The New York Times

In Oxnard, Hollywood is the name of a beach, above, not an industry. Beachfront houses are often close to one another.

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OXNARD isn't the first place that comes to mind when the conversation turns to fabulous beach resorts on the California coast.



Oxnard, Calif.

The city doesn't offer much in way of night life, or high-end shopping, or even superb restaurants. (The Red Lobster here is rated No. 2 in popularity on TripAdvisor.com, which gives some sense of the local gastronomical scene.) In fact, if this small community about an hour north of Los Angeles — tucked midway between Malibu and Santa

Barbara — is famous at all, it is probably for its self-proclaimed title as the Lima Bean Capital of the World or perhaps for being home to Herzog Wine Cellars, one of the country's largest producers of kosher wines.

But one thing Oxnard has going for it is beachfront property — property a lot more affordable than that of its better-known neighbors to the north and south. That's why, over the past few years, Los Angeles-based entertainment industry executives in search of second homes and summer rentals on the coast have taken a shine to Oxnard and its seven miles of wide, white beaches.

“Two years ago, nobody knew what I was talking about when I mentioned Oxnard at a dinner party,” said Anne Litt, 41, a music supervisor for films and a D.J. for the public radio station KCRW, who lives in Los Angeles with her screenwriter husband, Howard Franklin. “Now, everyone says, ‘I keep hearing about Oxnard.’ ”

In 2005, Ms. Litt and Mr. Franklin bought an early '70s A-frame three-bedroom house that is a half block from the beach. The entertainment lawyer Warren Dern owns a second home nearby. The screenwriter John Gatins (“Coach Carter”) and the director and photographer Dewey Nicks are part-time residents too. This past January, Dave Grohl, lead singer of the Foo Fighters, paid almost \$3.8 million for a 3,250-square-foot, three-bedroom house on the beach.

Why did it take so long for Oxnard to get its proverbial day in the sun? Some locals suggest that it is because other coastal cities are neither directly off the freeway nor adjacent to the Pacific Coast Highway. Drive the 10 minutes west from the freeway exit to the ocean and the scenery seems more suited to a John Mellencamp video than a Beach Boys ballad. Oxnard is an agricultural community, studded with fields of lima beans and sugar beets and 8,500 acres of strawberries (the city recently held the 24th annual California Strawberry Festival).

Strawberries aside, others say that Oxnard's obscurity as a weekend destination comes from its clunky moniker. "Laguna sounds exotic. Oxnard — the name has no sex appeal," said Otto Kanny, the general manager of the River Ridge golf club, a public golf course in the city. (The local Chamber of Commerce once used the slogan "Oxnard, more than just a pretty name" to attract visitors.)

Perhaps touting the noneroding coastline would be a better lure. There are three beaches dotted with homes and lots for sale or rent: Hollywood, Mandalay Shores and Silver Strand. The properties range from quaint 1930s wooden bungalows (like "Windy Gables," said to have been rented by Clark Gable and Carole Lombard) to 5,000-square-foot, three-story contemporary estates with a Mediterranean flavor. The distance between each home is about the width of a grand piano.

"In the past three years, every house I have built has an elevator," said Jim Sandefer, who has been buying lots and building homes in Oxnard for 30 years. In the past five years, he has seen beachfront lot prices rise 300 percent. "The producers from Los Angeles want oversized garages, home theaters and large decks."

While the housing market in Oxnard may still be undervalued compared with better-known getaways, the prices can be just as steep as the surrounding dunes. A 6,200-square-foot lot on Mandalay Shores with approved architect plans for a Cape Cod house is priced at \$2.5 million; a four-bedroom, four-bathroom, 4,000-square-foot beachfront condo sells for \$4 million. Even a rather downcast mobile home a Frisbee throw from the beach sells for \$500,000.

Compare those offerings to Malibu's, however, and Oxnard sounds like a steal. A three-bedroom oceanfront home in Malibu's exclusive Broad Beach runs \$12.5 million; a large beachfront property in the A-list celebrity haven known as the Colony can sell for as much as \$18 million. Even an estate comparable to the ones that Mr. Sandefer

develops and sells for \$3 million to \$4 million in Oxnard would cost about \$8.5 million in Malibu.

For those who aren't ready to commit, there is the option of renting. By this time of the year, most of the beachfront properties are leased during high season, from June 15 through Sept. 14. Weekly summer rents typically run from \$2,000 for three-bedroom cottages to \$5,000 for three-story mastodons with five bedrooms. (In Malibu, weekly rentals are rare, as most landlords insist on tenants who will commit to a month's stay.)

"There's less traffic than Orange County, and it's quiet," said Andrea Giannetti, 40, an executive vice president of Sony Pictures, who has rented a house on Hollywood Beach with two fireplaces and two kitchens for the first week of August. "Who needs Malibu?"

Still, some Oxnard homeowners try to appeal directly to the movie industry set. Michael Keegan, who owns two rental properties, advertises one of his houses online as "Impeccable Malibu Style at Hollywood Beach!" The house features sleek black leather couches and a midcentury modern dining room set.

"When I furnished the house, I did it with L.A.-based people in mind," said Mr. Keegan, who used to work at a major studio and now invests in real estate. "I didn't want to hear, 'Oh, but it's not like Malibu.' "

Frankly, Oxnard isn't even close. "We love Oxnard because you don't see everyone you know," said Jessica Goodman, a senior vice president of Warner Brothers, whose husband, Adam, heads the production department at DreamWorks. The couple rented in Oxnard for two summers before buying a three-bedroom house that they are currently renovating. "We can leave L.A. on a Thursday night or Friday morning and get there in an hour, but you really feel like you are farther away from Hollywood."

On a recent Sunday morning, locals waited outside for a table at Mrs. Olson's Coffee Hut, a popular beachside diner known for its hearty dishes. Men and fresh-faced women padded about in sweats and flip-flops. Hair was tousled. A young woman in high heels stuck out like a giraffe among llamas.

But it's the breakfast fare, not the footwear, that separates Oxnard's old and new guards. "The people from L.A. say, 'No cheese, no oil, no potatoes,' " said the manager, Lissa McGraw. "And they always want soy milk, which we don't have."