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# Montecito: The Latest Pandemic Hot Spot

Boldface names and affluent families are flocking to this California coastal enclave

By AMANDA EBERSTEIN

The coastal enclave of Montecito, Calif., which sits between the Pacific Ocean and the Santa Ynez Mountains in Santa Barbara County, has long been a desirable destination. Covering approximately 9 square miles, the town is known for its dramatic natural surroundings, pristine beaches, mild climate, historic estates and boldface neighbors like Oprah Winfrey, who owns multiple properties including a 20,424-square-foot, Neo-Georgian mansion on 40 acres purchased for roughly \$50 million in 2001 and nicknamed “The Promised Land.”

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown in mid-March has only boosted that desirability. “I’ve been selling real estate for 18 years and have witnessed some very active markets, but I have never seen this many buyers in one place,” says Marsha Kotlyar, a local agent with Berkshire Hathaway Home Services, who says that there has been an 80% increase in year-to-date sales over 2019. “Montecito offers what everyone wants: a stunning setting, a small and uber-safe community and wide-open spaces.”

“Montecito has seen 46 closings in the last 30 days alone, compared with only nine closings for the same period one year ago,” or a 411% increase, adds Ashley McGowan, a third-generation Montecito real-estate agent.

**411% JUMP** in the number of closings in the last 30 days compared with the same period a year ago

families from Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York—are choosing to move to Montecito full-time. The attractions include the area’s highly ranked schools, most of which are open for in-person learning, and relatively low Covid case numbers—around 300 confirmed cases in Montecito and the surrounding communities of Summerland and Carpinteria as of early December, according to the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department. Plus, many people can now work from anywhere.

The tony hamlet made headlines last summer, when Prince Harry and Meghan Markle bought an 18,671-square-foot Mon-



J.R. McGinnis and Jim Bain recently settled in Montecito with their 9-year-old triplets after the outbreak shifted Mr. McGinnis to working remotely.



**\$3.97 MILLION**  
Closed in August  
3,837 sq. ft.  
5 bedrooms



They closed in late August, and moved just in time for the start of the school year.



Montecito compound for \$14.65 million. In October, soon after having their first child together, Katy Perry and Orlando Bloom closed on a \$14.2 million home, according to people familiar with the transaction. And actor Rob Lowe sold his 10,000-square-foot East Coast-inspired estate for \$45.5 million earlier this fall, before purchasing a 1925 Mediterranean-style residence for \$13 million this month, per people familiar with both deals.

In September, talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres and her wife, actress Portia de Rossi—real-estate aficionados known for flipping houses—quietly bought a \$49 million property from comedian Dennis Miller in an off-market deal, according to two people familiar with the transaction. Then in November, the couple sold another Montecito home, a hillside Balinese-inspired compound, for \$33.3 million after less than a month on the market.

Although the area is known as a playground for the very wealthy, Montecito, which is a 90-minute drive up the coast from Los Angeles, is an understated beach town at its heart. In addition to the sprawling estates are more affordable family-friendly properties. (Affordable is a relative term: The median listing price in November 2020 was \$5.36 million, up 22% from last year, according to Realtor.com.) “Montecito has quirky charm,” says Jeffrey Alan Marks, an interior designer who purchased a \$3.399 million cottage in Montecito and moved with his husband and their new baby from Santa Monica last year. “It feels like a European beach town or the Hamptons of the West Coast.”

“People come here to live a relaxed lifestyle, where they can take comfort in knowing that their kids are safe, the hiking trails aren’t jam packed and you can wear flats to dinner without being photographed by the paparazzi,” Ms. Kotlyar says. It was this lifestyle that attracted J.R. McGinnis, a former television studio executive turned private-practice entertainment



**\$1.835 MILLION**  
Price paid in October  
2,453 sq. ft.  
4 bedrooms

Kristen d’Offay with her children Luc, Violet and Poppy, and their dog, Evie. Ms. d’Offay put in an offer on the home the day she saw it.



lawyer, and his husband, Jim Bain, when searching for a place to settle with their 9-year-old triplets. “Jim and I wanted to raise the kids outside of the city, like we had been raised,” says Mr. McGinnis, a 58-year-old Oklahoma native. “However, my work required me to be in Los Angeles. We have loved Montecito since our first visit 20 years ago, and always thought that we would retire here.”

When the outbreak shifted Mr. McGinnis to working remotely, he and his husband decided to accelerate these plans. They put their Los Angeles home—a 4,060-square-foot English Tudor-style house in Hancock Park—on the

market for a “million dollars more than we thought we would get, and within four days we had four offers at asking,” Mr. McGinnis says. “We said, ‘Oh my God,’ we have to do this now.” They closed in August for \$5.5 million—\$500,000 over asking price. Their first “dream” Montecito home sold to someone else, but Ms. Kotlyar, their agent, knew about another property that was just about to come on the market. “I drove up with Jim and the kids to see it the next morning, and we bought it on sight,” Mr. McGinnis says of the single-level, 3,837-square-foot, five-bedroom home, which sits on 1 acre and includes a swimming pool. They closed on the property for \$3.97 million in late August, and moved in just in time for the start of the school year. The couple plans to build a 1,200-square-foot guesthouse by Harrison Design—the same firm that renovated the main residence more than a decade earlier.



**SOLD \$49 MILLION**  
several structures including a Tom Kundig-designed ‘barn,’ lily pond, 4 acres

Ms. DeGeneres and her wife Portia de Rossi are known to be investors in real estate and have long had a home in Montecito. They sold a Bali-inspired estate in the area for \$33.3 million in November, according to a person familiar with the deal. Ms. DeGeneres allowed the Millers to remain in the home for a time after the closing, according to a person familiar with the situation.

—Katherine Clarke



Jeffrey Alan Marks, right, with his husband Gregory Marks, their daughter James and dog Coal. They had just finished a yearlong renovation.



**\$5.36 MILLION**  
Median listing price in Montecito in November, up 22% from last year



Gardener Kathy Kreisler lives on this 2½-acre property and presides over its grounds.



**\$5.5 MILLION**  
price paid in August; property includes a main house dating to 1890

## Ellen DeGeneres Buys From Dennis Miller

Comedian and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres is the buyer of a \$49 million estate in Montecito, Calif., one of the most expensive properties ever sold in the pricey Santa Barbara County community, according to two people familiar with the deal.

Ms. DeGeneres bought the property from Dennis Miller, comedian and political commentator, and his wife, former model Carolyn Espley-Miller, in late September. Records show the couple owned the property since 2006. They couldn’t be reached for comment.

The compound, which was not publicly listed for sale, includes three separate parcels of land totaling more than 4 acres and several structures, records show. Ms. Espley-Miller revealed her Instagram followers with glimpses of the property over the years, show-



The compound includes several structures.

ing off the South African Cape Dutch-style main house, a “barn” designed by Los Angeles architect Tom Kundig and a large lily pond. She often posted about the wildlife on the property, including dragonflies, hummingbirds and a heron, as well as the gardens.

“The garden is heaving with lavender, protea, bottlebrush, sweet peas & strawberries,” she wrote on her Instagram last year. “I’ve got 7 big almonds on my almond tree (a first!) and a ripe fig already.” The deal was among a string of

major transactions in Montecito over the past few months. Rancho San Carlos, a roughly 240-acre estate, recently sold for \$63.25 million, and the sale of actor Rob Lowe’s home in the area recently closed for \$45.5 million.

allenge when looking for a Montecito home. “My budget was under \$2 million, which doesn’t get you much,” she says.

The mother-of-three had fallen in love with the area in 2017 during a family vacation and had longed to move there following a major life change that included a divorce in 2018 and subsequent launch of a clothing line, which is manufactured in Los Angeles. She had been trying to convince her ex-husband, with whom she shares custody, to move to Santa Barbara, but his business obligations kept him in the San Francisco area—until Covid-19. “All of a sudden, out of the blue he said, ‘You know, I don’t really need to be in the office full-time anymore,’” Ms. d’Offay says.

Ms. d’Offay originally wanted a fixer-upper, but stumbled upon an extensively remodeled, 2,453-square-foot home with four bedrooms, five bathrooms and a swimming pool. Plus, it was on a quiet street full of kids similar in ages to hers. She put in an offer on the day that she saw it, closing for \$1.835 million in October. Her ex-husband purchased a property on 3 acres in the nearby community of Hope Ranch; their children are attending a private school located a few minutes away.

For residents, the boom is all the more dramatic given the devastating events of the last few

years. In the early morning of Jan. 9, 2018—just after the Thomas Fire, a wildfire that burned through approximately 281,893 acres across Santa Barbara and Ventura counties, including much of the hillside surrounding the town—a rainstorm caused a massive debris flow of mud and boulders throughout Montecito, killing 23 people, destroying more than 100 homes, damaging an additional 300 and causing \$177 million in property damage, according to the Montecito Board of Architectural Review.

“The Thomas Fire and subsequent debris flow event had a devastating impact on our market, and we had finally just recovered before Covid hit,” Ms. Kotlyar recalls. According to the Montecito Fire Department, the threat of significant future fires and flooding will remain extremely low for the next 20 to 25 years, as the hillsides are now covered in new vegetation that will keep the area intact.

Part of Montecito’s rebirth can be attributed to the area’s local institutions, which have long been a big draw.

For years, there were two luxury hotels to choose from: San Ysidro Ranch, a 500-acre resort known for being a location of John and Jackie Kennedy’s honeymoon in 1953, and Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Bar-

bara, a historic 1927 Spanish Colonial-style property overlooking Butterfly Beach. In March 2019, billionaire Los Angeles real-estate developer Rick Caruso debuted his first-ever hotel project: Rosewood Miramar Beach, an oceanfront resort with 161 guestrooms and suites, six restaurants, multiple boutiques and an invitation-only private club with membership dues that it will only say is in the six-figure range.

“I wanted to create a place that felt like a grand estate where you would be comfortable walking off the beach in sandals and a cover-up, and also at night in a sport coat and beautifully dressed,” says Mr. Caruso, who lives in a 4,000-square-foot apartment onsite during his frequent visits. The resort’s beachfront location and open-air layout has proven exceptionally popular during the pandemic, as Americans look for vacation destinations closer to home. Occupancy is consistently at 80% to 100% with an average daily rate of approximately \$2,000, one of the highest of any hotel in the country, according to Mr. Caruso.

For David C. Bernstein, the co-founder of Rock-It Cargo, a transportation and logistics company specializing in live entertainment, a summer rental next to Rosewood Miramar Beach convinced him to move to Montecito full-time. “I think you’d be hard-pressed to find anywhere else like

it,” says Mr. Bernstein, 63, who rented in Montecito from May to September so that he could be closer to three of his grown children.

Prior to the pandemic, Mr. Bernstein—whose primary home is a 9-acre estate in his hometown of Elkins Park, Pa.—had been planning to buy an apartment in New York City. After Covid-19 shut down much of the East Coast, he decided to find a Montecito property to buy.

Mr. Bernstein looked at about 10 homes before he found two adjacent lots on 2½ acres that were part of a trust sale. Located minutes from Butterfly Beach, the property consisted of a main house built in 1890 as well as a guesthouse that serves as the home of Kathy Kreisler, a gardener who still lives there and presides over the grounds. “It was such a surprise to drive by the property every day and not know it existed,” says Mr. Bernstein’s agent, Maureen McDermut, of Sotheby’s International Realty.

Mr. Bernstein purchased the two properties for a combined \$5.5 million in August, with plans to build a contemporary Frank Lloyd Wright-style home. In the meantime, he is hoping to close on a nearby property that he can live in during the construction, which is budgeted at \$5 million to \$6 million and projected to take three years.