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Prosper embraces its Crystal Lagoon

Here's what it's like to jump into DFW's first Crystal Lagoon

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Sharon Grigsby finds out what's so special about the new Crystal Lagoon in Prosper's Windsong Ranch community.

The yearslong race to bring the first Caribbean beach to North Texas — the muchcoveted Crystal Lagoon — has created a tidal wave of developer hype and suburban political intrigue.

In Rowlett, the crystalline blue oasis promised to residents remains, at best, onagainmaybe after the city's private partner decided the plan wasn't feasible. That left Prosper's Windsong Ranch community, on U.S.

Highway 380 just west of the Dallas North Tollway, to cross the finish line first

When it opened its own Crystal Lagoon late last month.

Despite all the attention, including my own reporting on Rowlett's persistent quest for one of these megawater features, I could never figure out why so many people were so darn fascinated with the idea of a Crystal Lagoon. What better time to try to find that answer than Fourth of July week? So I spent Tuesday afternoon as a Windsong beach bum, albeit



Youngsters play at the Crystal Lagoon at Windsong Ranch, which has about 900 homes and 2,000 more planned.

with digital recorder in hand.

You won't confuse the Crystal

Lagoon with Aruba, but the sparkly azure water and the white sand between my toes

were a mindaltering change of scene from the

Miles of freshly scraped prairie along nearby Highway 380.

Stir in a little imagination and it's a seaside vacation alongside friends and neighbors — with

home a short walk away.

By the numbers

The geewhiz facts behind the project are impressive: One-quarter mile long, 10 million gallons of water, a maximum depth of 10 feet and a silky white floor that reflects the blue sky. Surrounding the lagoon is a beach made up of 2,600 tons of white sand trucked in from Arkansas.

But before you start calculating the driving distance to Prosper, be aware that this Crystal Lagoon is open only to Windsong Ranch residents, who pay about \$120 a month in HOA dues, and their guests. Lucky for me, one of the handful of people I know in Prosper is real estate agent Marie Bailey, whose family lives right across the street from Windsong's newest amenity. I wrote about her recently as the woman shepherding the "Move to Texas from California" migration, and this week I asked her to be my guide into the Crystal Lagoon hoopla.

Everyone I met Tuesday was al-



Alexis Domin, 10, shows off her handstand technique at the Crystal Lagoon in Prosper's Windsong Ranch community. The lagoon, open only to Windsong residents and their guests, is a quarter-mile long and features 10 million gallons of water at a maximum depth of 10 feet.

most giddy over the Crystal Lagoon. Maybe that's because the beach makes you feel like an uninhibited kid again. It reminds you of a favorite vacation,

a honeymoon or a longplanned retirement trip.

And even though North Texas is hardly the natural habitat for a

Caribbean beach, as Bailey put it, "somehow it manages to feel very authentic."

Many of the residents I met are

part of the slew of outofstate transplants who have relocated to North Texas. Others moved here from nearby Frisco and McKinney to get out of what they described as the congestion and rat race in those boomtowns. Some moved from virtually across the street from Windsong.

Chicago native Tim Burke told me a job transfer landed him in North Texas, but the beach brought his family to Windsong Ranch. Once his two children learned about the lagoon, he and wife Tracey knew they had no other choice for their new home. "The kids want to come here every day."

Fellow Chicagoan Dave Finnigan pointed to the subdivision just to the east and said he, his wife and three children "basically moved a street over" for the chance to enjoy the lagoon. "It's like the beach in your backyard."

Terry Tuzzolino, who drove from Los Angeles with his wife last summer to visit his brother Andy, caught the lagoon bug —



Tenyearold Cooper Dalby watches as Rice Lee, 7, buries him in the sand. The beach is covered with 2,600 tons of white sand hauled in from Arkansas.

even when it "was still a dirt pond."

Worth the commute

Tuzzolino said, "We kept checking in on the progress and looking at homes" and ultimately couldn't resist changing addresses — if not his place of employment. He continues to work for the Los Angeles Fire Department as a firefighter and paramedic — four days on the job, then five days off at Windsong.

He's not sure how long he'll make that commute, but he's content for now "to know that my wife will be OK, that she's surrounded by people that she knows."

These guys, like everyone else I talked to Tuesday afternoon, acknowledged that the moniker "Crystal Lagoon," like "master plan neighborhood" and "resort living," makes their neighborhood sound a bit fake and fancy pants. But they say that's not the reality.

"People here want to create a social network, tightknit community, and the lagoon is part of that," Andy Tuzzolino told me.

About 900 houses make up the neighborhood at present and 2,000 more or so are planned, said David Blom, vice president of the Tellus Group, which developed Windsong. Residences range from townhomes, priced in the high \$200,000s to \$300,000s, to singlefamily homes — with five lot sizes — from the low \$400,000s to \$1.4 million. The majority of sales have been in the \$500,000 to \$600,000 range.

Blom told me that the decision to allow only residents — and a carefully controlled number of guests — to use the Crystal



SHARON GRIGSBY

Lagoon grew out of other developers' troublesome experiences. Lagoons opened to the public to help with operating costs "have been met with a lot of conflict and consternation from residents," he said.

Spent part of the day waistdeep in water with Windsong residents buoyed to an oversize inner tube as far larger flotation devices — a pink flamingo, a rainbow unicorn, a watermelon slice, a rubber ducky, even a Bucee's branded ride — drifted by.

Teens raced each other on tubes. Mothers helped young children swim and dads played ball with their little ones. Kayaks and paddle boards launched from a nearby dock. On the beach — amid kids building sand castles and burying each other along-

side their masterpieces — I actually found one resident working.

Water and Wi-fi

Brant Robinette, who moved to Windsong a year ago, said even though the lagoon is artificial, "it has pretty much everything you could want right in one spot," he said as we sat under a large shaded pavilion outfitted with plenty of fans and Wifi.

And most of all, he told me, when he and his wife travel, even to Hawaii, "she won't get into the water when she doesn't know what's in there. But here, she loves it."

The simulated seaside also suits 12-year-old Cameron Dear, who lounged at the lagoon's edge with her parents, Alex and Kristi. Cameron explained that she has eczema and ocean salt-water "hurts it really bad. There's no saltwater here. And there's no sharks or rocks."

Her mother explained that the Dear family moved about a



month ago from Savannah, just a couple of miles to the east, to get a home with a beach. "Wel-

come to the neighborhood," a nearby resident shouted as he paddled by.

Late in the afternoon, I kicked back on an aqua chaise lounge and, under the shade of a coral beach umbrella, enjoyed the soothing breeze and Hawaiian music.

Lounging just to my right was Stacey French, who has lived at Windsong Ranch almost since it opened five years ago and who teaches fourth grade at the on-site elementary school. She admitted to some skepticism when the lagoon plan was circulated, but "it seems so natural. You can't really imagine how big it is and all the things you can do."

Ashley Ginty, who stopped by French's shaded spot so her daughter could say hello to her former teacher, said with a laugh that her husband doesn't like the sun or the water — but the lagoon means she can go to Windsong's version of the Caribbean every day.

"I can breathe here," Ginty said.

"I literally feel like I can take a deep breath when I cross 380 into Prosper, but especially here at the beach."

And if you squint just enough, even the mass of trees on the greenbelt at the far side of the lagoon looks a bit tropical.

All that's missing is the sound of the surf. Maybe the developers will eventually figure out how to add that, too.

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