FLORIDA FOR BOOMERS

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So, you’re thinking of retiring to Florida or maybe buying a second home or vacation home here.

You won’t exactly be blazing a new trail.

Though likely inhabited by Native Americans for thousands of years before Europeans set eyes on it, Florida was “discovered” in 1513 by Juan Ponce de Leon who claimed it for Spain. Ponce de Leon named it Florida, because he landed here during “Pascua Florida,” the festival of flowers during the Easter season. The next several hundred years were a tumultuous time in Florida with various parts of the state changing hands several times between the Spanish, French, and British. After Britain’s defeat in the Revolutionary War, Spain regained control of Florida, but later ceded it to the United States.

Florida became the 27th state on March 3, 1845.

**Florida Fast Facts**
Capital: Tallahassee  
Nickname: The Sunshine State  
State Flower: Orange Blossom  
State Beverage: Orange Juice  
State Bird: Mockingbird  
State Tree: Sabal Palmetto Palm  
Funky Fact: State Pie: Key Lime

Since it became a state, Florida has seen steady and sometimes explosive growth. Today more than a thousand people a day set their sights on moving to Florida. Most of them are chasing fantastic year-round weather and a slower pace of life.
Why do People Move to Florida?

The two main reasons people consistently name for moving to Florida are the great weather, and the slower pace of life. But let me tell you about another attractive feature of living in Florida.

Taxes

Florida is consistently ranked among the states with the lowest tax rate. It has less than half the tax burden per capita as New Jersey, the nation’s highest tax state per capita, making it a haven for retirees as well as businesses. The state sales tax is 6% and the corporate tax is 5.5%. One thing that attracts many people to Florida is that there is no state income tax. Any income that you plan to pull in from investments, pensions, or a second career during your retirement will only be taxed at the federal rate, which means more money for you in the end.

Another advantage is that since January 1, 2007, Florida residents no longer have to file an intangibles tax return on their stocks, bonds, mutual funds, money market accounts and other investments.

Florida Weather

Florida is well known for its beautiful weather, with plenty of sunshine most days of the year. Thousands of Northerners affectionately referred to as “Snow Birds” flock to the state each winter to escape the frigid winter temperatures up north.

During the winter, temperatures average around the mid-fifties in the north part of the state, and the mid-sixties down south. You won’t find coat closets in most of the homes you see in Florida, but don’t let that fool you. In some parts of the state it can get below freezing, and it has been known to snow.

Florida’s weather is primarily subtropical, largely because it is nearly surrounded by water. In the summertime temperatures can get uncomfortably warm. Lots of folks who move to Florida from up north use the summer months
to do some traveling, going back up north to see friends or traveling abroad. This is something that you may want to consider as well. There are days, especially in South Florida, where the mercury can top 100 degrees.

The average temperature in North Florida during the summertime is around 80 degrees while the average in South Florida is in the low to mid-eighties. You can also usually count on an afternoon rain shower or thunderstorm to cool you off a little bit on most summer days. Be careful during those afternoon thunderstorms, as Central Florida is known as the lightning capital of the world. Florida has a rainy season that runs from June through October. This rainy season accounts for around 70% of Florida’s annual rainfall, which is between 50 and 60 inches for most parts of the state.

Regions of Florida

This overview of Florida admittedly does not do any of the regions justice. This section has been kept brief to make room in the book for the important information you will need to know about Florida real estate. There are other books available for those wanting to study Florida’s regions in depth.

Panhandle
This region is home to the state’s capital, Tallahassee, as well as Pensacola, Fort Walton Beach, and Panama City. People love the tranquility of the Panhandle, as it is one of the least heavily developed parts of Florida. However, as more people discover this region, this tranquility may not last.

North East
The areas of Jacksonville, St. Augustine, and Palm Coast are where the bulk of the population in this fast-growing region live. Palm Coast is located in the what was for a few years the nation’s fastest growing county, Flagler County.

East Coast
Known as the “Space Coast” because of the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, this region includes Ormond Beach, Daytona Beach, Port Orange, New Smyrna, Titusville, Melbourne, and Cocoa Beach. This region is growing rapidly not only be-
cause of Northerners retiring there, but also because of people moving up from South Florida, to escape the high home prices and congestion.

**West Coast**
Tampa, St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Bradenton, and Sarasota are the biggest populations centers in this region of the state. Also known as the Gold Coast, the west coast of Florida offers direct access to the Gulf of Mexico, which is perhaps a more serene option than the Atlantic Ocean.

**Central Florida**
This part of Florida is best known as a tourist destination because most of the theme parks in the state are located in central Florida. Some prominent cities include Orlando, Lake Mary, Altamonte Springs, Winter Park, Kissimmee, Leesburg, Ocala, Gainesville, and Lakeland. The Villages, which is the most popular retirement community in the country is also located in Central Florida, about an hour north of Orlando.

**South West**
This region is popular with people from the Midwest U.S. who can hop on I-75 and shoot right down. Popular destinations in Southwest Florida include Naples, Marco Island, Cape Coral, Port Charlotte, and Fort Myers. Home prices in some of these cities are known to be among the highest in the state, but the beauty of the area may be unrivaled.

**South East**
Perhaps best known for Miami and South Beach, South East Florida offers much more. It has long been a retirement haven for people from the Northeast U.S. Home prices in this region can be high, depending on the area. Major cities include Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, Hollywood, West Palm Beach, Boca Raton, Delray Beach, and Stuart. Most people consider the Florida Keys to be a part of South East Florida as well.

**MyFlorida.com Website**
The state of Florida has compiled a great resource for residents and visitors

Visit: http://www.myflorida.com
Choosing an area in which to live in Florida can be difficult, especially if you have not spent a lot of time in Florida yet. There are many great choices available to you. But you can use these tips to narrow your choices down and eventually make a final decision on a place that fits your lifestyle and budget, suits your housing needs and desires, and that you’ll love for years to come.
Getting Started

Since you likely live hundreds -- if not a thousand -- miles away from Florida, the best place to start your search is online. Visit the websites of the local newspapers for the cities, towns, or areas you are investigating and do some general exploring and reading.

You can often find information on the history of an area, photo tours and sometimes “virtual” video tours. Don’t forget to scan the real estate classifieds to get a feel for home prices in the area. It will also be helpful to read some local articles and editorials. These can give you a sense of the feel of an area, and reveal items of interest or concern for the local residents.

Radio and TV news stations also have some excellent resources on their websites. Radio stations can be especially helpful for finding information in line with your interests. For example, a community calendar for a country music station might list events that would appeal to their typical listener. These events would be different than events that might interest an oldies or easy listening crowd.

Next, visit the websites of the area chambers of commerce and request an information package. The information packages will usually include a brochure on the area filled with advertisements for local businesses, information on annual events, a guide to local history, and usually a map of the area that will come in handy when you make an in person visit. In addition, request information from some new home builders and communities in the area, to see if the types of houses they offer appeal to your wants and needs.

If the area seems like it might meet your requirements, go to the next step.

Links to most Chambers of Commerce in Florida can found at: http://www.flchamber.com/about/find-a-local-chamber/

Getting Personal

It goes without saying that you should talk to friends or relatives living in
Florida, but don’t overlook people in your extended network or sphere of influence. For example, did your golf buddy’s brother-in-law recently move to Florida? Give him a call and get the scoop.

**Government**

Visit the website of the local government. By the looks of things, are they up-to-date technologically? Read through official statements and press releases you may find. Does the local government seem prepared to manage the growth their area may be experiencing?

Also, what are the taxes like in the area? Is the government being wise and prudent in their spending, or does it seem like they are plundering windfalls from property tax increases? These are all not easily answered questions but with a little research you can get a feel for what some of the answers might be.

**Home Prices**

To get a general feel for what the prices of homes are in the area in which you are looking, visit sites like Realtor.com, Zillow.com, and Trulia.com. They will show you all the homes listed in the city or zip code that you specify. Enter your required number of bedrooms and bathrooms as well as your price range and see which homes come up as a result.

**Florida Real Estate Shows**

Florida real estate shows are a great opportunity to check out some of the new communities in Florida without even having to set foot in the state.

Home builders, developers, and real estate agents come to these shows in hopes of making a good first impression on potential buyers like you. The shows are set up so that you can wander around and stop for information at booths that look like they may be of interest to you.
One company that organize these shows is RPI Media. Show locations are primarily in the Northeast and Midwest U.S.

For more information on show dates and locations visit: www.livesouthshows.com

Contact a Real Estate Agent

Working with a real estate agent is discussed in depth later in the book, but for starters, you can investigate some agent websites in the area that you are considering. Some agents offer relocation packages that provide a lot of good information on the areas they service.

Make a Visit

Now that you’ve gathered a bunch of information on places you think might interest you, its time to make a visit.

When you visit an area, especially one you’ve never been to before, there are certain things you’ll want to look for to help you decide if this is an area you might like to live in.

Using the map that came in your package from the local chamber of commerce (otherwise you should buy a local map), drive through some different parts of the local area.

As you are driving, are you seeing restaurants, businesses, shopping centers and so forth that look appealing to you and that match your ideal lifestyle?

Stop in at some different establishments like restaurants or shopping malls and take a look around. Ask people you come in contact with what they like or don’t like about the area.
See if they have any recommendations of places to look for homes or any other relevant information they are willing to share.

**Drive Through Some Neighborhoods**

Take a detour off the main roads and into some residential neighborhoods.

Are the homes what you expected? Are people’s yards well maintained?

Visit some of the new communities and model homes in the area or take a tour of some resale homes that you’ve arranged to see ahead of time with your real estate agent.

**Facilities and Services**

Look for the amenities that are important to you. Are there libraries nearby and are they up to date? What about medical facilities? Check to make sure an area’s cultural activities, recreation facilities, beaches and parks, golf courses, and whatever else is important to you are available at a level that will fit your needs and desires.

Make a list of your current weekly activities (garden club, rotary, church, etc.) and be sure that the area you choose provides you the opportunities to continue to do what you enjoy.

**You’ve Got Visitors**

Keep in mind the likes and dislikes of friends and family members who will be coming to visit. Do your kids and grandkids love the beach, or is a ten minute drive to Disney World more important? Presumably you will want them to visit as often as possible, so get their input before deciding on a place.

One of the worst things that could happen to you during this transition to life
in Florida is you find your dream home, but hate to go out into the community surrounding it for lack of things to do and be a part of.

Or you buy your dream home, but find that when the kids and grandkids come to visit there’s nothing fun for them to do.

But this won’t happen to you as long as you do some prudent research and investigating before you make a purchase and settle in.

One other important thing to keep in mind is that some 55+ communities place a limit on the length of time that someone under the age of 19 years old can stay with you.

In some communities this limit is as short as 30 days, so if you plan on hosting your grandkids for the entire summer, you better choose your community wisely.

Just last week I was in the office of a sales manager for one of the top home builders in the country and he told me the story of one of his recent customers who moved to his community because the first community he moved to wouldn’t let his grandkids visit for as long as he wished.

So keep that in mind.
If you took the initiative to purchase and read this book, you know better than to simply trust that the first real estate agent who crosses your path will be able to adequately handle the complex details of your real estate purchase in Florida.

Unfortunately, this is not the case for many people.

According to the National Association of REALTORS®, 70 percent of people complete a real estate transaction with the first agent they made contact with.

In order to find the very best real estate agent for you, first ask friends or family who have moved to the area you are considering for referrals. If you don’t have anyone to contact in the area you are considering, try doing an internet search, such as “Orlando real estate agent,” and investigate the websites of several agents that come up.

Also, try contacting the chamber of commerce for the city you plan to move to and see if they have any recommendations. It is a good idea to contact at least a few agents in the early stages to get a feel for what to expect down the road.

Be open and forthright with them if you have used the services of another agent before contacting them, so that there are no surprises for anyone later.

Ask the agents questions about their qualifications, years of experience in their market, and whether they have helped other people, particularly boomers like you, relocate to their area. They should be able to offer you written testimonials from satisfied clients. Also, since you will be new to the area, make sure the real estate agent has a strong network of local service providers such
as attorneys, home inspectors, and lenders to recommend to you.

You may want to go one step further in the screening process and see if there are any complaints against the agent.

Simply go to [http://www.myfloridalicense.com/dbpr/](http://www.myfloridalicense.com/dbpr/) and click on “Verify a License.” Then enter in the agent’s name and click search. Scroll down for the results. You can also do this for any builder or contractor you are thinking of hiring.

**Types of Representation in Florida**

If you should decide to allow the agent you are meeting with to represent you, you can have them represent you in a couple of different ways. While there is no one right way to have an agent represent you, it’s still very important to know who is and who is not on your side in any transaction.

**Single Agent**

The first form of representation for you to consider is a single agent relationship. In this relationship the agent is solely on your side, that is, they owe a fiduciary duty to you. A single agent owes you the following nine duties:

1. To deal with you honestly and fairly. 2. Loyalty. 3. Confidentiality. 4. Obedience (within the scope of the law). 5. Full disclosure. 6. Accounting for all funds. 7. To use skill, care and diligence. 8. To present all offers and counteroffers in a timely manner unless otherwise instructed in writing. 9. To disclose all known facts about the property materially affecting the value of the property.

**Transaction Broker**

The second way for an agent/brokerage to represent you is as a transaction broker. This is common if you are working with an agent/brokerage who also represents the sellers of homes you are looking at. In this case, the agent/brokerage is supposed to be a neutral party in the transaction. A transaction broker owes you seven duties, as opposed to nine of the single agent. A transaction broker does not owe you obedience or confidentiality.
It should be noted that it will be automatically assumed that you are dealing with a transaction broker, unless you specifically and explicitly choose to enter into a single agent agreement.

No Brokerage Relationship

You also have the choice of not entering into a brokerage relationship at all. But even if this is the case, a licensee still owes you the duties of dealing honestly and fairly, disclosing all known facts, and accounting for all funds entrusted to them.

Buyer Brokerage

Buyer Brokerage is another type of relationship that you could engage in. The Exclusive Buyer Brokerage Agreement is a document that essentially binds you to a certain agent, for a certain amount of time, to look for a certain type of property.

The thing to be careful of is that the agreement is usually written with you, the buyer, being held responsible for paying the agent’s fee if the seller does not agree to pay it, or paying for any shortfall in the amount required by the agent. I’m all for working with a buyer's agent, someone who has only your interests, not the sellers, at heart.

However, because compensation is usually offered through the seller, you should request that they delete the clause requiring you to pay them their fee if the seller will not. The only exception should be in the case of the agent finding you a for-sale-by-owner property that does not offer the agent compensation.

If you wish to be shown for-sale-by-owner properties, be clear up front with the agent about how much you are willing to pay. Most agents will ask for a percentage of the sale price, usually two to three percent, but you're better off paying them a flat fee to help you.

For example, if you agree to pay a percentage, the agent makes out better when you pay $300k for a house than they would have if had they helped you negotiate a sales price of $270k.
The Rest of your Real Estate Team

In addition to your REALTOR®, you may want to have one or more of the following people on your side during your search for, and purchase of, a new home.

**Attorneys**

In several states, perhaps even where you currently live, attorneys are required in all real estate transactions. Not so here in Florida. However, this does not mean you should not use one, especially if it is a complex transaction, or there are clauses in the contract that you do not understand. It can certainly make you feel more comfortable having a set of trained eyes on any contract you sign. One point I would like to make, however, is that if you are buying real estate in Florida and would like the counsel of an attorney, use a Florida-based attorney, preferably one who specializes in real estate.

I'm sure the attorneys where you are currently living are very competent and would never purposely misguide you, but for your protection, it’s better to use an attorney who deals with real estate transactions in Florida on a daily basis. You wouldn't use a medical malpractice attorney to defend you in a DUI case, would you? Then don't do the same with your real estate transaction. The best way to find a real estate attorney is through a referral from your real estate agent. They should give you a list of more than one attorney to check out on your own.

**Tax Advisor and Accountant**

When deciding to purchase a home in Florida, there are a number of tax considerations you should discuss with your tax advisor or accountant. Among the many concerns is whether you should pay cash for your new home or get a mortgage so that you can get the tax deduction on the interest. This is not an easily answered question, and the answer will not be the same for everyone. But your tax advisor or accountant should be able to help you decide what’s best for you and your situation.

**Financial Advisors**

Buying real estate anywhere is both a financial and an emotional decision.
Naturally, you will seek the guidance of as many people around you as you can. For some people, this includes seeking the guidance of their financial advisor.

Most financial advisors put their clients’ interests before their own and should be highly regarded for the contribution they can make in developing an individual’s financial strength. However, just as in any other industry, the financial advisor industry does contain some unscrupulous people who have a tendency to look out for their own interests, rather than those of the client’s. If you have done all the research you can do regarding your decision to purchase a home and feel comfortable with it financially, you should not let the advice of a financial advisor or stockbroker stand in your way.

When consulting with your advisor or broker about a real estate purchase, remember that they are usually compensated based on how much money they are directing for you. If they could stand to lose hundreds of thousands of dollars from your portfolio because you want to sell some investments to pay cash for a new home, they may not be happy about parting with your money. If you sense any personal motive in their advice to you on this matter, take your money and run, don't walk, to find another advisor.
When considering a home purchase in Florida, or anywhere for that matter, one of the first decisions you should make is whether to have a home built, or buy a resale (previously occupied) home. Your decision will depend on several factors including how quickly you need a home, your personal taste, and other factors. Here are some pros and cons of both.

TYPES OF HOMES

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Pros of Building a New Home

One of the best things about a brand new home is that it is under warranty from the builder. If (almost) anything goes wrong while the home is under warranty, you won’t be charged to have it fixed.

Assuming you are building from scratch (not buying a builder spec home), you will get to choose your own décor like carpet, tile, cabinets and counters. This helps to personalize the home to your tastes and to give it some of your own soul. You also have the ability to customize to an extent, depending on what types of changes the builder allows.

Also, you will likely qualify for better insurance rates because the home will be built to current building codes.

Cons of Building a New Home

One of the cons of building a new home is that you typically have to wait for the home to be built, unless the builder has the style of home you want in his inventory (commonly referred to as “spec” homes or “quick move-in” homes). If you are on a tight schedule, or you do not want to find a temporary place to live while your home is under construction, you might want to pass on building a new home.

Another important factor to consider is that building a new home can be an overwhelming and nerve-wracking process. Seeing little day-to-day progress can be exasperating and many people feel the urge to micromanage the builder when there is usually no need to do that. If you are predisposed to being a micromanager, skip the headaches and buy a home that’s already built.

Pros of Resale Homes

One advantage of buying a resale home is that unless you have plans to do some remodeling before you move in, the home is ready to be occupied, and you know exactly what you’re getting. You get to avoid the roller coaster of emotions involved in building a new home.
Most home sellers are open to at least some negotiation on price. This depends on the market of course, and in some cases, why the seller is selling. Helping you negotiate is where your real estate agent comes in handy.

**Cons of Resale Homes**

With a resale home you are not able to choose your décor such as tile and carpet, cabinets and countertops, or make any customization or personalization until after the purchase and, even then, not without a remodeling budget. It is what it is. Someone else has chosen the colors and materials, and their tastes may differ from your own. Something else to consider is that, depending on the age and construction of the home, your insurance may cost more.

Additionally, if you want the protection of a home warranty, it must be purchased separately at your expense, unless the seller provides one. Also, don’t forget you’ll need a home inspection, which you can read more about in a later chapter.

**Should you Rent?**

Another possibility for you to consider is renting a home for a year or two while you acclimate yourself to Florida. This can be helpful for a boomer who isn’t sure they want to retire in a certain place, or live in a certain neighborhood, or type of home. You can try it out, and when your lease is up, you can decide what to do from there.

Most experts agree that in most cases buying is better than renting. Not so much because of future appreciation that can take several years to realize, but for the tax benefits of owning, like deducting mortgage interest and real estate taxes.

Other problems with renting as opposed to buying include the difficulty of finding something that suits your tastes and housing needs. There’s no such thing as a custom built rental. Plus, if you do find a place, since you don’t own the home you’ll be restricted in making any changes to its appearance.
All of that said though, in a situation where you are the least bit unsure of your decision, renting may be the answer. It would do you very little good to plunk down tons of money on a new home, only to decide you hate the area, and in six months or a year later pick up and find a new home in a new area.

**Single Family Homes**

The most basic and most popular type of home is the single family home.

It’s what most people think of when someone says “house”. A standalone structure, a single family home sits on its own piece of land, be it the size of a credit card or several acres. Single family homes offer their owners the most sense of space.

Even if your neighbor’s home is only five feet away, as will be the case in some communities, you still have a feeling of separation and distance from them. When standing in your living room, you really can’t tell if the neighbor’s house is five feet or 50 feet away.

Single-family homes typically offer the most flexibility when you wish to make changes, such as adding an addition, changing the exterior color, or putting in a pool.

If you buy a single-family home in a subdivision governed by a Homeowners’ Association (HOA), you will not have as much flexibility with what you can do to your home.

The Architecture Review Board or ARB must typically approve most changes, especially those affecting the exterior appearance of the home. However the upside is that your neighbors will have to conform to the same standards when they wish to make changes. Be sure to read the HOA restrictions before purchasing to make sure they’re rules you are willing to follow.

As an owner of a single family home, you will be responsible for the home’s maintenance. You will be responsible for cutting the grass, trimming the shrubs and bushes, painting, pressure cleaning, and any other exterior maintenance as
needed.

For the boomer who has better things to do than to spend Saturday on yard work, however, the new trend in some communities in Florida is for single-family homes to be maintained on the outside, just like a townhouse or condo. These are called “maintenance-free communities” or “maintenance-free lifestyle communities.” Just as in a townhouse or condo, the owner is assessed a fee to pay for certain services such as lawn care, periodic painting, and pressure washing.

**Condominiums**

Condominiums, or condos, are popular all over the state, but even more so in coastal areas. Condominiums are buildings comprised of several separate units. Theoretically, the price of the land that the condo is built on is spread across the units, with units on higher floors typically commanding higher prices and yielding better views.

For example, someone who wants to live on the ocean and may not be able to afford the several million-dollar price tags for a home may opt instead for a condo at a lower price. Even so, some condos run into the millions of dollars depending on location and features.

Condominiums are communities unto themselves. The beauty of condo living is that most of the upkeep of a regular single family home is eliminated. There is no lawn to cut, no shrubs to trim, and you won’t ever be asked to paint the building in your spare time on the weekend. Amenities range from the bare bones with a swimming pool and fitness room, to total luxury with full-time concierge, doorman and valet, room service, spas, and restaurants.

I actually live in a condo on the ocean. There are things that I love about condo living and things that I don’t like. Here are links to two articles I’ve written on the subject:
What I like:

What I don’t like:
http://www.floridachurches.com/downsides-oceanfront-condo-living/

Townhouses

Townhouses can be considered sort of a happy medium between a single family home and a condo. Townhouses are two-story structures that are similar to single family homes in that they sit on their own piece of land. They are also like a condominium in that they are attached to one or more other homes. They commonly include either a one or two-car garage and also a front or back patio for lounging outside.

The outside of the home is typically taken care of for you, you don’t have anyone living directly above you, and there is frequently a small piece of the yard for you to call your own in which you can plant annuals or a rose bush, etc. (often subject to community restrictions). These benefits account for the rise in popularity of townhouse living in Florida.

In most communities, townhouse owners are assessed for the maintenance of the common areas (parts of the community owned equally by the home owners), as well as any amenities provided such as swimming pools, tennis courts, and pavilions.

These assessments can occur monthly, bi-monthly, quarterly or yearly. Most likely these fees will not be figured into your mortgage, so you will have to make a separate payment when it is due. Again, you should review the budget and the association rules before you make a purchase.

Manufactured Homes

Close your eyes and step into a modern manufactured home. Now open them. Are you sure that you’re really in a manufactured home? You see drywall, crown molding, tile, hardwood floors, a fireplace, decorative niches, and
archways. Then look at the floorplan and layout, it seems that this can’t be a manufactured home!

Manufactured homes have come a long way from the long and narrow tin cans on wheels of the 50s, 60s, and 70s and have evolved into a logical, economical, and safe choice for many would-be homeowners. Affordability is one of the main factors driving the increase in manufactured home ownership. Manufactured homes cost considerably less than their site-built counterparts, sometimes 25-50 percent less, in fact.

Money is one thing you say, but are they safe? Today’s manufactured homes are built in quality and environmentally controlled factories and adhere to current federal building codes. This, combined with the fact that they are anchored to the foundation on which they sit, a process that is overseen by local building inspectors, means a safe and secure home that can withstand the elements. Manufactured home builders’ websites are often filled with testimonials of how their homes have been able to withstand hurricane force winds just as well and sometimes better than some site-built homes.

Before you jump in though, some caveats to consider: Though they may be built to withstand winds over 100 mph and are up to federal codes, manufactured homes are still feared by many insurers. It can be tough to find insurance on your manufactured home at a reasonable rate. Also, when hurricanes threaten Florida, especially near the coast, manufactured home communities are almost always under mandatory evacuation orders, even if site-built home communities surrounding them are only under voluntary evacuation orders. That might be something to think about if you don’t want to have to pick up and go every time the wind blows.
There are several kinds of Florida communities that you may come across in your search, and here I’ve detailed a few of the more popular types. Keep in mind that it’s entirely possible to come across communities that are combinations of these, for example, a gated 55+ maintenance-free community.

**Country Club Communities**

Florida has more golf courses than any other state. There are more than 1,500 golf courses in Florida and most cities have several golf course communities, also referred to as Country club communities. Courses can range from fairly modest to extremely upscale. Florida even has a license plate proclaiming it as the “Golf Capital of the World.”

Many communities have more than one golf course. Most have at least one clubhouse with such amenities as a fitness center, practice facilities, pro shop, restaurants and bars, banquet facilities, even full service spas, so that you can enjoy a massage after that tough round of golf.

Some golf courses are private, meaning you must be a member or the guest of a member to play there. Membership rates vary among country clubs depending on the location and caliber of the course. Keep in mind that most private courses have a food and beverage minimum, meaning that you have to spend at least “x” amount of dollars in their restaurants and bars within a designated period of time. Thankfully, sometimes purchases in the pro shop can be applied towards meeting your food and beverage minimum. If you lose as many golf balls as I do, you should have no problem reaching your food and beverage minimum.

Many country club communities have equity memberships, which pass from
one party to another through the sale of real estate in that community. If this is the case with the home you intend to purchase, be sure that the real estate contract includes the right to the membership. Your real estate agent can help you with this.

Some communities have both a private course and a public course. You can own a home in a community such as this, not be a member and instead choose to play the public course exclusively. Surely, though, if your budget allows you will probably want to be a member of the private course to give your golf game some variety.

Country club communities with a golf course that is always open to the public are also an option. Be aware, however, that public courses tend to be more crowded than private courses, although this can depend on the time of year, the level of the course, and the price you have to pay to play. Some new communities allow the public to use their golf courses until there are enough residents and consequently enough members in the community. This is both good common sense and sound economics.

If you do not play golf, you may want to think twice about buying a home in a golf course community. Many boomers who do not play golf resent the fact that they are sometimes required to help fund its operations through their homeowners’ association dues. Whether or not this occurs depends on how the homeowners’ association and club budgets are set up, so you might want to look into that before you buy.

For more information on golf courses in Florida, visit the state’s official golf resource at http://www.playfla.com

Active Adult / 55-Plus communities

55-plus communities are communities where the majority of the homeowners are over the age of 55. For a community to qualify for the 55-plus designation and to be marketed as such, at least 80 percent of the units have to be occupied by at least one person over 55. A common misconception is that
everyone must be over 55 but that simply isn’t true. On the other hand, this does not mean that someone under 55 must be allowed to purchase a home. A community-- through its deed restrictions-- can legally deny someone the ability to purchase a home if they are not yet 55 years old.

Some 55-plus communities have limits on how long relatives such as kids or grandkids can visit, but those instances are usually limited to mobile home parks. While there are still many 55-plus communities in Florida, research suggests that some boomers do not want to move into a 55-plus community due to some of the restrictions involved and because they associate it with being “old.” If you fall into this category, you may want to seriously consider a maintenance-free lifestyle community as an alternative. But even still, the business of developing and building 55-plus communities is... excuse me... booming, and those who do it right are experiencing amazing successes.

For a list of 55-plus communities in Florida visit: [http://fchr.state.fl.us/fchr/resources/55_housing/directory_of_55_housing_communities](http://fchr.state.fl.us/fchr/resources/55_housing/directory_of_55_housing_communities)

**Maintenance-Free Lifestyle Communities**

If cutting grass, landscaping, painting, pressure washing, and general upkeep of the exterior of your home are appealing to you, skip to the next section. Still with me? Okay then, a maintenance-free community might be for you. While some maintenance-free communities are designated 55 and better, most are not. But because maintenance-free lifestyle communities often have restrictions such as no fences, no swing sets, and no basketball hoops, they tend to discourage many families with young children from moving in.

So in maintenance-free lifestyle communities you might enjoy a little more peace and quiet but at the same time be free to have your children or grandchildren visit how often and how long you like.

Maintenance-free communities are those in which you pay a monthly, quarterly, or yearly fee (sorry, the “free” in “maintenance-free” doesn’t refer to the cost) to a
homeowners’ association or resident association, and in return, the association contracts with outside vendors to take care of certain maintenance and upkeep. Some homeowners’ associations fees just include the cutting of your grass and leave the homeowner to take care of other items or contract with vendors directly to have them done. Others include complete landscaping such as shrub trimming, mulching, fertilizing and spraying of the yards, painting, and pressure washing.

Most maintenance-free communities are highly “amenticised”, with clubhouses, swimming pools, billiard and card tables, craft rooms, fitness centers, and activity directors. The idea is that you fill your time doing the things you enjoy, while leaving the work to someone else.

**Manufactured Home Communities**

Most baby boomers entertaining the purchase of a manufactured home in Florida will be considering manufactured home communities that offer a full array of amenities like golf, tennis, swimming pools, clubhouses, and restaurants and bars. It’s not just the home, it’s the lifestyle that boomers are after, and many developers have realized this and are offering it to the manufactured home buyer.

However, in many (though not all) manufactured home communities in Florida, you do not own the land your home sits on, the developer does. One of the main factors in a home’s ability to appreciate is its location and land value, something that in this arrangement you have almost no stake in. This is often times a thorn in the side of residents, but it is what it is. If you really want to live there, it’s simply something you’ll have to deal with.

Also, the developer will pay the taxes and provide the services outlined in the developer agreement such as grounds maintenance, lawn care, security, and the like, and in turn will charge you a fee, commonly referred to as “lot rent.” This is a source of revenue for the developer. The developer is providing you certain services, and you are paying him for providing them. Likewise, when he has an increase in costs or taxes, these increases will be passed on to the homeowners.
One of the best ways to find out more about what owning and living in a manufactured home in Florida might be like is to talk with people who live in a manufactured home. If you are curious, when visiting an area spend some time driving around a manufactured home community and talk with some residents if possible. Most will be glad to share their experiences with you, whether they are good or bad.

For more information on Manufactured homes in Florida, visit the Florida Manufactured Housing Association at http://www.fmha.org

Gated Communities

Just as in several other states, maybe even your own, gated communities are located all over Florida. Gated communities are gaining in popularity across the nation, especially in the Sunbelt. They can either be manned, with guards posted at the gates and patrolling the streets regularly, or they can be unmanned, with arms or gates that open when you press a button on your garage door opener or enter your secret code in a call box.

Guests will either be required to stop and speak to the guard or call your home from the call box before proceeding into the community. While this can sometimes be inconvenient for some people, there is no doubt that gated communities do a good job at keeping solicitors, sightseers, and general riffraff out of the neighborhood, as well as protecting and enhancing the value of the homes in a community.

If your home in Florida is just going to be a part time residence, you might enjoy the added peace of mind that a gated community can give you while you are away. Guards in some communities will even check your doors and windows for you while you are gone. Some can act as a sort of concierge service, accepting packages for you and putting them aside for you until you return. When considering a gated community, be sure to ask your salesperson or real estate agent what level of service you can expect from the guards in the community you are considering.
If you get a chance, speak to a guard and see if they can give you any tips either on the community or the area you are considering. Guards typically see hundreds of people every day and therefore have their fingers on the pulse of the community.

Do not let the fact that a community is gated lull you into a false sense of security. No community, gated or otherwise, is immune to crime. Crime can happen anywhere, it does not discriminate based on zip code. Remember to keep your doors locked, garage door closed, and store any valuables in a safe place.
The general idea behind a homeowners’ association (HOA) is that you have a group of people elected by the residents who make up the board directing the homeowners association. The main duties are to 1) represent the best interests of the residents of the community especially in the capacity of protecting home values through the implementation and enforcement of rules, known as covenants and restrictions and 2) to assess and collect homeowners’ fees to help pay for the upkeep of common
areas of the community as well as any other areas provided for in the covenants and deed recordings.

**Fees and Dues**

Homeowners’ association dues vary widely depending on the amount of amenities that are provided to the homeowners. Some just cover the maintenance of the common areas including medians, right of ways, lakes, and ponds. Other dues can cover things such as upkeep of the streets (if they are private streets), and streetlights. Some communities negotiate for a group rate on cable TV or Internet access with service providers. You may be charged fees for those services monthly, quarterly, or yearly. Failure to pay your homeowner’s dues can result in the association placing a lien on your property and eventually foreclosing if you get far enough behind on your payments.

As a prospective purchaser in a community, you are entitled to and encouraged to review the budget. When deciding whether a homeowners’ association’s dues are a good deal or not, add up what you think it would cost you to obtain the services provided on your own. Don’t forget the aggravation the association saves you by not having to deal with finding and scheduling the services and vendors yourself.

If you are buying a home in a new subdivision where homes are still under construction, odds are that the developer still controls the homeowners’ association. Until control of the HOA is given to the resident owners, called turnover, which the state of Florida requires to occur when 90% of the units in a community have sold and closed, the developer is still responsible for maintaining the public aspects of the community (streets, common areas, etc.) and carrying out the duties of creating a budget for the Association and setting HOA dues accordingly.

Oftentimes the developer will over-subsidize the budget, in order to keep the initial HOA fees low, in an effort to attract more buyers. But when turnover occurs, and the developer is no longer subsidizing the budget, homeowners can be hit with a sharp increase in their HOA dues. Before purchasing in a community where the developer controls the HOA, make sure that you carefully review the budget to make sure everyone is paying their fair share, or if that is not the case, try to reasonably figure out what your dues might be when control of the development turns over.
Common Rules and Regulations

Another aspect of communities with homeowners’ associations is that most involve rules and regulations, or covenants and restrictions (C and Rs) also referred to as covenants, conditions, and restrictions (C, C and Rs). Be sure to ask for a copy before you sign any purchase agreement, and make sure that the agreement is contingent on (depends upon) your understanding and approval of the covenants and restrictions and rules and regulations.

Some common rules and regulations that may be included in the documents are rules regarding:

**Fences**

Some communities have restrictions on what type of fence you may have, the material it can be made of, how high it can be, or if any fences are allowed at all. If a community you are considering does not allow fences at all, and you have pets that require being fenced in, you might have to consider an invisible fence.

**Playground or sports equipment**

Basketball hoops are not allowed in more and more communities, while some allow portable basketball hoops as long as they are stored in the garage when not in use. Swing sets and slides are also commonly not allowed because of how they can deteriorate in appearance, and in maintenance-free communities where lawn care is included they are a hindrance to the easy cutting of your lawn.

**Parking**

Overnight or long-term street parking are often not allowed. This is as much a fire and police safety issue as it is an aesthetic issue. Boats and trailers are usually not allowed to be stored outside, so you must find room in your garage or park them off-site.

**Changes to the exterior of your home**

Most homeowners’ associations require that an architectural or design review committee approve any changes you wish to make to the exterior of your home. This
includes things such as adding a screened-in patio, swimming pool, or painting your home a different color. Even changes to your landscaping must sometimes be approved.

There is usually a form they have you fill out on which you must describe in detail any changes you plan to make, including a list of materials to be used, who will do the work, and so on. You are also typically required to submit any drawings or plans that show how the change will look when complete. This is to keep everything in the neighborhood looking nice and congruent.

Pets

Some communities have restrictions on the number of pets you may have in a home, as well as the size. These are typically implemented to reduce the number of potentially aggressive dogs such as pit bulls, and are most common in condominiums or townhouses due to the close proximity of your neighbors. Also, most communities and municipalities now have rules requiring you to pick up after your pets. Be mindful of these rules and laws, especially if the area you are moving from had no such ordinances, as you can be heavily fined for ignoring them.

Protection of home values

It can sound like a pain to have to pay these fees and abide by these restrictions especially if you are coming from a community that doesn’t have any fees or restrictions. But all these fees and rules, as inconvenient as they may sometimes seem, do serve the important purpose of protecting your home values. If you are going to pay a quarter of a million dollars or more for your new home here in Florida, you want to know that someone is looking out for you and your investment. Ask any reputable real estate agent or property appraiser and they will tell you that communities governed by homeowners’ associations have the best track record of preserving and increasing home values.
Deciding if an HOA is for you

So, based on the above information, do you think a community with a homeowners’ association is for you? If you’re at all like me, the answer is a resounding yes. I like knowing that my best interests are being looked after and my home value is being protected. You basically just have to weigh out the pros and cons of living in such a structured environment. While it’s not for everybody, I think that most people, especially boomers such as you will ultimately choose to live in and be happy in communities with a homeowners’ association. I think it’s best for your lifestyle and the future value of your property.

Condo Association Fees

As an owner of a condominium you will be responsible for paying condo fees. Before buying a condo, make sure these fees have been explained to you in writing. You should also ask to see the budget. When buying a resale condo in Florida you have a three-day “cooling off” period (7 days for new condo construction) during which you may ask to cancel your contract. This is so that potential condo buyers have ample opportunity to examine and understand the condo fees, rules, and budget. Remember though that this only applies to condos, the same “cooling off” period does not apply to any other type of property.

The condo fees are collected to pay for things like maintenance of the exterior of the condo, including insurance on the building, maintenance of the common areas, such as the grounds, swimming pool, and other amenities. Quite frequently in a condo the condo fee includes water, sewer, and garbage service. This is often more convenient for you: almost no one complains about having a few less checks to write.

Special Assessments

Eventually, if you live in a condo (and even with a homeowners’ association) long enough, you may fall prey to what is called a special assessment. A special assessment is sometimes a necessary evil, and is used to pay for items such as a new roof or unexpected repairs beyond ordinary maintenance. Your condo’s budget should have a re-
serve set aside for unexpected events, but sometimes if there is not enough money to 
pay for what needs to be done, unit owners will be assessed. If you are on a shoestring 
budget or have a fixed income with little reserves, you may want to rethink a condo be-
cause just one special assessment can put you in the red.

Also note that failure to pay any of your condo fees or special assessments can re-
sult in the condo association placing a lien on your property, which can eventually 
lead to foreclosure.

For more information on your rights and obligations as a condo owner visit:  
http://www.condo-laws.com

Community Development Districts

Not to be confused with a homeowners’ or condo association, a community devel-
opment district (CDD) is a means used by local governments and developers to shift 
the burden of developing infrastructure, maintaining roads and landscaping, building 
clubhouses and other improvements to the homeowners in that district. The way 
CDDs work is the CDD, run by a board that is chosen by the developer, issues bonds to 
pay for the infrastructure and other community improvements that new homeowners 
have to pay back over the course of a number of years, usually 20 to 30. The amount 
homeowners are assessed for this is added to their tax bill. This can be an unexpected 
extra expense if you are not familiar with the rules of the CDD.

CDDs are not necessarily a bad thing though, as they can provide a community 
with amenities and services it otherwise might not get. You just have to be careful and 
know what you are getting yourself into before buying in a CDD. There are new CDDs 
popping up all the time so always be sure ask when buying a home if it is in a CDD.

CDD’s have gone bankrupt in Florida. In fact, according an article in Florida 
Trend written back in 2010, at the time that article was written Florida had 125 dis-
tricts in default on $3 billion in bonds. The article remarked that an additional 70 
were teetering on default.
CDD financial problems can really only be helped in a few ways. One, an increase in demand for real estate within that district creates the needed revenue to cover bond payments. Or, as has happened in several instances, the bad debt along with the land and improvements on it are bought at such a large discount that the new owners are able to go in and build the community and sell homes at prices that rival those of foreclosures and short sales that have flooded the market.

But just because a certain area is in high demand, it doesn’t necessarily mean their CDD’s aren’t at risk. A perfect example of this is The Villages, home to several CDD’s. As you probably know, The Villages is the most popular retirement community in Florida. Homes continue to sell there at a fast pace, despite the overall economy and real estate market.

But while they may enjoy good financial health, The Villages CDD’s have come under attack by the IRS, which has had an investigation going on for years now looking into whether these CDD’s have been controlled and run according to the rules that are in place to keep them tax exempt.

You can learn more about Florida CDDs and search a list of current CDDs here: http://www.floridacddreport.com/
When people who are looking to buy in Florida ask me about the taxes I like to share a little bit of humor. I say Florida has no state income tax, so they make up for it with real estate taxes and speeding tickets. Speeding tickets is the funny part. The real estate taxes, on the other hand, are not so funny for some.

The real estate taxes that you pay on a home can vary widely depending on what city and what county you are buying the home in. For example taxes in 2014 on a $250,000 home in Dade County (Miami area) could be $5188.29, and taxes on the same priced home in Sarasota County could be $3412.59.

Why the difference? Well, several factors are at work here, but the main thing is that the taxes will usually be higher in areas that are experiencing rapid population and housing growth. When rapid growth happens some local governments cannot provide the level of services expected of them without raising taxes.

This usually happens because city governments didn’t anticipate the rapid growth and must then play catch-up. Had they foreseen the growth, it might be a different story.

They could have used the expanding tax base from more people moving into the area to increase the amount and level of services that would be needed such as building new roads and infrastructure, providing adequate schools, police, medical, and fire services, and hiring more public servants to oversee and run them.
Florida Counties With the LOWEST and HIGHEST Property Tax Rates*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOWEST</th>
<th>HIGHEST</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walton – 9.7536</td>
<td>Alachua – 23.442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monroe – 10.1257</td>
<td>Volusia – 23.2216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collier – 11.7923</td>
<td>St. Lucie – 22.7249</td>
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<td>Bay – 12.1271</td>
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<td>Franklin – 12.9457</td>
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<tr>
<td>Okaloosa – 13.4039</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sumter – 13.5546</td>
<td>Hendry – 20.8776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Rosa – 14.4789</td>
<td>Hillsborough – 20.7007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson – 14.5345</td>
<td>Palm Beach – 20.5622</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data is from January 2013

Property Appraisal

The property appraiser’s office has the task of putting a value on your home. This will help determine the amount of tax you will be required to pay. The property appraiser is not; however, the person who determines what your taxes will be. The local government does that when they set the millage rate.

Luckily, most of the time, you won’t pay taxes on the entire price of your home. In Florida, property appraisers have a duty to assess your home at “just value.” The typical property valuation is targeted between about 85-95 percent (but these are sometimes lower and sometimes higher) of what they think a particular property would sell for. If you just purchased a property, you are assessed at 85-95 percent of the amount you paid for it, that is, your contract price.

The property appraiser’s job involves figuring out a reasonable range of values that buyers would pay for a particular property. Property assessments are usually set
at the lower end of that range, which is normally around 85 percent. This is a practice used in almost all Florida counties. You will have to check with the property appraiser’s office in the area you are considering to determine where in this range they prefer to target.

Many people wonder why the figures of 85-95 percent are used and not 100 percent. The lower figures are used to allow for closing costs, transfer taxes, and real estate commissions that may have been built into the final sales price but are not really part of the “value” in the home.

While the above information is good to know, in order to get the possible “worst-case scenario” idea of what your taxes will be, use the 100 percent value for your financial planning. Then when you get your tax bill, if it happens to be lower, you will hopefully be pleasantly surprised.

**Millage Rate**

An essential element to figuring out how much your taxes will be is the millage rate, commonly referred to as “mil rate.” The millage rate is expressed as “mils per thousand.” For example if the millage rate is “17”, then you will pay $17 per $1,000 of assessed value.

Each taxing district will set its own millage rate which can be determined by dividing the total proposed budget of the taxing district (city, county, school district, etc.) by the total taxable value of all real estate in the district after exemptions are deducted for.

You will likely be taxed by your city, county, school district, water management district if there is one, and others. It’s important to get a whole tax picture view before deciding on an area. The local property appraiser’s office will usually be your best resource for this.

It is also important to note that real estate taxes in Florida are paid in arrears, and you will have an opportunity to get a small discount for paying them early.
For links to the property appraiser’s offices throughout Florida visit http://myflorida.com/dor/property/appraisers.html

Once you find out the millage for the area you are buying a home in, you can use the formula below to figure out an estimate of your taxes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Price you pay for the home (Contract price)</th>
<th>$250,000</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>times</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>90% (assuming middle of 85-95% range)</td>
<td>90%</td>
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<tr>
<td>equals</td>
<td>=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Just value”</td>
<td>$225,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divided by 1,000</td>
<td>/1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>equals</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times mil rate (we’ll assume 17 mils per thousand)</td>
<td>x 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equals your tax liability</td>
<td>$3,825</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

State of Florida Homestead Exemptions

The state of Florida does provide some much needed tax relief in the form of homestead exemptions.

$50,000 Homestead Exemption

Florida’s constitution provides homeowners the right to receive a homestead exemption provided they meet certain residency requirements. Every person who has “legal or equitable title (you own it) to real property (your home) in the State of Florida and who resides on the property on January 1, and in good faith makes it his or her permanent home is eligible for a homestead exemption.” This exemption reduces your “just value” by $50,000 (note: this used to be $25,000...Florida voters elected to double it in January 2008), which could save you around $1,000 on your property tax bill, depending on what the millage rate is for your area. For this example I assumed a 2% tax rate (20 mils).
HOWEVER, the second $25,000 that Florida added in 2008 to this exemption does not apply to school taxes (which equate to about a third of most tax bills). Therefore, the actual benefit from this is closer to $15,000 (for a total benefit of $40,000...$25,000 + $15,000). The tax savings from a $40,000 exemption where this tax rate is 2% would be $800. Still not a bad chunk of change.

You have to make application for the exemption between January 1 of the previous year and March 1 of the year you want the exemption. For example, for the 2014 tax year, you would have been able to apply for homestead exemption from January 1, 2013 to March 1, 2014.

When filing your homestead exemption for the first time, you will be asked to provide evidence that you are a legal resident, such as a voter registration card or a Florida driver’s license. Most counties have automatic renewal programs so there is no need to reapply each year as long as you are in the same home. If you move, however, you will need to reapply.

If you are a part-time resident using your home in Florida as a vacation home or second home, you will not be eligible for this exemption. However, since the new property tax amendment passed in January 2008, your property tax increases are now capped at 10% per year. “Big deal” now you say... but if there's ever a time like 2001-2006 when property taxes nearly doubled for some folks, you'll be happy with this change.

Other Possible Exemptions
In addition to the $50,000 Homestead Exemption, there are other exemptions available that could possibly reduce your tax bill.

Additional Homestead Exemption for Persons 65 and Older of up to $25,000
This exemption is available on a county-by-county basis, and not all counties offer it.

$500 Widow’s and Widower’s Exemption
This one is pretty self-explanatory.

**$500 Disability Exemption**

Any Florida resident who is totally and permanently disabled may claim this exemption with proper documentation of the disability.

**$5,000 Disability Exemption for Ex-Service Members**

An ex-service member who is disabled at least 10 percent in war or another service-related incident might be entitled to this exemption.

**Exemption for Deployed Military**

A member or former member of any branch of the United States military or military reserves, the United States Coast Guard or its reserves, or the Florida National Guard may receive an exemption on this year’s tax bill if he or she receives a homestead exemption, was deployed during the last calendar year outside the continental United States, Alaska, and Hawaii in support of a designated operation (each year the Florida legislature designates operations for this exemption), and submits an application, Form DR-501M, to the property appraiser.

The percent of the taxable value that is exempt for the current year is determined by the percent of time during the last year when the service member was deployed on a designated operation.

**$500 Exemption for Blind Persons**

In order to claim this exemption, you must have a certificate of blindness issued by the Division of Blind Services of the Department of Education, the Federal Social Security Administration, or the Veteran’s Administration.

These exemptions can be combined with each other. Certain other rules and restrictions apply to the above exemptions. You should contact the local property appraiser’s office for more information on the county in which you are interested. For links to the property appraiser’s offices throughout Florida visit: [http://myflorida.com/dor/property/appraisers.html](http://myflorida.com/dor/property/appraisers.html)
Save Our Homes

The Save Our Homes amendment is a piece of legislation, loathed by many and loved by some, which helps limit the tax burden of those residents who own homesteaded property in Florida. Due to the drop in real estate values between 2007 and 2011, the effects of Save Our Homes has been greatly diminished, but if there is ever a large and fast rise in property values in the future, its good to know that this is in place.

Over the period of 2001-2005 home prices rose by as much as 100 percent or more in many parts of Florida. Most people would have a hard time handling a property tax bill increase of 100 percent in such a short period of time. In fact, in such situations, many homeowners of modest means on fixed incomes would no longer be able to afford the home they live in because they wouldn’t be able to pay the taxes.

The amendment states that the assessed value of a homesteaded property cannot exceed 3 percent of the assessed value of the property for the prior year or the percentage change of the Consumer Price Index as reported by the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, whichever is lower.

For example, the Consumer Price Index rose 3.40 percent in 2006, so the increase in assessed value was capped at 3.00 percent. Let’s assume that between 2005 and 2006 the value of your home in Florida doubled from $100,000 to $200,000. (This is not likely to happen in such a short period, but it makes for a clear example.) With the Save Our Homes cap, you could only be taxed on $103,000 ($100K + 3 percent) instead of the full value of $200,000.

The new property tax amendment passed in January 2008 provides for “portability” of up to $500,000 of any Save Our Homes benefit you may have accrued. If you are moving from out of state this doesn’t effect you. Only if you live in Florida, are homesteaded, and have built up Save Our Homes benefit does it apply.

Property Tax Disclosure

Once a home changes ownership, it is reassessed at its full value, and the Save Our Homes amendment does not go back into effect until a year after the property is
homesteaded again. This is assuming the new owner is not bringing built up Save Our Homes tax savings with them like I mentioned in the last paragraph (ie: they are moving from out of state, etc.).

Consider this scenario. You are looking at a house on the market for $400,000. The Multiple Listing Service printout that your agent gives you on the property states that the amount of property taxes paid by the owner for the prior year was $2,500. It is a very common but costly mistake for buyers to assume their property taxes will be that same amount. I’ve heard “but it says right there on the sheet, Property Tax: $2,500” too many times. The truth is that your taxes could be much higher because you will be required to pay taxes on the amount that you pay for the property. The current owner is paying taxes based on what they paid for the property, which, depending on when they bought the property, could be considerably less.

The Florida Legislature thought that not enough people buying homes were being made aware of this fact so they introduced a new Property Tax Disclosure which must be in all residential real estate contracts after January 1, 2005.

It reads:

A buyer should not rely on the seller’s current property taxes as the amount of property taxes that the buyer might be obligated to pay in the year subsequent to purchase. A change of ownership or property improvements triggers reassessments of the property that could result in higher property taxes. If you have any questions concerning valuation, contact the county property appraiser’s office for information.

The best resource for calculating what your taxes will be on a particular property is, again, the local Property Appraiser’s office. They are there to help you.

Most have property tax calculators on their website that you can use to get an idea of what your taxes will be.
Luckily for us (knock on wood), we haven’t had a really significant hurricane here in Florida in the last few years, so the insurance “panic” that we experienced in 2004-2007 during which insurance was tough to get in some locations has died down a bit.

But, as with all things having to do with Mother Nature, you just never know.
In addition to the obvious need to protect your investment, the ability to get homeowner's insurance is of utmost importance when getting a mortgage on your property. No mortgage company will loan you money without you first having insurance on the property. In some instances your mortgage lender can even foreclose on the property if you fail to carry insurance. While no one can predict what the future will bring, I have done my best to compile for you the facts and resources, as they now stand, to help you navigate the homeowner's insurance minefield in Florida.

Getting Started

Presumably you now have homeowner's insurance on your current residence, wherever that might be. My first piece of advice is to ask your current insurance agent if their company writes homeowner's insurance policies in Florida. If you are with a large national insurer with operations in Florida the odds are good that they do write homeowner's policies in Florida. By doing this, you are taking the path of least resistance, and you will probably be able to get pretty decent rates through what are called "multi-line" discounts assuming you have other property such as cars, jewelry and the like already insured through them. You are welcome to shop around and price out other insurers, but from what I've seen, if you are comfortable with the company you have now, switching carriers to save a few bucks isn't worth the hassle.

Ask Around

If the above scenario does not work out for whatever reason, my next step would be to ask any family or friends presently living in Florida who they have as their homeowner's insurance carrier. If they have no useful information, ask a real estate agent or potential new neighbors for a recommendation.

Because of the ever present risk from hurricanes as well as rising re-insurance rates (yes, insurers get insurance to protect themselves against losses on the insurance they issue you), many insurers in Florida have dropped customers in damage prone areas, stopped writing new policies in those same areas, or stopped writing new policies in the state altogether. You are going to have to do some serious legwork, phoning different agencies to see who is doing what at the time when you need insurance. Many
have a one policy out, one policy in type of arrangement, where they will place you on a waiting list and when a policyholder does not renew for whatever reason, they can pick you up.

**Florida Market Assistance Program**

If you’ve tried all of the above and still are not able to acquire coverage, your next step is to visit the website of the Florida Market Assistance Program at fmap.org. FMAP is a free on-line referral service, created by the Florida legislature and designed to connect those who are not able to find coverage with insurers who are able to write new policies. You register at the website and submit a request for quotes. Agents will typically then call or e-mail you if they can offer assistance to you based on where your home is located, its age, and other factors.

For more information visit [http://www.fmap.org](http://www.fmap.org)

**The Last Resort**

If all of the above options fail and you are not able to find private homeowner’s insurance coverage, Citizens Property Insurance Corporation is your last available option besides self-insuring. This is commonly referred to as “going naked,” which I promise you is not as fun as the name suggests.

The Florida Legislature created Citizen’s in 2002 to help Floridians who cannot get traditional coverage. More than a million homeowners in Florida turn to Citizens for their homeowner’s insurance coverage. Here is fair warning, though. Because Florida law mandates Citizen’s rates, they are much higher than the rates of private insurers. This is by design, so that Citizen’s does not directly compete with private insurers. So the bottom line is don’t turn to Citizens unless you absolutely have to.

For more information visit: [http://www.citizensfla.com](http://www.citizensfla.com)
2007 Property Insurance Legislation

This is a few years old, but still important to know about. In January 2007, Florida legislators passed a bill that may lower property insurance premiums and bring other insurance relief to millions of property owners. Among the highlights of the 167-page bill are means to lower rates for homeowners by allowing owners to exclude wind-storm and contents coverage, allowing owners to choose higher deductibles so that their premiums will be lower, removing the requirement that Citizen’s charge the highest premiums, and allowing non-homesteaded properties to be eligible for Citizen’s.

In order to further protect policyholders, the bill requires insurance companies to give 100 days notice of their intent to cancel a homeowner’s policy that would be effective during hurricane season, requires insurance companies to expedite payments of claims after storms, and prohibits excess profits by insurers.

The bill also makes an effort to expand the property insurance market in Florida by requiring insurance companies that write homeowners policies in other states and auto insurance policies in Florida, to write homeowners policies in Florida.

Insurance companies lobbied heavily against this bill, and there were fears of companies pulling out of Florida altogether, and even though a few companies stopped writing homeowner’s policies, most have continued to write policies in the state. State Farm announced in February 2009 that they would no longer write homeowner’s policies, but reversed this stance in December 2009. Nationwide Insurance announced that they would no longer write homeowners policies in Florida.

Types of Coverage

When shopping for homeowner’s insurance, there are various types of coverage available for you to choose from. Perhaps the most important is guaranteed replacement cost coverage.

Guaranteed Replacement Cost Coverage

No matter which insurance company you eventually go with, you need to make sure that all rates that you are being quoted are for what is called guaranteed replacement-
replacement cost coverage, as opposed to actual cash value coverage. Guaranteed replacement cost coverage means that even if you are insured for, let’s say, $200,000, if your home is destroyed and it costs $250,000 to build at today’s construction costs to be put back into use as it was before, then that’s what the insurance company will pay.

This type of coverage will cost more, as you might imagine, but it provides the policyholder with much more protection. One way to mitigate the rise in your premium is to raise your deductible. When you raise your deductible, or the amount you pay out of pocket to file a claim, your yearly premiums will go down.

**Endorsements and Additional Coverage**

Your homeowner's insurance policy may not cover certain items in your home against damage or theft. Always have your agent explain anything you don't understand and read your policy carefully.

Items like fine art, coin or gun collections, jewelry and furs, or electronic equipment beyond the standard televisions and DVD players, must usually be accounted for and covered under a separate policy or endorsement for an additional premium amount. But if you have any of these items, it might be wise to look into the coverage available to you.

**Inventory**

Always maintain a current inventory of the items in your home, including pictures or video of your property. This inventory should be kept in a safe place outside of the home like a safe deposit box at a bank. This way, if your home and personal belongings are destroyed, you have evidence of what was damaged to show the insurance adjuster. This step alone can save you several hours, days, or sometimes weeks of hassles and delays in getting your insurance claim processed.

**Flood Insurance**

There are two facts that most people do not know. First, flooding is the number one natural disaster in the United States; even properties not near water can be suscep-
tible to flooding. Second, losses due to floods are not covered by your homeowner’s insurance policy.

The Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) puts out “flood maps” that show which areas tend to be most prone to flooding. I often hear people ask, “is the property in a flood zone?” and usually people describing homes in low-risk areas will say “no, it’s not in a flood zone.” Well, the correct answer is that every property is in a flood zone. It’s just a matter of whether it is in a low, moderate or high-risk flood zone.

Your real estate agent might be able to tell you which flood zone the property you are looking at is in. But it is your insurance agent who will use a Flood Insurance Rate Map or FIRM, to ultimately determine your flood risk. Be aware that federal law requires you to purchase flood insurance if you have a federally backed mortgage and reside in a high-risk area.

Better Safe than Sorry

Everyone, no matter where in Florida they live should carry flood insurance available through the National Flood Insurance Program. It is relatively inexpensive, especially if your home is in a low-risk flood zone. A single-family home is limited to $250,000 coverage for structural damage and $100,000 for contents. I used to have those amounts of coverage on my home in a low-risk flood zone and my premium was just over $300 per year. For less than a dollar a day, I could sleep easy at night when the rain from the latest tropical system is pouring down. It was a no-brainer.

For more information on flood zones, flood maps, and flood insurance contact your insurance agent or visit [http://www.floodsmart.gov](http://www.floodsmart.gov)
At the link below I’ve posted the standard Florida real estate contract used by Realtors for most transactions for your review. It’s important to note that if you are buying a new home, most home builders have their own contracts.

**Download sample contract here:**
http://www.floridaforboomers.com/florida-real-estate-contract/

Your real estate agent should be able to explain all of the important details of the standard Florida real estate contract. But if you are unsatisfied with their explanation you should not hesitate to contact a Florida real estate attorney.

**Buying a Home “As-Is”**

Sometimes in your search for a home you will come across a home being sold "as-is". This means that you are allowed to have your inspections done, just like a normal sales scenario but the owner will not be responsible for fixing anything you may find wrong with the place. Many people errantly believe that any home being sold "as-is" is a “handyman’s special” that will require lots of work to be made habitable. This is simply not always the case.

It’s true that is sometimes the owner's reason for selling a place "as-is," but in my experience the reason the seller chooses this route is more often just a matter of convenience. Another reason might be as a point of negotiation. For instance, you may make an offer for twenty thousand less than what the seller is asking for a home, and the seller could agree but add the caveat that you must buy it "as-is." You the buyer, of course, will have to do your own research to see which of these scenarios are true for the house you are considering.
The seller is still required to disclose all known facts that affect the value of the property. However, the seller makes no representation as to the physical condition of the property.

As the buyer in this scenario, you are given the right to inspect the property as you would under normal circumstances, but you are also given the right to cancel the contract, should you not be satisfied with the findings of the inspection or do not wish to pay for the repairs that need to be made. You will be given a certain number of days to conduct your inspections and you must let the seller know of your intention to cancel in writing during that allotted time, should you decide you do not want to proceed with the purchase.

Homeowners’ Association Disclosure

The Homeowners’ Association Disclosure, required by Florida Statute 720.401 is one of the more plainly written documents you will come across during your real estate transactions here in Florida. There are nine statements on the current Homeowners’ Association Disclosure.

Here’s a brief explanation of the nine sections lettered a through i:

a. Simply lets you know that you will be obligated to be a member of a Homeowners’ Association.

b. States that there are or will be restrictive covenants that govern the property.

c. If there is a fee (assessment) to be a member of the homeowners’ association, the fee is noted here. Also, if there are any special assessments owed it will be noted here.

d. Lets you know that you may be required to pay special assessments to the municipality, county, or special district and that these can change from time to time.
e. Gives you warning that if you do not pay the above-mentioned assessments, a lien can be placed on your property.

f. If there is a mandatory fee to use certain facilities in a community, it will be noted here. For instance, some associations have pools or clubhouses that you are required to pay to use.

g. Lets you know whether or not the covenants or rules of the association can be changed without the approval of the association membership. It is preferable that they cannot be changed without the approval of the association membership.

h. Tells you that the statements in the disclosure are only summary in nature and that you should read the covenants and restrictions of the association before purchasing property there.

i. This lets you know that a homeowners’ association's covenants and restrictions are a matter of public record and can be obtained from the record office of the county where the property is located.

**Florida Building Energy Efficiency Rating Disclosure**

As the purchaser of a home in Florida you have the right to have the energy efficiency of the home tested. This can be helpful in determining what the annual energy use of the home might be, and how it compares to other homes used as "yardsticks" for means of comparison. You should be notified of this right either before doing a contract or at the time of contract. Most contracts will have verbiage in them alerting you to this fact.

**Insulation Disclosure for New Construction Homes**

If you are buying a new construction home in Florida, you must be given an Insulation Disclosure, either in the contract or as a separate rider attached to the contract. The type, thickness, and R-value of the insulation in the interior walls, exterior walls, and the ceilings in all areas should be disclosed to you.
An insulation disclosure may look something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Thickness</th>
<th>R-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ceiling/Batt</td>
<td>Fiberglass</td>
<td>10&quot;</td>
<td>R-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceiling Blown-In</td>
<td>Fiberglass</td>
<td>13&quot;</td>
<td>R-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exterior Walls</td>
<td>Foil</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>R-4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior walls/Batt</td>
<td>Fiberglass</td>
<td>3&quot;</td>
<td>R-11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Home inspections and home warranties are two tools available to you that will help to ensure that the present and future condition of your new home here in Florida is satisfactory.
Home Inspections

Before finalizing the purchase of a home, you should always have a home inspection done. This point cannot be stressed enough. A home inspection could be the best money you ever spend. Home inspectors conduct a thorough evaluation of the home that can help you understand the condition that the house is actually in before you take ownership. Remember, that sometimes looks can be deceiving, and nobody likes unexpected surprises or costly repairs once they move in. Even if the house is fairly new and appears to be in good condition, you never know what could be hiding out of plain sight.

Most home inspections don’t reveal much of anything, maybe faucets that need tightening, or caulking that needs to be done. The point of an inspection is not to convince you that so much is wrong with the house that you are discouraged to buy it. It is rather to give you an accurate depiction of the current condition of the house, as well as an idea of how certain things will hold up in the future.

When major items are found, such as a failing air conditioning unit, or bad wiring, the parties must look to the real estate contract to see who will be required to make the repairs. Home inspections typically cost anywhere from $200 and up, depending on the size of the home. After the inspection is complete you will be given a detailed report of all the inspector’s findings, whether good or bad, usually accompanied by digital photos.

A typical home inspector will inspect the structural elements of the home consisting of the roof, outside and inside walls of the home, patios and driveways, as well as parts of the foundation if visible. They will go into the attic to inspect the trusses, the underside of the roof decking for water intrusion, and insulation. The systems of the home will be inspected including the electrical, HVAC, and plumbing systems. All appliances that are staying with the home are inspected and tested for proper operation, and usually a random spot check of electrical outlets, windows, and doors will be done.

Other items that a home inspection company might perform for additional fees include radon gas and mold testing, water analysis, and pool and spa inspections. Most home inspectors subcontract for a termite inspection that may be at an addi-
tional cost to you, but it is a very important part of any home inspection here in Florida.

Ask your real estate agent, or friends and family for referrals.

**Home Warranties**

If you are buying a new home from a builder, one of the advantages you have is that your home will usually come with a warranty provided and paid for by the builder. But this doesn’t mean that you’re out of luck if you decide to buy a resale home. There are several home warranty options available to you, no matter the age or condition of the home you are buying.

Home warranties for average homes under approximately 5000 square feet will cost you between $300 and $400 dollars per year. You can renew these on a yearly basis. Most plans do not require an inspection of the property before they take effect. Depending on the company you choose and the specific plan you go with, an additional amount may be needed to warrant some items like the A/C, refrigerator, washer/dryer, and a pool or spa.

Typically covered items include the plumbing, electrical, and heating systems, water heater, most appliances, disposal, smoke detectors, and exhaust fans. You need to read the warranty contracts carefully to see exactly what is and what is not covered. For example, a warranty might cover your refrigerator motor, but not the shelving inside the refrigerator.

Should something that is covered by the warranty break down, there is usually a service call fee, anywhere between $40 and $80. Other than paying that, you will not be required to pay out any money for the repair or replacement of a covered item. Most home warranties are pretty simple to acquire, fairly inexpensive, and are usually worthwhile.

Some national home warranty companies to consider are:

- American Home Shield
  - [http://ahswarranty.com](http://ahswarranty.com)
- Old Republic Home Protection
  - [http://www.orhp.com](http://www.orhp.com)
Real estate financing in Florida, for the most part, is no different from real estate financing in any other state. However, if it has been a few years since you last went through the process of getting a mortgage, you could use some refreshing on the world of real estate finance.

Types of Lenders

While shopping for financing during your home buying process, you may encounter several types of mortgage lenders. Here is an explanation of some of the more common types of lenders you may encounter along the way to homeownership.

**Mortgage Brokers**

Mortgage brokers are essentially middlemen in the mortgage process. They serve as intermediaries between lenders and borrowers. Mortgage brokers typically have the widest array of loan programs available, because they have relationships with several lenders. The term “middleman” is usually associated with extra expense, but mortgage brokers can actually save you money by helping you comparison shop and find the best mortgage for your particular situation. Mortgage brokers will assist you with things such as filling out and submitting your loan application, running your credit report, scheduling an appraisal, and helping to coordinate your closing.

However, the mortgage broker does not make the decision to fund your loan. A person called an underwriter, who is employed by the lender, makes that decision. Mortgage brokers are paid a fee for their services, sometimes charged to the borrower in the form of points or origination fees, but they can also be paid by the lender, or often times a combination of the two. Sometimes this fee can be negotiated in your favor, or you can also ask that the broker just charge a flat fee, a strategy that is recommended by many industry experts.
Mortgage Bankers
Mortgage bankers are in the business of originating loans and then selling them to the secondary mortgage market (more on that in a moment). Mortgage bankers often have appealing loan rates and programs, but oftentimes do not have access to as many sources as the previously mentioned mortgage broker.

Banks and Credit Unions
Most banks and credit unions also offer mortgages. Funds for these loans are obtained from their customers through checking and saving accounts as well as certificates of deposit. The bank or credit union will sometimes service the loan themselves (if it’s a large bank) or sell the loan to the secondary market.

Secondary Mortgage Market
It is common for lenders that provide home loans to sell these loans to the secondary market, made-up of investors such as Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Selling your loan provides lenders with the funds they need to issue new mortgages. If your loan is sold, it will not affect the terms of your mortgage or your payment. It will however affect who your payments are made payable to, so if you are using an online bill payment method make sure you are paying the correct entity and sending your payments to the correct address.

Types of Mortgages
Just as there are many sources for your new mortgage, there are also several different types of mortgages. Here are some of the most common types of mortgages.

Fixed Rate Mortgage
The most common type of mortgage, a fixed rate mortgage, is one in which your interest and principal payments remain the same (constant) over the life of the loan. Bear in mind that your total payment may fluctuate (usually upwards) as real estate taxes and homeowner’s insurance rates change over the life of your loan. Different terms are available for fixed rate loans, from as short as 10 years to new 40 and even 50 year mortgages, loan periods which were recently introduced. Keep in mind that the shorter the term, the higher your monthly payment will be. However, the longer
the term of the mortgage, the more interest you will end up paying over the life of the loan.

**Adjustable Rate Mortgage (ARM)**

Adjustable-rate mortgages are mortgages in which the interest rate on the mortgage fluctuates over the life of the loan. The rate will initially be fixed for a specified period of time. For example, with a 5/1 ARM the rate will be fixed for 5 years and adjust every year after that. Rate adjustments are made based on changes to a defined index. The interest rate is determined by adding a fixed number of points to the index. The attraction with adjustable-rate mortgages is that rates are initially lower than that of fixed-rate mortgages. If you do not intend to live in a house for longer than the initial fixed rate period, you will not be subjected to the adjustments in the rate. The disadvantage of an ARM is that during times of rising interest rates, your payments can increase dramatically after the fixed period is over.

**Balloon Mortgage**

A balloon mortgage is a short term mortgage, usually 2 to 7 years in length, that is amortized over 30 years with the balance becoming due in a lump sum at the end of the term. Again, rates are lower than fixed-rate mortgages, but some people do not want to have to refinance or pay a large lump sum at the end of the loan term.

**Reverse Mortgage**

Reverse mortgages have been around for many years but are just recently gaining notoriety. A reverse mortgage is a mortgage where the lender pays you either one lump sum or a smaller amount each month, as opposed to you paying them. This can give you extra money to pay your bills and do the things you want to do but otherwise might not be able to afford.

When you pass away or decide to move, your heirs or new owners get ownership of the home and must repay the mortgage. This is most commonly accomplished by selling the home. Reverse mortgages are only available to people over the age of 62, and should only be considered in specific circumstances. In fact, before obtaining a reverse mortgage you must be counseled by an HUD approved reverse mortgage counselor.
**VA Loan**

Veterans of the United States Armed Services with more than 180 days active duty during peacetime, or 90 days during times of war may be eligible for a VA loan through Uncle Sam. VA loans can be used to purchase a home, manufactured home, or condo. In order to obtain a VA loan, the law requires that:

- the applicant be an eligible veteran who has available entitlement
- the veteran must occupy or intend to occupy the property as a home within a reasonable period of time after closing
- the veteran must have satisfactory credit
- and, the veteran and spouse must show stable income sufficient to meet the mortgage payments.

The advantages of VA loans are that they require no down payment, they are available from most lenders, and the VA prohibits lenders from requiring PMI, or Private Mortgage Insurance. The VA is guaranteeing the loan, so there is no need for a lender to require the veteran to pay for additional insurance against default.

On the downside, VA loans carry a one time funding fee ranging from one and a quarter percent to three percent, depending on the veteran’s service, as well as other factors.

For more information on VA loans, visit [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov) or call the Florida VA Regional Loan Center at 1-888-611-5916.

**Special Financing**

There may be times when a conventional real estate loan will not meet your needs. For these cases, special types of real estate financing may be available to you.

**B/C Credit Mortgages**

B/C loans, sometimes referred to as sub-prime loans, are for those who do not meet the credit guidelines established by Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac. Through B/C loans, borrowers are able to obtain financing for a temporary period of time, when their credit history excludes them from receiving “normal” loans. Recent bankruptcy,
divorce, foreclosure, or late payments that show up on your credit report can bump you into this category. You should be aware though that loans of this type carry higher interest rates than those of “A” credit borrowers.

**Bridge Loans**

Let’s say you look at a home in Florida, fall in love and have to have it. But, you haven't yet sold your home in New Jersey (or wherever you're from). A bridge loan will allow you to purchase the new home in Florida without having to first sell your home up North. There are essentially two ways for a bridge loan to be structured.

The first way is you get a bridge loan for enough money to pay off your current home and make your deposit on the new home in Florida. Then you would just get a regular mortgage on the new home. You won't have to make payments on the bridge loan for a predetermined amount of time, say 6 months or a year, but in the meantime, interest is accruing. The rub lies in that if you don't sell your home in the allotted time, you will have to start making payments on the bridge loan, meaning you'll now be making two mortgage payments. Once your home up north sells, you pay off the balance of the bridge loan and any interest that has accrued.

The second way to structure a bridge loan is to use the equity in your home up north to make the down payment on the home in Florida. Now you have two loans, your original mortgage, and a second home equity mortgage. Then, you'll get a mortgage on the new house. So, essentially you have three loans. But, you aren't usually expected to pay on all three, just your original mortgage and your new mortgage. Again, once your home sells, you'll pay off your original mortgage and the bridge (second equity mortgage) as well as any interest that has accrued.

Experts only recommend getting a bridge loan if you know that you can afford to make two mortgage payments if you had to. Usually, a lender won't give you a bridge loan unless you have enough cash to make both payments anyway. Also note that the rates on a bridge loan will be significantly higher than say, a typical 30-year mortgage. It can pay to shop around to different lenders to see what types of bridge loans they may offer and what the rates are.
Interest Rates

News of interest rates is everywhere, your local newspaper, online and on television. Some people in the real estate and finance worlds hang on every eighth-of-a-point fluctuation in interest rates. For most of us, however, there is little need to do this. A quarter-point here or half-point there shouldn’t affect your plans for purchasing a home in Florida, so long as you have planned wisely in the financial department. For average size mortgages these fluctuations won’t add but a paltry sum to your mortgage payment. But it is important to know a few things about interest rates, in hopes of better understanding how they could affect you.

How Interest Rates are Determined
Mortgage interest rates, contrary to what many people believe, do not follow the Federal Reserve Board’s lowering and raising of rates. Instead, they actually anticipate the fed. A closer tracking device for mortgage interest rates is the 10-year Treasury note. If you want to know what mortgage interest rates are doing, follow the 10-year Treasury. But as mentioned before, slight changes in rates are nothing to lose any sleep over.

Rate Locks
The typical escrow (time from contract to closing) on a home is 30-60 days, but interest rates are constantly changing. In order to protect yourself in an environment of rising interest rates, get a rate lock. With a rate lock the lender holds or guarantees the interest rate for you for a predetermined length of time. Sometimes they will do this for free for a minimal amount of days, say 15-20, and for longer periods they will charge you a fee. A 60-day rate lock will be more costly than a 30-day rate lock.

Sometimes during escrow, rates will drop, leaving you paying a higher rate than the market rates at time of closing. To avoid this, ask for a rate lock with a one-time float. If the rate goes lower anytime before closing, you can float down to the lower rate. Again, some lenders offer this feature for free, with others you will have to pay. Shop around because the market is always changing and so are lenders’ terms and policies. Competition among lenders can run high, especially in slow markets.
**Interest Rate Buy Downs**

An interest rate buy down is a reduction in the interest rate that you pay on a mortgage. There are temporary buy downs and permanent buy downs. Temporary buy downs are common as an incentive for builders; they pay the lender a fee to get the buyer a lower initial rate for a set period of time, usually a year or two. This is also an incentive sometimes offered by home sellers to entice someone to choose their home over another.

As a buyer, you can also acquire a permanent buy down. With a permanent buy down, you pay a fee up front to have your interest rate lowered or "bought down" for the life of the loan. You should only do this if you plan on keeping the mortgage for a long time, as it will take a while for the lower rate to recoup the money you paid out to buy it down. Check with your mortgage lender to see if a buy down might make sense for you.

**Applying for a Mortgage**

The mortgage application is going to be mostly what you would expect. It will ask for your name, social security number, your address for the past two years, a copy of your driver’s licenses, a list of all your assets as well as debts along with monthly payments, employment information, sources and amount of all your income, and more. The type of lender and type of loan you choose will determine the additional information that the lender will ask you to submit along with your mortgage application. These can either be faxed, e-mailed, mailed, or hand delivered to the lender, depending upon your location and theirs. Just to give you an idea, some of the items they may need include:

- a copy of your sales contract (if you’ve executed one)
- proof of your deposit (copy of the cancelled check, bank statement, etc.)
- pay stubs for the last 30 days if you are still working
- your past two years of tax returns
- three months of statements for all your bank accounts and investment accounts
- a copy of your current mortgage statement if you have one
- if you are divorced, they will probably ask for your divorce decree
• if you are self-employed they will need a current profit and loss statement
• if you receive a pension or social security the lender will ask for proof of such

Again, depending on the lender and type of loan you are applying for this list can be longer or shorter.

Good Faith Estimate

Within three days of applying for a loan, you should receive a “good faith estimate” as well as a HUD guide to settlement costs from the bank or mortgage company that you applied to. The good faith estimate is just that, an estimate of the costs that you will be expected to pay at closing. Costs that will be reflected on the good faith estimate will include costs for appraisals, surveys, attorney’s fees, recording and transfer fees, doc stamps, mortgage origination fees, and more. Never fully commit to a lender until you have reviewed and are comfortable with their good faith estimate.

Your Credit Score

Most everyone has heard of a FICO score, created by Fair Isaac Corporation. In case you haven’t, it’s one score that lenders will look at to determine how good of a credit risk you are, and consequently how much money they will lend you and with what terms. FICO scores range from 300 to 850 and the median score nationwide is 723. If your score is above that median, you are doing pretty well as far as most lenders are concerned and you should qualify for the best rates when shopping for a mortgage.

The big three credit reporting agencies, Equifax, Experian and Transunion also produce individual credit scores based on the information they have about you and your history. The problem, however, with credit scores is that they are generally unpredictable, and can vary widely from different reporting agencies.

The problem that a lot of people face is that they have no clue going in to apply for a mortgage what their credit score is and when they find out it’s too late to do anything to improve it. Experts recommend that at least six months before applying for a
loan you should visit www.MyFico.com to get your score. There is a fee involved with this but the knowledge you will be armed with after finding out your score could prove to be invaluable.

Ways to Improve Your Score

There are several ways to beef up your credit score in the months leading up to applying for a loan. Most important, experts agree, is to keep your credit card balances below 25% of what your available credit limit is. Thought you might escape those library fines since you’re leaving town? Not so fast. If they are turned over for collection, they can damage your score, so make sure you are all square with the house. Also, do not open or close any credit accounts, including car loans, in the time leading up to applying for a loan. Both can hurt your score.

Your Credit Report

Your credit score is based upon the information that can be found in your credit report. Everyone is entitled to a free copy of his or her credit report once a year. Simply visit www.annualcreditreport.com to get a copy. Be sure to check your report for any errors, such as erroneous bad debt claims and the like, which can drag down your score.
For some boomers, building a new home in Florida is the ultimate dream. There’s not much more exciting in real estate than picking a lot, choosing or designing a floor-plan, making your interior design selections, and seeing it all come together right before your very eyes.

Besides being exciting, it can also be described as overwhelming, daunting, mind-boggling, and a slew of other adjectives. After reading this chapter, you should feel
comfortable enough with Florida new home construction that if you do choose to build a new home here, the words you use to describe it will hopefully lean more towards “exciting.”

Choosing a Builder

There are many factors that should go into your choice of home builder. The most important factors are those that are important to you. Of course, these are different for everyone. Some people want the very best price available, while others don’t mind paying more for higher quality. Some want a builder that will hold their hand throughout the entire process, while others prefer to have very little contact with the builder. Others still want total control over their selections, while some don’t mind if the builder even chooses the colors. It’s very important that you decide for yourself what factors are important to you before you start looking for a builder.

Once you decide on the factors that are most important to you, do some investigating. If it’s the best price you desire, visit several communities and see which builder is offering the best incentives. Builders with numerous homes in their inventory ready to move into are more likely to give incentives than a builder who has no standing inventory. Check the local paper in the area you are looking for homes, and scan the advertisements for good deals and incentives. A local real estate agent might be able to point you in the direction of the best deals in town.

If quality is the most important thing to you, spend some time in the builder’s model homes looking around on your own and examining things like the trim work, the drywall, and the paint. Look for anything that’s not quite right such as wavy walls or uneven paint applications. Chances are if the builder didn’t take the time to get his models right, he won’t take the time to get your home right. If the builder does not have a model, see if he has a list of customers that you may contact to try and go see their homes.
Working with the builder and his staff

The first person you will meet when looking at model homes will be the builder’s sales staff. Start with them. Are they presentable, eager to help answer your questions, and polite? Or are they abrasive, pushy, rude, and uncaring? Typically, if they like their jobs, and take pride in the product they are representing, odds are good that you’re looking at a pretty good builder.

Remember that the salesperson will typically be the direct line to the builder for you throughout the homebuilding process. Keep in mind that you are probably not their only customer. So if they are busy with others when you stop by to ask a question or report a complaint, be respectful of them and their time. Respect is reciprocal.

Some builders will have you meet with different members of their staff during different phases of the construction process. You may meet with a decorator, an architect, a superintendent, or all of these before and during the construction process. To save time for everyone, before meeting with each representative, have your questions ready.

A few builders allow their customers to walk the construction site whenever they want, others only allow it at specific times during the process. In either case the builder’s insurance policy usually does not cover you if you are injured, if you step on a nail, or trip and fall over some plywood. Construction sites, no matter how well they are supervised can be dangerous; so most builders require that you be escorted by someone on their staff when you visit the construction site and that you visit at times when subcontractors are not working inside. It may not always be convenient or possible for you to get to the construction site during the builder’s business hours. If that is the case, you are at your own risk when you visit the site.

How to Choose a Floor Plan

Obviously you need to choose a floor plan that fits well with the way you live your life. If you plan to use your home in Florida just as a second home or vacation home, and rarely expect to have many guests accompany you, then maybe a one or two bedroom condo, townhouse, or small home will fit your needs. If you expect more people,
or plan to use the home as a primary residence and are accustomed to a much bigger home, obviously you will want to go bigger with a large condo (maybe even combine two adjacent units), a large townhouse, or a single family home.

The key to finding a floor plan that fits your needs is to spend some time in the builder’s model homes, if available, and try to envision things such as furniture layouts, traffic patterns, blending of public spaces, such as the flow from the kitchen to the living room, as well as private spaces, such as bedrooms and bathrooms. Place most of your interest in areas that meet your lifestyle needs. For example, if you love entertaining, look for an extra large great room and maybe an open kitchen. If you plan on having lots of visitors--and remember everyone wants to come to Florida--then focus on bedroom sizes. You get the idea.

You may be accustomed to the split bedroom floor plan. These are popular in Florida as well. However, in some developments where the lots are narrower (such as 40, 50, or 60, feet wide) you may find that split bedrooms are rare. Not many builders have found a way to make an efficient split bedroom floor plan for those size lots.

Most people, however, find that once they are in a home with the bedrooms on the same side, that they don’t really miss the split bedrooms all that much. Split bedrooms are great for families, especially with teenagers who like to crank up their stereos or play their drums. Having the secondary bedrooms on opposite sides of the house from the master bedroom provides parents more peace and quiet. But most baby boomers retiring to Florida or using their home as a second home don’t have that problem, and find that a non-split plan works just fine for them.

Choosing a Lot

The selection of a lot to build your home on is, for some people, even more important than choosing the floor plan or who builds your house. We all know the saying, “location, location, location.”

Some people are very particular about their lot, as well they should be. The lot you choose will determine several things, such as the quality of view you will have, your level of privacy, your utility bills, the price, and your home’s future resale value.
Some people could care less what lot their home is built on, but taking everything into consideration, they certainly should.

In Florida, water views, be it the ocean, river, lake, or pond are the most coveted, followed by views of a golf course. As such, prices and premiums you will pay to look at these vistas are higher than say, a lot with a view of the interstate. Also many people like to have their home back up to a conservation area, which assures them of privacy in that nothing can be built behind them.

Most people don’t think about it but the lot you choose can also have an effect on your heating and cooling costs. On most homes, the majority of the windows are located on the front and rear of the home. If the home is placed on a lot with an east/west exposure (home faces east or west) more sunlight will enter the home, increasing your utility bills in the summer time, and lowering your heating costs in the winter.

There are other considerations if you are going to have a swimming pool at your home. If the rear of your home faces east, your pool and patio areas will be shaded from the sun in the afternoons, but will have the morning sun. Some people prefer the afternoon shade while some prefer the afternoon sun. Others still prefer a north/south exposure, which evens out the two extremes. There is no right or wrong answer, but you’d be doing yourself a disservice if you did not at least consider what you might like before choosing a lot. My advice is try to visit the lot you are considering at different times of the day and see what exposure you think will work best for you.

**Making Your Selections**

After finalizing your contract with the builder, you will be given a time to either meet with the builder’s decorator, or to visit their design center. This is when you pick all the colors and interior materials that will give your home its personality, including things like cabinets, carpeting, tile, countertops, paint colors, and so on. Depending on the size home you’ve chosen, this may be a short two to three hour process, or it could span several appointments over the course of a couple days or weeks.

No matter how many homes you build, this will always be one of the most stressful times because what you choose here will determine how your home is going to look.
and function for years to come. To minimize the time and stress that picking every-
thing out will invariably cause, it pays to have done your homework as to what you like
beforehand. This way you won’t be making any split second decisions on things that
you might not be able to change later. Take pictures of ideas you see in model homes
or tear out pictures in magazines of things you might like to have in your new home.

Critical Steps in the New Home Construction Process

Have you ever bought a perfect car? Wait a second--I know you’re thinking-- did I
pick up the wrong book? I thought this was the book about Florida real estate written
by that tall, handsome gentleman. Yes, you’ve got the right book.

For most people, the answer to this seemingly out of place question is no. No mat-
ter what make, model, or how much you pay, there seems to always be at least one
problem or imperfection that you notice within the first couple weeks of owning a new
vehicle.

Well, no matter where you purchase or how much you pay, don’t expect anything
different with a new home. Just think, cars are built in a factory, protected from the
elements like sun, heat, and rain. Machines and computers also play a big role in the
production of a car.

Unfortunately, homes don’t have those advantages. They are built in the dirt out
in the hot sun, being rained on and rained in, often exposed to the worst Mother Na-
ture has to offer. And to be quite honest, a high school degree is a major accomplish-
ment for some of the people doing the actual physical labor on your home. Sure, some
may even have some college under their tool belts but remember, digging footers, lay-
ing block, and hammering nails aren’t $50 an hour jobs.

Fortunately for you, the builder supervising them in most cases is well educated
and more importantly licensed to make sure your home is built up to the requirements
of the city, county, or municipality where the permit was issued. You’ve also got city in-
spectors who are trained to discriminate between good work and bad work, looking
out for you.
And finally, you have the next several pages of critical steps in the new home construction process to help ease your mind during what can be a confusing and frustrating time. While it won’t by any means tell you how to go out and build your own home, this information should give you the knowledge to feel a bit more comfortable with everything that will go on during the new home construction process.

**Permitting**

Once the floorplan and other structural features of the home have been selected, the builder will submit the plans to the city for approval. When submitted, the plans for the home must usually be accompanied by an architect’s or an engineer’s seal, essentially stating that they certify that the home is planned in accordance with the proper design specifications and building codes. Hard construction cannot begin until the permits have been received back from the city.

If the city feels the plans submitted comply with all current zoning and building codes, they will issue the builder permits to build the home. A copy of the plans and permits will be kept in a permit box in plain view at the construction site and checked frequently by city inspectors throughout the construction process.

**Fill, Compact, and Site Prep**

Most of the residential lots being built on these days in Florida require at least some amount of fill dirt to bring them up to the elevation required by the city or municipality which issued the building permit. Usually once the lot is filled and compacted, an engineer will come out and conduct a compaction test, to make sure the dirt added to the lot has been properly compacted. Not every lot that is filled needs to be tested for compaction. The builder usually has a set standard for lots that they test, such as lots requiring more than one foot of fill. A lot that has not been compacted properly is prone to settling, which can cause cracks in foundations and walls, and more trouble for you down the road.

Anything else that stands in the way of construction of your new home will be removed at this point. Brush will be cut back. Trees too close to the home are susceptible to damage by trucks and other machinery, and tree roots can damage the foundation, so if any trees still need to be removed it will happen at this time. The lot will be graded, generally sloping slightly towards the front, back, and sides to help with drain-
The area of the lot where the home will go will also be leveled, so that in the end, your house will be level as well.

**Hub and Tack**

Once the lot is filled and compacted, a survey crew will come and stake out the home, also called hub and tack. At this point, the corners of your home will be set.

**Form the Slab**

Pieces of lumber, typically 2 x 10s turned on their side, are used to create the perimeter of the slab. Footers are then dug out underneath the 2 x 10s. Footers, which are a couple of feet deep (depths vary area to area and builder to builder), and wider than the walls of the home, provide the support necessary to help make the house more sturdy.

Metal reinforcements rods will run around the perimeter of the home and will be positioned vertically at certain intervals to go up inside of the block that will be placed on top of the slab. These will eventually help connect the slab to the tie beam at the top level of the block.

**Elevation and Setback Survey**

At this point, a survey is done to make sure that the home is being built within the confines of its particular lot, and does not encroach on neighboring properties. The elevation of the lot is also checked, to be sure that it is at the height required by the city, county or municipality that issued the permit.

**Rough Plumbing and Inspection**

Water and sewer lines, which will be in place under the foundation of your home, are run at this time. The water lines will typically be made of copper, and drainage lines will be made of PVC piping. Any electrical outlets needing to be placed in the floor can also be installed at this time. Otherwise the slab will have to be cut later to install them. Once complete, an inspector will verify that each element of the rough plumbing has been installed properly.

**Termite Treatment**

Most builders in Florida will provide some form of termite treatment for the home. The most common type is a slab pretreatment that will be done before the slab
is poured. The purpose of this pretreatment is to prevent termites from getting into your home and doing serious damage in the future. If you were to visit your new home the day that it is treated for termites, you may be overcome by a very strong odor. That's the termite treatment.

Due to environmental, scheduling, and cost concerns, some builders will not pretreat your slab but will treat the actual wood inside your home. After the framing is complete you may see that it looks like the bottom three or four feet have been stained, usually a greenish color. In this case, a termite treatment such as Boracare® has been used to treat your home for termites. The jury is still out as to which is the better treatment for the prevention of termites.

**Prep the Slab**

Once the rough plumbing is completed, a vapor barrier comprised of several sheets of plastic will be placed over the area in which the slab will be poured. This helps to keep moisture in the ground from penetrating the foundation and getting into your home once the slab has been poured over it.

**Slab Inspection**

Before the slab is poured an inspector will come and make sure that all work done up until this point is up to code, that all procedures have been properly followed, and construction is safe to proceed.

A side note here about inspections. While absolutely necessary, they can add a significant amount of time to the construction of your home, especially in areas where there is a lot of construction going on. Inspection departments are notoriously under-staffed and overburdened with work. Sometimes you may see your house just sitting idle, with no work going on and your natural reaction may be to get angry with the builder.

Believe me, the builder wants to complete your home quickly, sometimes more quickly than you may even want him to. While your home is under construction he is likely carrying costs such as a mortgage on the land, insurance, and taxes, not to mention hard construction costs. Understand that when your home is sitting idle that sometimes it is the builder experiencing delays, but most often he is probably waiting on an inspection to be completed before he can proceed.
Pour the Slab

Next, the slab and the footings are poured. In the case of a monolithic slab, one long continuous pour of concrete is all it takes to create your slab. Wire mesh, or more commonly these days, high strength fibers, are usually embedded in the slab to increase its strength and help minimize cracking.

Ideal weather conditions for the pouring of your slab are that the weather should be dry, with little to no chance of rain during the pour, and temperatures should not be extremely hot or extremely cold. If after the slab is poured, it appears rain may be in the forecast, sheets of plastic should be placed over the freshly poured slab to keep it from getting wet. Excess moisture can affect the appearance of the concrete, as well as the integrity of the slab.

While the slab won’t reach it’s ultimate strength for 20 to 30 days, it will usually be strong enough for construction to proceed in just a few days.

Slab Cracks

Eventually with almost every concrete slab, you may see some hairline cracks. They most likely won’t appear for a couple months but inevitably some will appear. These do not indicate that you have a bad slab, but are most likely just settling or expansion cracks, the result of extreme temperatures, wind, and evaporation of water in the concrete. One concrete company representative said that the only guarantee they can give is that all concrete will crack, it’s just a matter of when and to what degree.

If you are overly concerned about cracks that have appeared in your concrete slab, you might request that the builder hire an engineer to come take a look and certify that it is okay. You will likely have to pay for this service, but if it helps you sleep better at night, it may well be worth the few hundred bucks.

Foundation Survey

Once the slab is in place, another survey will be conducted, just to be extra certain that your home will not encroach on anyone else’s property. It’s better to discover this problem at this stage, when it will likely cost only several thousand dollars to fix, rather than later when it’s a much more costly problem to fix.
**Block**

It takes a few days for the slab to cure long enough to support block being placed on top of it. Once the slab is cured, the block is then placed on top of the slab to form the outside walls, or shell of your home. Holes are left where the doors and windows will go, and any glass block that you have ordered is normally installed at this stage as well.

You will also see holes every so often along the bottom row of block called inspection ports where the metal reinforcement rods are sticking up from the slab into the block. These holes are included so the inspector can see that the slab, by the use of the metal in it, is effectively attached at set intervals by metal and concrete to the block walls.

**Solid Pour Cells, Lintels and Tie Beam**

Steel and poured concrete will be added to the block at predetermined intervals, usually every four or five feet. This process is done to add extra strength to the shell of your home and as previously mentioned, connect the shell to the slab. Lintels around all windows and doors will be poured to add strength around these openings, and then the tie beam (top layer of block poured solid) will be poured. This will have steel rods embedded in it as well, and hurricane straps that will later be attached to the trusses will also be embedded in the tie beam.

**Lumber and Roof Trusses Get Delivered**

About this time in the construction process, your roof trusses and the lumber for your roofing and interior framing are usually delivered. In some cases these materials may sit unused for some time while other projects are being worked on. Just how long they sit out, exposed to the elements, rain, sunshine, and heat depends on the builder’s efficiency in scheduling as well as availability of work crews. To minimize weather exposure most builders will at least cover the materials lying out with tarpaulins or plastic sheets.

**Trusses and Roof Decking**

Your trusses, which will arrive at the home site already assembled and ready to install, act as a sort of skeletal system for your roof. They will be set on top of the block usually with the assistance of a crane. Once they are secured to the block walls with
the metal “hurricane” straps embedded into the tie beam, the roof decking will be placed on top.

**OSB vs. Plywood**

Some builders use plywood roof decking while others use oriented strand board, or OSB. There is endless controversy about which is the better product. The fact is though that both products are excellent in their purest, undamaged forms. The problem that sometimes occurs with OSB is that its exterior “seal” may get damaged on site and lessen its integrity and ability to repel water. Don’t fret if your builder insists on using OSB; just make sure that each piece being placed on your roof is in good condition.

**Framing**

Framing of the interior walls of your home will also be done at this time, and rooms will really start to take shape. Don’t worry too much if the framing work looks a little rough at this point. There will be a framing “punch-out” later where everything that needs correcting will be taken care of. Feel free to point out anything that you think may not be obvious to the builder, mistakes can and do happen, but also feel secure in knowing that there will be a framing inspection to make sure everything has been done safely and correctly. Some builders will also do a framing walkthrough with you just to make sure everyone agrees nothing has been overlooked.

**Window Installation**

Windows will be installed and usually any sliding glass doors in your home will be installed as well. You may notice that windows on some homes in Florida will be single glaze windows, also known as single-pane windows. If you are coming from a cooler climate you may be shocked at first that builders in Florida use single-pane windows, as you wouldn’t have even thought of using them up north. However, single-pane windows are used quite frequently in Florida. One argument you’ll hear some builders make is that Florida does not experience the wide temperature swings like the north does. Another argument for them is that it takes about 5-7 years of energy savings to recoup the cost of installing the double-pane windows versus the single-pane, while most people move every 4-5 years anyway.

This doesn’t mean you should necessarily settle for single-pane windows. If you plan on being in the home more than a few years, the investment will pay off for you.
With double pane windows the extra pane of glass and the air in between the two panes adds a few extra layers of insulation and therefore comfort to your home. Triple-pane windows are even available on some higher end homes.

**Impact Resistant Windows**

Impact resistant windows are also gaining in popularity with the increasing awareness of hurricanes and the damage they can cause. In fact, in more and more coastal areas, new homes that are in what is called the “wind-borne debris region” are required to have either impact resistant windows, or some other approved window covering or shutters. Shutters are often the prevailing choice of cost conscious builders and home buyers, as impact resistant windows can be very expensive; usually three to four times the cost of standard windows.

**Roof Felt**

A layer of felt-like material will be placed over the roof decking to provide an extra layer of moisture protection. If shingles get blown off in a storm, water still has the roof sheathing covered by this felt to contend with before it can enter your home.

**Shingles**

The shingles are now placed on the roof. The most common type of roof shingle on production homes are asphalt shingles because they are relatively inexpensive and they get the job done. Asphalt shingles will be nailed down to the roof. Asphalt shingles come in 5-year to over 50-year ratings. The higher the rating, the more substantial the shingles and thus the higher levels of winds they can withstand. The builders marketing materials will usually specify the rating of the shingles they install.

You should keep in mind that if you get, for example, a 30-year rated shingle, in all likelihood it will not last you 30 years. Florida’s weather fluctuations from warm to sweltering and dry to wet, can take a heavy toll on roof shingles. The factory ratings are for the shingle’s lifespan under ideal weather conditions.

**Tile and Metal Roofs**

Alternatives to asphalt shingles are tile, either made of clay or concrete, and metal roofs. Though each is more expensive than asphalt shingles they will both last longer and require a little less maintenance. The covenants in the neighborhood where
your home being built will sometimes dictate what type of roof your home must have, but if given a choice, you might consider a tile or metal roof.

Tile roofs have a long lifespan if installed and maintained properly. Roof tiles are made in a variety of colors to blend with your home's specific design needs. Trusses must be engineered to hold extra weight as tiles weigh considerably more than asphalt shingles. Impact such as that caused by hail can break tiles, and you should have them inspected periodically for damage to prevent problems down the road. When installed properly, roof tiles are less likely than asphalt shingles to blow off in inclement weather.

Metal roofs are also gaining in popularity, partly due to the resurgence of the “Old Florida” architectural look, and also because of their durability. Some roofing companies are offering lifetime warranties for metal roofs, which is a very attractive feature. Metal roofs are also available in different colors to match your home's design. Though the metal material itself reflects the sun's rays, it has a low r-value because it is a conductor of heat, but dead air space and attic insulation can be utilized to increase energy efficiency. As you could probably imagine, noise can sometimes be an issue with rain or hail storms on metal roofs, but sound-deadening insulation can be used to mitigate this problem. Some metal roofs can become dented when hit by falling objects like hail, but some manufacturers offer a “no-dent” guarantee.

**Plumbing Top Out**

At this stage toilets and bathtubs will be set and the plumbing lines will be stubbed out. Tubs will usually be made of marble, fiberglass, or acrylic and this will be spelled out in the builder’s marketing materials. Jetted or “whirlpool” type tubs are usually available, and are especially nice in master bathrooms. Tubs should be covered with either cardboard or plastic during the remainder of the construction process as they can easily be damaged by a dropped hammer or similar accident.

You usually have a choice between elongated or round toilets. Also, “comfort” commodes that are a few inches higher than standard toilets for “ease of use” are usually an option. Check to be sure that the tubs and toilets that are installed are the color and style you have selected.
HVAC Rough-In

HVAC, which stands for heating, ventilation and air conditioning, will be roughed in at this time. Your air ducts, air vents, and air returns, which regulate the temperature throughout your home, will now be installed. Each room should also have its own air return. This is important because air returns keep your home’s air temperature balanced. In homes where this has not been done, you can often have as much as a ten degree difference in temperature from room to room.

Air Conditioner Size

Most people when comparing air conditioning units are overly concerned with tonnage, or how big the unit is. But in reality, the tonnage is something that has a point of diminishing returns, meaning that bigger isn’t necessarily going to give you better results. The local building codes will dictate the size, or tonnage that the A/C unit used in your home should be, based on the size of your house. The size of what will be installed might also be spelled out in your builder’s marketing materials or sales contract.

SEER Rating

Here’s what is important. Your air conditioning unit will have what is called a SEER rating, or seasonal energy efficiency rating. Many older homes have A/C units with SEER ratings as low as 10. The higher the SEER rating, the better the performance (energy efficiency) of the unit. Most builders will let you upgrade the A/C unit so that you can get a higher SEER rating unit if you desire.

Electric Heat Pump

In all likelihood your heating system will be an electric heat pump, also not very popular up north. This system will use the same ducts as your air conditioner. Electric heat pumps are not very efficient in temperatures below freezing. At extremely low temperatures an electric heating element kicks in to help the system out. Up north that might be on constantly. But here in Florida, electric heat pumps are the most cost effective and efficient heaters you can have installed in your home. The temperature is rarely below freezing, allowing your heating system to run in its most efficient state most of the time.
Electrical, Phone, Cable and Security System Rough In

Now all of your electrical outlets, cable outlets, phone jacks, and the security system will all be wired in. There are certain minimum requirements for the number and spacing of electrical outlets. Most new homes far exceed these minimum requirements.

Smart Box

Usually located in the garage, utility room, closet or some other out of the way place in most new homes is what may be referred to as a smart box. The smart box is the central hub for all cable, phone, and high-speed Internet lines running into and throughout your home. Essential in today’s high-tech world of networked computers and home electronics systems, with a little instruction you can have multiple computers networked throughout your new home, internet access in any room you choose, and high speed data flowing to your Tivo. You’d be taking a technological step backwards if you were to buy a new home today without this feature.

Outlet Locations

Well before this stage, preferably at the time of selections and before the builder submits for the permit if possible, you should let the builder know if you have any special outlet location requests. Otherwise, it will be a costly mess to have outlets moved or added later, when drywall has to be cut and removed to make any changes.

Think for a while about your living habits now. Do you currently watch television in the kitchen while cooking? If so, request a cable TV outlet in the kitchen. Like to surf the web on your laptop while laying in bed? Make sure there is a high-speed Internet connection near where your bed will go. I think you get the idea. Note that some builders will charge for this service and some will not agree to do it at all, but this is something you should ask about while shopping for a builder.

GFI Outlets

Special electrical outlets will be installed in your kitchen, bathrooms, laundry room, garage, and in any other indoor and outdoor locations where water might commonly come in contact with the outlet. These outlets, clearly marked GFI or GFCI for Ground Fault Circuit Interrupter, are safety devices designed to prevent electrocution.
At the first sign of trouble, such as water coming into contact with electricity, they are designed to shut-off or kick the breaker to that particular outlet and prevent you from being electrocuted. Make sure that whoever does your walkthrough with you, shows you how these operate and that they check to make sure that they are functioning properly.

**Security Systems**

One of the most popular options on new homes today is the security system. Whether for a personal residence or a part-time second home, it’s nice to have the peace of mind that a security system can offer. The security system is typically comprised of a base unit where the system is controlled from; one or more motion detectors; and sensors placed on doors and windows that alert you if one of them is opened. Other accessories include glass breakage sensors and carbon monoxide sensors. Make sure that all of your home’s smoke detectors are hard wired into the system, so that if one of them should detect smoke, you as well as the fire department, will be alerted. An intercom system can be integrated into most security systems, and video surveillance technology is also available at a much higher cost.

Just because your home has a security system, don’t sleep easy yet. You are not really protected until you have that system monitored by a security company. Probably the two most popular national security system-monitoring companies are Brinks and ADT, but many cable companies are getting into the security monitoring game as well.

Ask your friends, family, and neighbors for suggestions on companies too, as there are many other options available from lesser-known local companies. When you contact them they will send a representative out to your home to make suggestions as to the type of monitoring services that will suit you and your system the best. Once you choose the company you wish to go with, you will sign a contract for their monitoring services. When an alarm “event” occurs at your home, whether you are there or not, their monitoring center will be alerted and they will contact the proper authorities.

**Exterior Doors**

The exterior doors, such as the front door and any side exterior doors will now be installed. They can be made of solid wood or a wood composite, metal, or more com-
monly these days fiberglass. Fiberglass is extremely durable, less likely to dent than steel, and easy to paint.

**Framing Punch-out**

As mentioned earlier, any last corrections that need to be made to the framing before inspection will be done at this point.

**Framing, Electrical, Plumbing, and Mechanical Inspections**

Next, a whole slew of inspections happen. Typically, you won’t even be made aware of it if some aspect of the home fails inspection. But not to worry, the house will not proceed until everything that may be wrong with it has been corrected and re-inspected. Failed inspections happen, and it shouldn’t give you the impression that you are getting a substandard home. You should be thrilled that someone has been careful and diligent enough to catch any mistakes, to prevent problems for you down the road.

**Stucco**

The outside of the home is now stuccoed, providing another layer of protection for your home to the elements. Stucco is basically a muddy mixture of cement, dirt, and water applied to the outside of the block walls of your home. Before the stucco can be applied to the house, a layer of sheathing and a wire lathe must be placed over any exterior wood framing, such as porch ceilings, to protect the wood and to help the stucco adhere. Blocks walls, however, can have the stucco applied directly to them.

**Exterior Paint**

Now the outside of the home will be painted the color you selected. Several builders in Florida, after having experienced never before seen water penetration through block walls during the tropical season of 2004, have started using elastomeric paint to help keep wind-blown rain from penetrating the outer shell of their homes.

It is highly recommend that you seek out a home builder using this type of paint, or have your home painted with it soon after you move in. The elastomeric paint is a “waterproofing” paint, not necessarily waterproof, that is applied and a factory representative will usually inspect the application to ensure that it was done properly.
Insulation

Different types of insulation will now be placed in different parts of your home. For example, very thin foil insulation will be placed inside the exterior block walls, batted insulation will be placed between the studs of some interior walls and-- if possible-- in parts of the ceiling. The remainder of the ceiling will have blown-in insulation, especially in those areas that are hard to reach. Thick, fire rated insulation will also be placed between the garage and the interior of the home to form a fire barrier.

R-Value

The effectiveness of the insulation to resist heat from entering the living areas of the home is measured in what is called an R-Value. In Florida, all builders and sellers of new construction homes are required to disclose to you what the R-value is of the insulation installed in the different areas of the home. This will most often be in your sales contract but it could be under a separate “insulation addendum” to the contract.

Quick Note About Garage Insulation...

Some builders insulate the garage ceiling, and some do not. You should be able to find out from the builder’s marketing materials whether or not they do it. If not, and you plan to spend any significant amount of time working in your garage, I suggest you pay a little more to have insulation installed over the garage. It can make a big difference in the comfort of your garage, especially during the hot summer months.

Insulation Inspection

Because insulation is such an important component in your home from both a safety and comfort standpoint, there will be an inspection to make sure the right type and right amount of insulation have been installed properly in the required places.

Soffit and Fascia

The soffit and fascia are aluminum or vinyl materials that are used to cover the eaves, or where the roof overhangs the outside walls of the house. The soffit is designed to prevent water and bugs from entering the home, while still allowing air to flow into and cool the attic.
**Drywall**

The interior walls of your new home in Florida will most commonly be constructed of drywall, also referred to as “wall board.” The drywall will be nailed to the wood studs inside your home and the seams will be hidden by tape. The rooms of your new home are really taking shape now.

Drywall is typically less expensive and less durable than the plaster walls that you may have had or seen in older homes. Drywall is available in different thicknesses, the most commonly used thickness being ½ inch thick. Thicker drywall is generally preferred because each increasing level of thickness adds extra insulating, durability, and sound deadening properties. Also, thicker drywall, especially 5/8 of an inch or thicker, is easier to hang pictures on than ½ inch drywall. Different types of specialized drywall are also available albeit at higher costs such as fire-rated drywall or sound deadening drywall. As with anything else, having the builder install thicker drywall or any specialized drywall will usually result in an increase in costs.

Over the first year or so in your new home, drywall cracks, and nail or screw pops may appear as the house is breaking in and going through a shrinkage process. Near the end of your initial warranty period, usually one year, you should have the builder repair these minor cracks and nail or screw pops.

**Windowsills**

After the drywall is installed but usually before it is textured, the windowsills will be installed. Most production builders these days are using cultured marble or solid surface windowsills, but some use real wood sills. Many experts prefer cultured marble or solid surface as opposed to wood because windowsills sometimes can get wet if you leave a window cracked open accidentally, and moisture and wood don’t go well together.

**Drywall Texture**

Your drywall job will not be complete without a layer of texture applied to give it some depth, added durability, and also to help hide any imperfections. Two of the most common types of texture being applied in Florida today are called “knockdown” and “orange peel.”
Knockdown texture can best be described as looking like splatter, while orange peel looks like—you’ll never guess—the peel of an orange. Looking through the builder’s model homes, speaking to the sales staff, or reviewing their sales literature will give you an idea of what types of texturing they use.

I briefly mentioned plaster walls before and if you prefer the look and feel of plaster, it can be applied to certain types of drywall. Just check with your builder for the ability to upgrade, and their willingness to do that for you.

**Trim carpentry**

At this stage a trim carpenter will go into your new home and install the baseboards, special moldings such as crown molding if offered by the builder, chair rails, and doorframes. Interior doors will also be delivered to the home around this time, but won’t be installed until after they are painted.

**Interior Paint**

Your inside painting will be completed at this time. Make sure to request that two coats of paint be applied. Don’t fret if the paint does not look perfect at this point. There is still work to be done inside, and a final paint touch up will occur before your home is complete.

Most builders will offer you a choice of colors that you can choose from when you make your initial selections. Be aware though that some production builders do not allow you to choose, and only offer white. If this is the case, you’ll either have to paint the interior of the home the colors you want yourself, or hire someone to come in and do it for you.

One tip I can give you is that if you are hiring someone to do the work for you, they will usually quote you a lower price if there is no furniture for them to move or have to cover up. So if possible, have your new home painted before moving anything into the home.

**Garage Door**

Your garage door will be installed about this time. The garage doors for your home can be made of wood, fiberglass, or most commonly on production homes, steel.
Garage doors are rated based on their "wind load" which is the amount of positive and negative pressure they can withstand.

Most people aren't aware that roughly 80% of hurricane damage to a home starts with wind entering through the garage. This makes the garage door the most vulnerable part of your home when it comes to hurricanes, so you'll want to make sure that the garage door on your home is sturdy and made to withstand high winds. This is usually accomplished with the use of heavier, sturdier door materials; door insulation; and many horizontal rows of steel bracing.

Specifications for your garage door were likely submitted with your house plans to the permitting office in order to certify that it is up to local code, and an inspector will verify that the proper door was installed when inspecting your home during construction. In most cases additional bracing can be added, just contact a garage door contractor in the area to come take a look and tell you what options might be available to you.

**Tile**

Ceramic tile is common in most high quality homes in Florida, at least in “wet” areas such as kitchens, bathrooms and utility rooms. Lower cost homes will substitute linoleum, which can be made to look like real tile. Available in different sizes, usually 12 x 12, 16 x 16, or 18 x 18, tile can be installed pretty much wherever you want, is extremely durable, and can be fairly inexpensive. It can also be very expensive, depending on your tastes and where the tile is made. Imported porcelain tile from Italy will be more expensive than ceramic tile manufactured in the United States, but most untrained eyes won’t be able to tell the difference. Another option in higher end homes is travertine marble. In the end, the tile you choose to have put in your home will be a reflection of your personal taste and budget.

A quality tile job will have grout lines of consistent size, and there will not be any high spots or low spots in the tiles. A good tile layer will employ the use of a level to ensure an even application with no high or low spots. Once you move in to your new home it is recommended that you have your grout sealed, or do it yourself, to prevent stains. While the tile can easily be cleaned with water and a mop, grout is much tougher to get clean so it’s best to protect it from the start.
**Lay out and pour driveway and sidewalks**

Now your driveway, front and back patio, as well as any sidewalks, will be laid out and formed up. Once they are formed, they will be inspected to ensure they are the correct size and shape. Assuming they pass inspection, these areas will be poured with concrete.

**Final Survey**

With all of the components of the home, structure, driveway, sidewalks, and patios in place, a final survey will be conducted to ensure all components are within the setbacks where they are supposed to be.

**Irrigation System**

Your irrigation system, which can be run off your main water system, a reclaimed water system, or a deep well, will be installed at this point. Be aware that with a well, there is a chance that if the well is not dug deep enough, high levels of sulfur in the water can discolor your exterior paint job over time. Typically, the deeper the well, the less paint discoloring sulfur will be present in the water, and proper depths of deep wells will vary from area to area.

The irrigation system is usually controlled by a timer box that can be manual or electronic, allowing you to set watering times, and setting the system to water certain days, while skipping others. Several Florida cities and counties are experiencing severe water shortages because of rapid growth and development, along with other factors. Therefore, restrictions on how often and when you are allowed to water your lawn are sometimes in place. Check with your city water department for more information on what restrictions might be in place in your area.

**Landscaping**

Any landscaping that is included with your home will be installed, following the installation of your irrigation system. Most builders include a basic landscaping package with your home, and some will give you the option to upgrade that package. Otherwise, you may want to add some more landscaping after you move in, since most basic packages can be pretty sparse.
**Measure Cabinets**

In the case of custom, or even semi-custom cabinetry, the cabinet company will measure for those shortly after the drywall is in. While some minor corrections to cabinetry can be made in the field, a quality cabinet company will rely on accurate measurements at this stage to build your cabinets to exact specifications.

**Cabinets**

Cabinets range from entry level laminate cabinets to a step higher with thermofoil cabinets, which are essentially vinyl-covered particleboard, to faux wood cabinet doors with plastic or particle boards drawers and shelves at a step higher, to all wood cabinets at the highest end. Maple, hickory, oak, and cherry are the most popular types of wood cabinets and various stains and glazing such as cinnamon or pecan can be applied to each.

Again, just like most of the other important selections going into your home, the cabinets you choose will be determined by your personal preferences and most definitely budget. Be sure to put a lot of thought into your cabinetry, because if you decide you don’t really like it that much a few years down the road, it can be expensive to replace.

One simple way to save a little money without sacrificing design is to have upgraded cabinets installed in your kitchen, and have standard cabinetry installed in your bathrooms. This way, everyone can marvel at your beautiful cabinets in the place where most people tend to congregate, the kitchen.

**Counter tops**

Your kitchen countertops are one of the most used components of your new home. Your choices range from inexpensive yet functional laminates, to solid surfaces like Corian®, granite, and Silestone®. Again, just like other components in your home, the product you ultimately choose will be based on factors such as personal taste as well as budget. A laminate counter will usually arrive with your cabinets, while solid surface counters must be custom measured for after your cabinets go in. Because of this there is often a couple week delay between your cabinets being installed and the countertop installation.
**Laminate**

Laminate countertops are made in a variety of colors, patterns, and textures. Laminate countertops are among the least expensive countertops available, yet many laminate countertops resemble the look of higher priced counters at first glance. Laminate countertops are not as durable as solid surface counters and can be cut or scorched easily, so you’ll need to always make use of a cutting board when working with knives, and hot pads when using hot pots or pans.

**Corian®**

Corian®, invented by DuPont, is one of the most popular countertops available today and with good reason. It is extremely durable, nonporous (this makes it stain resistant), and with over 100 colors available, it can be used in a number of creative applications. Something you might want to think about is that some people decide to transition their solid surface countertops into their bathrooms as well, something you may not typically want to do with laminates.

While Corian® is extremely durable, care should still be used when cutting or cooking. Its cost far exceeds that of laminate counters. A typical kitchen will cost a few thousand dollars as opposed to a few hundred with laminate, but with the proper care and precautions, it should last you a whole lot longer.

**Granite**

Granite is a natural stone, quarried in several locations around the world. Available in a vast range of colors and patterns, granite’s use as a countertop surface is very popular, especially in higher-end homes. Because it is a natural stone, no two pieces will ever look exactly the same, allowing the homeowner to express their own sense of flair and uniqueness.

Being that it is a natural stone, granite is porous, and must be sealed regularly to prevent staining. Most experts recommend that this be done twice a year. Granite is known for its hardness and durability, but again, as is the case with other solid surfaces, it is not scratch or burn proof.

**Silestone®**

Silestone® is a nonporous solid surface material made mainly of quartz, the fourth hardest natural mineral. Harder and more durable than granite, Silestone® is
scratch, stain, and scorch resistant. However, the manufacturer recommends that as with any other solid surface countertop, proper precautions against each of those be taken. Because it is nonporous, it does not need to be sealed like granite does.

Like each of the other countertop options, Silestone® is available in a variety of colors and patterns, and can be used in a variety of ways.

**Appliances Are Ordered**
If you have not picked out your appliances by now, you better get started. At least some of them, like the range, dishwasher, and any built in microwave or wall ovens will be delivered around this time. Your builder will usually have you go to visit their supplier to have you pick them out, otherwise you might be stuck picking out your appliances from a catalog which really makes it tough. Your final appliances-- refrigerator, washer and dryer-- will usually come a little later.

Appliances might be one of the hardest items to pick out. You should do a lot of looking around at different makes and models before you decide. Appliances are usually available in white, black, bisque, or stainless steel. You should choose a color that coordinates with the rest of your kitchen.

**Plumbing Trim**
This is when your faucets will be installed. Popular finishes include polished or antique brass, chrome and nickel. You will most likely have picked out the type and style of fixtures you want at your appointment with the builder’s decorator.

**Mirrors and Shelving Installed**
Your bathrooms mirrors get installed around this time. Mirrors range from standard flat mirrors, to more upscale beveled mirrors available in a variety of shapes. Some builders offer you a choice at your design meeting and some do not. If not, you can always have them changed out later.

Also, closet shelving, which is usually wire shelving in production homes, will now be installed. Some builders are offering the choice to upgrade to California® type closets, which provide a more useful and appealing shelving and hanging system customized to fit your needs. If your builder does not offer this but you just have to have it, once you move in just look up “closets” in the phone book and get some estimates.
**Electrical and HVAC Trim**

Your outlet covers and light switches will be installed, along with any light fixtures you have chosen for your home. Also, your air conditioning vents and return vents will be installed if they have not been already.

**Attic Insulation**

You might recall that when the insulation was installed, certain areas of your home's ceiling may have gotten batted insulation. At this stage the rest of your home’s ceilings will get insulated with blown-in insulation. A large tube or hose runs from an insulation truck and the installer climbs into the attic and “blows-in” the rest of the insulation. They will usually apply it until there is at least a foot or more of insulation covering all areas.

**Flooring**

Any hardwood flooring or carpet you have requested will be installed at this time. You will have picked out your flooring choices at your meeting with the decorator, and now you get to see how it finally looks installed in your new home. If you’re not excited yet, you should be. You’re almost home!

**Final Inspection**

This is the last city inspection that your home will have. After it is complete, and assuming your home has passed, the city will then issue a Certificate of Occupancy (or “C.O.” in builder-speak), basically stating that the home is habitable and has been inspected to meet or exceed local building standards.

**Paint Touch-Up**

The painter will go back in and touch up any spots he might have missed, or areas that have been scuffed, nicked, or otherwise damaged as things have been delivered and installed and people have been working.

**Meter Installed**

Up until this point, your home has been running on temporary power. Now the local power company will come out, remove the temporary power pole, and install an electric meter. A power company employee will check this meter each month to see
how much power has been used, and the power company will use this information to calculate your bill.

**Hot Check**

With the home running on permanent power, all of the electrical functions of the home will be tested to make sure there are no shorts in the system, and make sure everything functions the way it should.

**Install the rest of the appliances**

With 99 percent of the work on your home complete, your final appliances will usually be delivered and installed. You will have a chance very soon at your final walkthrough to verify that these are in no way damaged, and that they work like they should.

**Punch-out**

Here the last one percent of work, which is often the most important, will be attended to. Either the superintendent or a walkthrough specialist will walk through your home examining it for quality finish and attention to detail. Anything out of order or not in tip-top shape will be taken care of.

**Final Cleaning**

After all construction work is done, a cleaning crew will go through the home cleaning it from top to bottom, mopping floors, vacuuming carpet, scrubbing toilets, and cleaning counters. After the cleaning it may be found that certain counters or tubs have been scratched during construction. If this is the case they will be buffed or otherwise repaired.
The walkthrough, or new home orientation as it is sometimes called, is one of the most important phases in the construction of your new home. It is a time for you to meet with the builder and let him or his representatives acquaint you with your new home and all of its components. The walkthrough is also a time for you to give your new home the once over, looking for any construction issues not up to quality standards. Here is what could be considered the ideal walkthrough in detail.
Allow Enough Time

Allow ample time to go through your new home. In my experience an hour and a half to two hours is sufficient for average sized new homes. Also, leave any pets, kids, or curious friends and relatives at home. There will be plenty of time for them to experience and enjoy your new home in due time. The walkthrough is serious business and should be treated as such. Minimizing distractions is critical.

What to Bring

To ensure a successful walkthrough bring along several pens or pencils, a black permanent marker, a packet of neon green dots available at office supply stores, a pad of legal paper, some bottled water, a digital camera (you probably have one on your phone) and a ton of patience. Understand that everything might not be perfect once you start the walkthrough. It’s just the nature of home building that no matter how careful, the builder can’t catch everything. But, if you follow my advice, the builder and his employees will be in the position to get things corrected for you in a timely fashion.

The order of the walkthrough is not really important as long as everything gets covered. As you find items not up to standards, place one of the neon green stickers I suggested you bring on the item and write it down on your legal pad or a punchlist provided by the builder. Then snap a quick picture of the problem. Green dots can mysteriously disappear but if you write it down and take a photo it can’t be forgotten for long.

Things To Look For

**Breaker Box and Electrical System**

You will of course be tempted to head for the front door and bask in the glow of your fresh new home. But not so fast. Let’s cover some things in the garage first. The garage houses several important components of your new home and you should become familiar with them. The first item on the list is the breaker box. This is where the
electricity that comes into your home is regulated. The walkthrough representative should show you where it is and how to operate it.

Make sure that each breaker has been clearly labeled for you. This will eliminate headaches down the road. Also, there should be some GFI outlets in the garage. Now is a great time for the walkthrough representative to test those in front of you, and to show you how they work. Also, make sure they test the GFI outlets inside the home when you get in there.

**Hot Water Heater**

Be sure to check the hot water heater. Make sure the size, measured in gallons, is what you contracted for. The walkthrough representative should show you how to turn it off so you will know how to when necessary. There are timers available for your hot water heater that can easily be installed that will save you some money on your electric bills. If your hot water heater comes with a timer, have the walkthrough representative show you how to set it.

**Water Shutoff**

The main water shutoff valve to the home will usually be located inside the garage or sometimes on the outside. The walkthrough representative may advise you to turn the water off if you will be leaving the home for days at a time. This is probably good advice, at least initially until you’ve lived in the home a while and made certain there are no leaky toilets or pipes.

If you do turn off your water, make sure that you also turn off the breaker for the hot water heater. The hot water heater has coils inside that can burn up if there is no water passing through. When you return home, it is very IMPORTANT to make sure you turn the water back on before turning the hot water heater back on.

**Air Handler and Air Filter**

The air handler, which distributes the heated or cooled air throughout your home, will usually be in the garage as well. Make sure the walkthrough representative opens the filter door to show you how to change the air filter. Using the black permanent marker, make note of the filter size in a conspicuous place on the front of the air handler. You should change the air filter about every month for best performance.
Garage Door

While you’re still in the garage, open and close the garage door to check for proper operation and make sure the remote controls work. If your garage door opener came with an outside keypad, ensure that it too works. In the event of a power outage you may need to open the garage door manually. Have the walkthrough representative show you how to do that.

Kitchen

Once inside the home, the best place to usually start is the kitchen because there is so much to cover there. Make sure that there are no scratches on the kitchen countertops or cabinets. Open and close a random selection of cabinet doors to make sure they are working properly. Make sure the hinges are tight, and the cabinets aren’t sticking or rubbing against anything as you are opening and closing them. The representative should give you care and cleaning instructions for both your counters and your cabinets.

Turn on the kitchen faucet and set it to the hottest setting. Here we are checking to make sure that the hot water heater is working properly. As long as you’ve got hot water after what you feel is a reasonable length of time, you’re doing just fine. Have the walkthrough representative show you how the sink disposal works, and how to clear it if it gets clogged. Also have them show you where the individual shutoff valve is for the water in the kitchen as well as the locations of the GFI outlets.

Appliances

Examine the appliances that came with your home. First, examine the outside of them to make sure there are no scratches or dents. Accidents do happen during construction, but assuming you bought new appliances, and not scratch-and-dent specials, they should be in brand new condition. Turn the stovetop on, check that the burners are working, and then try heating the oven. Assuming everything is working thus far, start the dishwasher to run through a cycle. This is to mainly make sure that there are no leaks in the dishwasher, either when it fills or when it drains.

While the dishwasher is running do a quick check of the refrigerator. If there are integrated ice and or water controls in your refrigerator make sure they work. Don’t use the first batch or two of ice; just discard it in the sink. Also, most manufacturers
suggest running through and pouring out the first couple of gallons of water from the refrigerator. This is to make sure that the water line becomes clear of any debris that may have gotten inside during construction and installation.

If your home came with a microwave, also check to make sure it works. In the laundry room, start both the washer and the dryer if provided and make sure they are working correctly. Make sure the dryer vent hose is connected.

All of the appliance instructions and warranty information should be kept in one easy-to-access location. Some of them may have cards for you to fill out and mail in to the manufacturer to record your warranty.

**Drywall and Flooring**

Before leaving the kitchen, examine the flooring for quality. Also check the walls for any drywall imperfections and check the paint for any spots the painter may have missed. As you see things that don’t meet your standards, write them down on the list and place a green dot on or near the problem area. This is so that the drywallers or painters know exactly where to look to correct the problem areas.

Continue your flooring and wall inspection throughout the remainder of the home. Don’t forget to look up every now and then and then and inspect the ceilings.

**Systems and Components**

As you are going through the home, have your representative show you how various things work, such as how to set and control the thermostat, how to use the security system and intercom if there is one, and how to operate the central vacuum if you bought one. If your home has a fireplace, whether it is wood burning, gas, or electric, have the walkthrough representative show you how it works. Make sure you are given instruction booklets on each of these items and that you place them with your appliance booklets.

**Bathrooms**

Visit the bathrooms and check that the plumbing works. Again turn on the hot water, then the cold water to check the functioning of each. Be sure to check the showers and baths, as well as the sink. Water lines sometimes get reversed. Hot will be cold, and cold will be hot, but this can be easily corrected. Flush the toilets and make
sure they have adequate water flow and don’t remain running long after you flush. Check the tile work inside the showers to make sure that there are no holes or gaps in the grout or caulking. You don’t want water getting behind your tile in there. Examine the vanity tops for scratches and cabinets for loose hinges.

**Exterior**

Be sure to inspect the outside of your home as well. The walkthrough representative should familiarize you with where the hose bibs are located, the sewer cleanout, the A/C unit and anything else that is important. Make sure all of the exterior walls of the home are evenly painted, and do an inspection from ground level of the roof to make sure there are no shingles that look loose or out of place. If your home comes with a sprinkler system, you should be shown how to operate that.

**Warranty**

After you feel you’ve examined the home top to bottom and have made note of anything that is not satisfactory, you should have the walkthrough representative go over any warranty paperwork that is given to you, so you have an understanding of what items in the home are covered and for how long. Most warranty plans cover most everything for a short period of time, usually the first year. The systems of the home, things like plumbing, electrical, and HVAC, will be covered for a little bit longer, maybe up to two or three years.

There will also be a warranty on the structure. This is the longest lasting component of the warranty. When you hear a builder say a ten-year warranty or 15-year warranty, they are referring to the warranty on the structure. The structure is usually deemed to include the foundation and footings, beams, lintels, columns, walls, roof framing systems and flooring systems.

When things settle down a little bit and you have some time, it can never hurt to read over all of the warranty information. This will help you feel more comfortable with the warranty claim and repair process should you ever need to go through it in the future.
Emergency Information

The walkthrough representative will usually give you a list of subcontractors who worked on your home so you can call them if you have a problem with something. You should also be sure that you have a list of repair people to contact should an emergency arise on a weekend or during any non-business hours.

These people should include the heating and A/C contractor should the heat or air break; the electrical contractor if you lose power due to something other than a loss of overall power from the power company; the plumber for if your hot water heater breaks or if there is a sewer stoppage; and finally the number for the roofer if you get a roof leak. I also recommend having the number for a 24-hour water extraction company handy, just in case a pipe breaks or a water heater bursts and your home is flooded.

Write all of these numbers down on one piece of paper and tape them to the inside of a cabinet so that you can find them easily in an emergency.

Sign Here Please

To conclude the walkthrough, the walkthrough representative will typically have paperwork for you to sign stating that he walked you through and familiarized you with everything in the home, and that all the workmanship was satisfactory. Just make sure that the items you found to be unsatisfactory are either on this paperwork or will be attached to it in some form or fashion.

It is not absolutely critical that these items all be completed before your closing, so long as they are documented as needing repair. Invariably in the days and weeks after you move in, you will find more items needing the builder’s attention. Just write all these items down as you find them and bring them to the builder’s attention.

It has been a long process but now you are all set to enjoy what you have longed for, a beautiful new home in Florida.
Some of you buying a home in Florida will have a swimming pool built along with your new home, or put in once your home is finished. Here is how the process of building your pool will generally go.

First you will meet with the pool builder to go over all that you want in your pool. Visit several pool websites, buy some pool magazines and talk with other pool owners to get an idea of what you want. You’ll need to decide on the size, the shape, the depth, where steps and ledges will go, waterfalls, spas, heaters, special jets, tile, interior coating (marcite) colors, and more.

The builder will submit plans for your pool to the city and wait to get the approved permit back before beginning. Once approved, the pool builder will lay out your pool according to the shape you requested and the city approved.

A backhoe will be used to dig out the pool, a truck will haul off some of the dirt, and some will be left to backfill and grade the pool deck later. Steel rebar will be placed in the pool to form a sort of “basket” in the shape of your pool.

At this point, drains, jets, and other plumbing will be installed. The city will inspect that the steel and pre-plumbing have been done up to code.

Then, fast drying, high strength concrete will be applied to create the shell of your pool. This process is called "shooting" the pool because the concrete is shot out of a hose. It actually looks like a pool now.

The excess dirt from digging the pool will be used to fill in around the outside of the shell and to grade the deck. Tile that you chose will be installed around the perimeter of the pool at this time.
Electricity is run to the pool equipment location and the equipment may also be installed around this time. The electrical work will be inspected as well as the plumbing lines. Assuming all is working well, the pool deck will be poured. Once the concrete dries it will be textured and coated with an acrylic type coating, which should last you several years with proper care.

Your screen enclosure, which usually requires a separate permit to ensure proper engineering and strength, will be done at this time. Now, the interior of your pool will be cleaned out and acid washed. It has probably had standing water, dirt, and construction debris in it, but no longer. The interior pool surface, most commonly a material called marcite is applied.

Your pool is filled almost immediately afterwards. Once filled, your pool builder will start-up and clean the pool and add the proper chemicals.

After you’ve been given your “new pool owner” orientation, you are ready to enjoy your pool. Some people prefer to maintain the chemicals in and clean their own pools, while others prefer to hire someone to take care of it.

My advice is to leave it to an expert, especially at the beginning. During the first few months of operation your pool goes through a “breaking-in” period and an expert can best control and guide this process. Once all the chemicals and the “mood” of your pool stabilize, you can take over the duties if you wish.
There are basically two places where real estate closings take place in Florida. The first and most common place is at a title insurance company, and the second is at an attorney’s office.
Title Insurance Companies

Because of their importance in your real estate transaction, most title insurance companies provide closing services. It is very common for closings on property in Florida to take place at a title insurance company office. The title insurance company will act as a neutral third party to ensure that all terms of the contract have been met, and they will collect and disburse funds according to the terms of the contract.

What is Title Insurance?

Before your closing, a title insurance company will conduct extensive research into public records, surveys, and other recorded documents to ensure that no party (other than the seller) holds an interest in or has a lien upon the property you are trying to purchase. According to the American Land Title Association, nearly one-third of all title searches reveal a problem with the title. Unknown heirs, divorces, tax liens, and fraud or forgery can cause title problems. Thankfully most can be resolved before your closing.

Upon completion of their research, the title insurance company issues an owner’s policy to the buyer, and a lender’s policy to the lender. The seller will customarily pay for an owner’s policy but, as with most other costs, this is negotiable. If you do end up having to pay for it, the cost will be $5.75 per $1,000 up to $100,000, and $5.00 per $1,000 thereafter. If you are financing, your lender will require you to pay for the lender’s policy, but this does not cost very much. It will be usually be only a couple hundred dollars or less because you are getting what’s called a simultaneous reissue credit with the owner’s policy.

Attorneys’ Offices

Many states require that an attorney conduct the real estate closing, but that’s not the case here in Florida. Even so, many people prefer the peace of mind that an attorney can bring to a real estate transaction. If your closing is being held at an attorney’s office, it will most likely be the seller’s attorney, since they usually pay for the title insurance policy. If that is the case, make sure that your attorney gets a copy of what you will be signing and has a chance to review it before you go to the closing. It is
not critical for your attorney to attend the closing. Often times your real estate agent will attend as a courtesy to you, just be sure to ask.

Closing Costs

There are costs other than the sales price that are incurred in every real estate transaction. As the buyer, your share of these costs will typically range from 1% to 2% of the sales price. The closing costs that you pay will be a function of a couple factors including what you have negotiated in the real estate contract and whether or not you are getting a mortgage. Costs that are customarily paid for by the buyer include:

- Recording of the deed
- Documentary stamps on the deed* ($.70 for every $100 of the sales price).
  *This is typically paid by the seller in a resale transaction, but I included it here because many builders require the buyer to pay this
- Documentary stamps on the mortgage ($.35 for every $100 financed)
- Intangible tax on the mortgage ($.002 times the mortgage amount)
- Lender’s title insurance policy
- Taxes
- Prepaid interest
- Prepaid HOA Dues, capital contributions, or transfer fees
- One year of insurance in full
-Appraisal Fee
- Underwriting Fee
- Flood certification fee
- And more...

How should you take title?

How you take title to your home is an important question that should only be answered after consulting an attorney, and your accountant, due to tax and estate-planning implications. How you take title establishes proof of ownership of a property, and often determines who will inherit your home when you die.
**Sole Owner**

Also known as owner in severalty, sole ownership is how you might take title if you are single, divorced, or widowed. Should you happen to die while owning the property, the property will be passed on according to your will. If you do not have a will, it will be passed on by descent to your heirs.

**Tenancy by the Entireties**

Tenancy by the Entireties is the most common way to take title in Florida for those who are married. In this case, if one spouse dies, the remaining spouse automatically becomes the owner.

**Tenancy in Common**

If you are in a second (or third, or fourth) marriage and you have children from a previous marriage, you may want to consider a tenancy in common. In this case, if you should die, your share of ownership in the property can be willed to your children.

**Joint Tenants with Right of Survivorship**

If you and the person you live with are not married, but you want to ensure that they receive full ownership of the property when you die, then joint tenancy with right of survivorship may be for you. The surviving owner will own the property outright, and the heirs of the deceased will have no claim to the property.

**Taking Title in a Trust**

Another option many boomers may want to consider is to take title in a trust. Speak to an estate planning attorney or a real estate attorney as to how and why you might take title in this way.
There are several things you should do after you move in to keep your home looking and operating like new.

**Periodic Maintenance**

These include monthly maintenance like changing your air filter, cleaning your disposal blades by running ice cubes through it, and checking for leaks around toilets and under sinks. Periodically check all grout and caulking for any cracks, as this can occur due to shrinkage. Of course, you’ll want to maintain your appliances and have them repaired at the first sign of trouble.

Twice a year you should have your roof (please don’t try to do this yourself) and the exterior of your home inspected. Check the operation of all windows and shutters if you have them. You should have your heating and air conditioning system inspected and serviced twice a year as well, once at the start of summer, and again before the winter heating season.

Your home warranty information provided by your builder may have additional hints and tips for keeping your home in tip-top shape year round.

**Pest Control**

In Florida, having a pest control service company come to your home regularly is essential in keeping your home both comfortable and free of insects and other pests. Without it you may have some unwanted roommates. Most non-native Floridians, especially Northerners are surprised at the amount of pests in Florida, but unfortunately the climate helps them thrive. The great weather might be what brought you here, and the bugs like it just as well.
The pest control company will usually start you off with an initial "kill everything in sight" type of service and maintain regular visits every 60 to 90 days. If you are still seeing bugs in your home, most companies will come out in between scheduled visits to try and get rid of the problem. Look in the phone book under "pest control" for companies providing service in your area.

If you are having a new home built, another pest control option is to have pest tubes installed in your walls. This is done after the framing stage, and before the insulation and drywall are put in. In the future, when the pest control company comes to your home, they service the tubes inside your walls from a base station outside, eliminating the need for you to be home when they come and eliminating the need for them to come inside. These tubes aren't something normally offered by most builders, so you might have to ask. They should not be very expensive, because pest control companies that work with them will install them for next to nothing in the hopes of making up for the expense when they sign you to a service contract. Not all pest control companies service these pest tubes, but more and more are doing so as they gain popularity.
Population and Growth

One of the best ways to mentally grasp the geographical distribution of Florida’s population is to look at Florida’s most populated areas. Distributed around the coastal areas and Central Florida’s east-west corridor, almost three quarters of the state’s population live in and around 10 major areas.
Florida’s Top Ten Metropolitan Statistical Areas (As of 2011)

1. Miami Fort Lauderdale Pompano Beach (South Florida) - 5,670,125

2. Tampa/St. Petersburg/Clearwater - 2,824,724

3. Orlando/Kissimmee - 2,171,360

4. Jacksonville - 1,360,251

5. North Port/Bradenton/Sarasota - 709,355

6. Cape Coral/Fort Myers - 631,330

7. Lakeland/Winter Haven - 609,492

8. Palm Bay/Melbourne/Titusville - 543,566

9. Deltona/Daytona Beach/Ormond Beach - 494,804

10. Pensacola/Ferry Pass/Brent - 453,218

Hurricanes

In Florida, hurricane season is a fact of life. The season officially begins June 1 and runs through November 30, with most activity typically occurring in late August through September. For many people in Florida, hurricanes are an excuse for a party. Most everyone who has lived in Florida for longer than a few years has been through at least one hurricane and several tropical storms. Though they are nothing to dismiss or joke about, with proper planning and precautions you’ll be able to weather the storms like a native.

Tropical depressions, tropical storms and hurricanes, when present, dominate the weathercasts here in Florida. The attention is for good reason. Hurricanes produce
extreme winds, tornadoes, torrential rain, and storm surge, which can cause severe flooding of coastal areas. In fact, nearly 60 percent of hurricane fatalities occur as a result of flooding. Other effects are of course property damage, power outages, temporary loss of public services, bridge and road closures, loss of communications, and hospital closures.

A hurricane usually begins as a tropical wave that develops into a low-pressure system known as a tropical depression. Tropical depressions are not very organized but they have the potential to become stronger and evolve into more organized storms. You can, and if you move to Florida most likely you will, track storm developments on-line at sites like weatherunderground.com or nhc.noaa.gov.

Tropical depressions have sustained winds of up to 38 mph. Should the storm gain strength, the next level is called a tropical storm, with winds between 39 and 73 mph, strong enough to cause pretty severe damage to older, unprotected structures.

**Hurricane Watch versus Hurricane Warning**

A Hurricane Watch indicates the possibility that you could experience hurricane conditions within 36 hours. This watch should trigger your family’s disaster plan, and protective measures should be initiated.

A Hurricane Warning indicates that sustained winds of at least 74 mph are expected within 24 hours or less. Once this warning has been issued, your family should be in the process of completing protective actions and deciding the safest location to be during the storm.

Hurricanes are rated on a scale of 1-5 on the Saffir-Simpson Scale:

- **Category One Hurricane**: Winds 74-95 mph
- **Category Two Hurricane**: Winds 96-110 mph
- **Category Three Hurricane**: Winds 111-130 mph
- **Category Four Hurricane**: Winds 131-155
Category Five Hurricane: Winds greater than 155 mph

The category ratings are based on the strength of the hurricane, not an expected level of its potential for destruction. Hypothetically, a category one hurricane hitting a highly populated area could cause more destruction than a category five hitting a less populated place. To read more about hurricane categories and the Saffir-Simpson scale visit: http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/aboutsshs.shtml

If you do become a property owner in Florida, you should take great care in preparing your property and your household for the threat of hurricanes. Don’t assume that because you live in the center of the state that you are immune from storm fallout. Be prepared. Have a written hurricane plan. At the beginning of hurricane season, check your disaster kit, batteries and non-perishable food supply. Tips for developing a plan and building a hurricane kit can be found on-line at redcross.org, or similar websites. Local television news stations usually put out hurricane tracking guides, which have tips on what you should do to prepare. These are usually available in local grocery stores.

Also, no matter how secure you may feel in your home, if you are asked by local authorities to evacuate, you should do so and do so early. Prepare for traffic congestion and long lines at the gas pumps. It helps to have a plan in place regarding where you will go and what you will take with you. Yes, it is a pain and inconvenience to pack up your essentials, secure your home, and drive to safe territory, but it could also save your life.

If you plan on buying a resale home not built within the last two years, visit the Federal Alliance for Safe Homes at http://www.flash.org for tips on how to prepare your home to withstand a hurricane.

Getting Around Florida

Florida is a lot bigger than most people think. The distance top to bottom is 447 miles, and 361 miles side to side. Florida is the twenty-second largest state, with 58,560 square miles. Florida’s longest river is the St. John’s River, which is 273 miles long. Lake Okeechobee is its biggest lake at 700 square miles, making it the second
largest freshwater lake in the continental United States, ranking just behind Lake Superior.

**Air Travel**

Getting to Florida by air is pretty easy, no matter where you are going in the state. Florida currently operates 13 international airports, with Orlando International Airport being the busiest with more than 34 million passengers a year, followed closely by Miami International Airport with approximately 31 million passengers a year. Florida also has several regional airports, and many smaller executive and community airports which can be a good choice for avoiding long lines and big crowds at larger airports, assuming you can get flights to where you need to go.

Florida airports are serviced by all the major airlines as well as discount and charter airlines. Search your favorite travel site to see how convenient and (usually) inexpensive it is for you to fly to Florida. If you plan to keep a second home here, it should be convenient for you to fly in and fly right back out without much trouble, cost, or inconvenience.

**Florida’s International Airports (with Airport Codes)**

Daytona Beach International Airport (DAB)
Fort Lauderdale/Hollywood International Airport (FLL)
Jacksonville International Airport (JAX)
Key West International Airport (EYW)
Melbourne International Airport (MLB)
Miami International Airport (MIA)
Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport (Panama City Beach) (ECP)
Orlando International Airport (MCO)
Orlando Sanford International Airport (SFB)
Palm Beach International Airport (PBI)
Pensacola International Airport (PNS)
Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport (SRQ)
Southwest Florida International Airport (Fort Myers) (RSW)
St. Petersburg/Clearwater International Airport (PIE)
Tampa International Airport (TPA)
Major Interstates

Florida’s major interstate highways are I-95, I-75, I-4, and I-10. They primarily connect the state north to south and east to west.

I-95, which runs up and down the east coast of the United States, reaches Florida north of Jacksonville, and runs the length of the east coast of the state, ending in Miami. It meets with I-10 in Jacksonville, and I-4 in Daytona Beach.

I-75 connects the west coast of Florida with the Midwest states, making cities on the west coast, including Tampa, Sarasota, Bradenton and Naples, hotbeds for Midwest vacationers, second homeowners, and retirees. I-75 begins in Florida about 45 miles west of Jacksonville. Once it snakes its way to the west coast of the state, it passes through Tampa (where it meets up with I-4), Bradenton, Fort Myers, and finally Naples. Here it begins to run east-west to Fort Lauderdale.

I-4 runs through the central part of the state, connecting Tampa, on the west coast, with Daytona Beach on the east coast. Interestingly, in 2004 Hurricane Charley became known as the “I-4 Hurricane” because it entered Florida near Tampa, and followed the path of I-4 very closely before exiting the state just north of Daytona Beach.

I-10 runs the width of the Panhandle of Florida and connects Pensacola with Jacksonville. If you were to keep driving west out of Florida on I-10 you would eventually end up in the Pacific Ocean near Santa Monica, California.

Road Construction

In a continuing effort to prepare the state’s roadways and interstates for Florida’s growth, road construction projects are always underway. If you’d like to find out where they are located before making a trip, visit the Florida Department of Transportation online at http://www.dot.state.fl.us. Here you can also find other valuable information such as the mileage between major cities and the locations of Florida’s rest areas, toll roads, and speed limits.
Speeding

Don’t speed. The Florida Highway Patrol and other law enforcement agencies are the butt of jokes such as: “Welcome to Florida, may I have your license and registration please.” Be aware that speeding fines are doubled in work zones in Florida. Speeding might leave you with a couple hundred bucks less to spend on your new home here.

511 Traffic Info

Florida offers an in-state travel information system that you can access by dialing 511 from a cell phone or landline. From 511, you can get updates on traffic for major roadways and interstates, as well as construction information, lane closures, and special alerts. The system is also available online at http://www.FL511.com

Florida Driver’s License

If you’ll be moving to Florida full time, you’ll want to get a Florida driver’s license. You can get that process started at the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles website at http://www.flhsmv.gov/

Save time getting your license by taking advantage of online appointment scheduling. After you get a Florida license, in some cases, you can even renew online or by telephone.

Some boomers moving to Florida will be bringing their elderly parents to live with them, many of whom will continue to drive in their seventies, eighties and nineties. The state of Florida offers a great resource covering many aspects of elderly driving at http://www.flhsmv.gov/FloridaGrandDriver/
Employment

If you plan to continue working after you move to Florida, or if you wish to start a second career, opportunities abound in Florida.

When looking for work in Florida, start with where you work now. If you like your current job, ask your manager if there might be an opportunity for you to continue working there by telecommuting. With so many boomers retiring, many companies are starting to see their company-wide levels of knowledge and experience start to dwindle. In order to keep that from happening, your company may want to keep you on board, even if you are hundreds of miles away (ON A BEACH!) in Florida.

Looking for something new? If it’s part time work you are after, check the classifieds in the local paper near where you are moving. Both local and national companies with locations in Florida actively recruit older employees. Part-timers and those looking for temporary or seasonal work can look to companies like Kelly Services, Manpower, and Spherion.

Other boomers may prefer to work year-round. Opportunities in Florida include retail, health care, communications, finance, insurance, business, and marketing.

In addition to looking for opportunities in local papers, don’t forget to search online jobs portals such as Monster.com and hotjobs.com for opportunities that might be available. This is your new life. What you choose to do with your time is completely up to you. Just make sure you fill it with things you enjoy.

Community Service

The volunteer rate for baby boomers is the highest of any age group. Invariably when you are ready to move to Florida, it will not be your parent’s retirement with time spent solely on the golf course, napping in a hammock, or playing bingo everyday. You are likely to want to spend at least part of your time volunteering for a worthy cause. Luckily, there are plenty of opportunities for you to get involved in community service in Florida. Whether you choose to help out at a local school part time, join
the local chapter of the Red Cross or United Way, or help build homes for Habitat for Humanity, your time and experience will be highly valued and appreciated.

As you probably already know, you’ll feel great about yourself for doing it. Getting involved in volunteer work naturally increases your quality of life. Many volunteer agencies actively seek out older volunteers for their expertise and availability. Some even organize special task forces made up of their members who are 50 or 65 years old or more.

For more information on volunteer opportunities for baby boomers visit http://www.getinvolved.gov and visit http://www.volunteerflorida.org for more information on the Governor’s Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service.

Continuing Education

One way to fill your time is to take some classes at a local college or university. Classes range from foreign language classes, to cooking classes, to photography classes and more. Maybe you want to learn to speak Italian before a big trip to Florence, or learn the intricacies of Thai cuisine to impress your friends and family. With 12 state universities and nearly 30 independent colleges and universities, whatever you would like to learn, there’s bound to be a school nearby that offers it.

Don’t be intimidated in thinking that these classes will be full of late teen and twenty-somethings. Boomer participation in continuing education, especially when it comes to subjects that support their hobbies, is rapidly growing. As well, many schools have organizations for students of non-traditional age. There’s bound to be a friend or two to make, and a good time had, no matter what type of subject you choose to study.

Also, be sure to take advantage of telecommuting opportunities offered from many institutions. The classes can either be self-paced or have assignment deadlines posted by the instructors. Often, students interact with teachers via email and with other students on class bulletin boards. Like traditional courses, online education runs the gambit from mathematics to art.
Museums and private organizations also offer classes. You can learn about Florida history, butterfly gardening, or surf fishing, explore yoga, take up sailing, or join the crowd at Bike Week by taking a motorcycle safety course.

For more information on Florida’s colleges and universities as well as links to each institution visit http://www.fldoe.org

Health Care

Close to 20 percent of Florida’s population is over age 65. This is the highest percentage of all states, and almost 50 percent higher than the U.S. average. Consequently, there are more than 260 hospitals in Florida, some of which are regarded as being among the best in the nation. You can be assured that there are cutting edge facilities close by, no matter which part of the state you move to.

According to U.S. News and World Report ten Florida hospitals are nationally ranked. Twenty other hospitals met standards for strong performance within the state.

Check out the U.S. News Best Hospitals Report for Florida here: http://health.usnews.com/best-hospitals/area/fl

MyFloridaRx.com

Prescription drugs can account for a large portion of your health care bills, especially if you don’t have insurance, aren’t old enough for Medicare, and don’t qualify for Medicaid. This site, developed by the Florida Attorney General and the Agency for Health Care Administration, lets you compare prices for the 100 most commonly used prescription drugs. MyFloridaRx.com also lets you see which pharmacy in your area has the best drug prices. http://www.myfloridarx.com
VA Medical Facilities

A high percentage of people moving to Florida have served in the military and are entitled to health care benefits from the Veteran’s Administration. There are several VA Hospitals and Clinics throughout the state as well as VA Outpatient facilities located near most major cities.

For a complete list of VA hospitals, clinics, and outpatient facilities visit http://www1.va.gov/directory/guide/allstate.asp

Arts and Cultural Activities

If you’re into the arts, cultural events, and festivals, Florida will not disappoint you. There are more than 340 museums, more than 30 theatre companies, more than 200 outdoor festivals, and countless galleries and craft shops dedicated to the Arts. Most major Florida cities have symphony orchestras. The addition of theme parks, and world-class beaches and state parks means that there is no reason for you or your visiting kids and grandkids to ever be bored. In fact, there is so much to do in all parts of Florida that they should be begging to come visit. And because the weather is so nice, most of these places and events can be visited and enjoyed year round.

Museums

Let’s take a look at some popular museums throughout Florida. Keep in mind this is not even close to being a comprehensive list, just a few highlights. For a comprehensive list of museums in Florida, visit the Florida Association of Museums website at http://www.flamuseums.org

Ringling Museum of Art

The name should ring a bell if you’ve ever been to the circus. This museum, containing over 10,000 works of art including paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints, photographs and decorative arts, is located on the west coast of Florida in Sarasota. Created by circus owner John and his wife Mable, the Ringling Museum has been in operation since 1927 and is now run by Florida State University.

For more information visit http://www.ringling.org
Salvador Dali Museum
Visited by over 200,000 people each year, the Salvador Dali Museum is the largest collection of Dali’s work in the world. Previously housed in Cleveland, Ohio, the museum opened in St. Petersburg in 1982. The museum has such an extensive collection that it frequently loans its work out to other institutions throughout the world.

For more information visit http://thedali.org/

Florida Museum of Natural History
Located in Gainesville at the University of Florida, this is the largest museum of natural history in the southern United States. The Florida Museum of Natural History holds over 20 million specimens of mammals, birds, reptiles, mollusks, fish, butterflies, and fossils. One highlight of the museum is a 6,400 square feet Butterfly Rainforest exhibit.

For more information visit the museum’s website at http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu

Southeast Museum of Photography
Located in Daytona Beach on the campus of Daytona State College, the Southeast Museum of Photography is one of less than 12 facilities in the United States dedicated exclusively to photography and is the only one in the southern United States. A special cultural and educational resource for anyone interested in photography, the museum features exhibitions covering a wide variety of photographic styles, and lectures featuring prominent photographers and critics.

For more information visit their website at http://www.smponline.org

World Golf Hall of Fame
The website sums it up: “If you love golf, you’ve got to go!” Previously located in Pinehurst, North Carolina, the World Golf Hall of Fame moved to St. Augustine and a new multi-million dollar facility in 1998. The museum contains historical artifacts and personal memorabilia from all the game’s biggest stars. Also on the grounds of the museum is an 18-hole natural grass putting course and an IMAX Theater. There are also two golf courses in what is called World Golf Village. The courses are King and Bear, co-designed by Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus, and Slammer and Squire, designed
by course architect Bobby Weed, who consulted with Sam “The Slammer” Snead and Gene “The Squire” Sarazen. The World Golf Village offers “stay and play” packages so that you can visit the museum as well as play the courses while in town.

For more information visit http://www.wgv.com

Theme Parks

There’s perhaps no better way to spend quality time with your kids and grandkids when they come to Florida than to visit one of the many theme parks that Florida has to offer. Most of Florida’s theme parks are located in central Florida, making them easy to get to from almost anywhere in the state. There are a few things you need to know, however, before you go.

**Price of Admission**

Admission prices change frequently, though you are easily looking at over $100 for two people at most of the parks listed below. Discounts are usually available for Florida residents, senior citizens, members of the military, AAA members, and young children. Annual passes are also available and can provide good savings if you plan to visit a park several times a year. Visit the parks’ websites for current admission prices and information on any discounts currently available.

**When Not To Go**

The best times to avoid the theme parks are during the summer, spring break, or winter break when millions of kids are out of school and family vacations are underway. Nothing’s worse than waiting in line for hours on end in 95 degree heat, packed in with thousands of people, especially when you are seemingly the only person there who remembered to apply deodorant that morning. Also, try to steer clear of most major holidays. If you plan to live in Florida at least part time or visit frequently, this still leaves you with plenty of time to enjoy the theme parks at times when they are less crowded.

**Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom**

The granddaddy of them all, the house of the mouse, is what got this whole Florida tourism based economy started. Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom, which opened for the first time in 1971, is one of the most visited and famous theme parks in
the world. Enjoyed by millions of youngsters, adults, and championship winning sports teams alike (“I’m going to Disney World!” – Various), Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom should be at the top of your list of things to see and do, at least once, while in Florida.

The park is open 365 days a year and features--in addition to the rides of course-- several parades, shows, and exhibits geared towards the enjoyment of the whole family.

**Epcot**
Mickey’s neighbor, Epcot Center is equally enticing with its cultural charm. Epcot features rides like Mission: Space, and exhibits as well as festivals throughout the year such as the International Flower and Garden Festival, and the International Wine and Food Festival. There’s something for everyone at Epcot, as the park is divided into different foreign country themed “pavilions,” such as China, Mexico, Germany, France, and more. Many people make a special trip to Epcot just to eat, wanting to sample cuisines from all over the world in one location.

**Hollywood Studios**
Also part of the Disney family of theme parks, Hollywood Studios offers its visitors the chance to immerse themselves in their favorite movies. They have rides based on movies such as Star Wars, and Twilight Zone Tower of Terror as well as shows based on hit films such as Beauty and the Beast and the Little Mermaid.

**Walt Disney World’s Animal Kingdom**
Disney’s newest addition to its theme park lineup is perhaps its most exciting. Celebrating the wonders of nature and wildlife, Animal Kingdom has rides, shows, and attractions that rival those at its older brother and sister parks. In addition to several animal encounters, rides such as Kilimanjaro Safaris, Kali Rapids, and the new Expedition Everest will make a trip to Animal Kingdom worth your while.

For more information on all of Walt Disney World’s parks, hotels and other attractions visit: [http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/wdw/index](http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/wdw/index)
Universal Studios/Islands of Adventure

Just down the road from Walt Disney World are the formidable competitors Universal Studios and Islands of Adventure. Here you will find two distinct movie themed parks, with a “City Walk” in between them, flanked by three exciting themed hotels—The Portofino Bay, The Hard Rock, and The Royal Pacific—all connected by a unique and ultra-cool ferry system. It all combines to create one of the most fun environs in all of Florida. World famous rides such as the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, Incredible Hulk and Revenge of the Mummy provide the thrills, while staples such as Spider-Man and Shrek 4-D provide all-ages entertainment.

At Universal City Walk there is an Emeril’s and Jimmy Buffet’s Margaritaville restaurants and other eating and drinking establishment such as Pat O’Brien’s and City Jazz. A two-story, 20 screen Loews movie theatre provides yet another opportunity to be entertained. My advice is to reserve a room at one of the hotels mentioned above and take a couple days to experience all Universal Studios, Islands of Adventure, and City Walk have to offer. Plus, with your room key you can gain special front of the line access to the rides in both parks as well as discounts at some of the restaurants and shops.

For more information on Universal Orlando’s theme parks, hotels, and entertainment visit http://www.universalorlando.com

Sea World

Located in Orlando, Sea World is one of the most famous marine life oriented theme parks in the world. There are shows and attractions featuring various forms of sea life such as dolphins, penguins, stingrays, sharks, killer whales, and more. If these shows aren’t exciting enough, the park has added rides and roller coasters in recent years for guests of all ages to enjoy.

For more information regarding Sea World, its hours of operation and other information visit http://seaworldparks.com/en/seaworld-orlando/

Marineland: The Original Sea Park

Marineland first opened in the late 1930’s as the world’s first oceanarium, providing visitors the first glimpse available of ocean life here on dry land. It was originally called “Marine Studios” and served as the site for filming of several Hollywood produc-
tions. Today, Marineland is a research and education facility, but the park itself is still open to the public. The main attraction at Marineland is the dolphin show. Marineland is located on the east coast of Florida, just south of St. Augustine. It might not warrant a special trip from far away, but if you are in the area, it’s worth your time to see it.

For more information visit http://www.marineland.net

**Busch Gardens Florida**

If you are looking for the adventure of an African Safari but don't want the hassle of updating your passport, Busch Gardens Tampa Bay may be a great alternative. Like most other theme parks, Busch Gardens also has rides, roller coasters, shows, and attractions but all with a Safari-themed twist. Most visitors though, go for the animals, and there are plenty there for you to see.

For more information on Busch Gardens visit http://www.buschgardens.com/BGT/default.aspx

**Kennedy Space Center**

Located on Florida's East Coast near Cocoa, Kennedy Space Center was (prior to the end of the shuttle program in 2011) the site of all United States space shuttle launches as well as the launch of many military and civilian rockets carrying satellites. There is also a visitors’ complex featuring exhibits, shows, and other attractions.

For details about Kennedy Space Center, as well as launch schedules visit https://www.kennedyspacecenter.com/

**Parks**

The Florida Park Service, managed under the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, runs one of the largest park systems in the country with 159 parks spanning more than 723,000 acres and 100 miles of beaches. Activities available for you to enjoy include swimming, diving, or snorkeling in Florida’s rivers and springs, bird watching, fishing, and hiking on scenic nature trails. Florida’s parks, combined with wonderful weather, offer year-round fun for all ages. Events such as battle reen-
actsments and Native American festivals celebrate Florida’s past, while art shows, museums and lighthouses offer a look into Florida’s cultural heritage.

For more information on Florida’s park system and a comprehensive list or parks visit [http://www.floridastateparks.org/](http://www.floridastateparks.org/)

**Beaches**

When one’s thoughts turn to Florida, the first image that comes to mind for many people is a beach: white sand, gentle breeze, and the hypnotic sounds of the lapping of the waves. Ah, this is why we live here. Florida has more than 1,100 miles of coastline, the majority of that being white sandy beaches bathed in glorious sunshine for you to enjoy. Each beach in Florida is unique, and you are sure to enjoy visiting several different beaches around the state to see which is your favorite. Whether your pastime is surfing, boating, kayaking, or just floating around, you’re sure to find a beach that fits your mood close by.

To learn more about Florida’s beaches and view an interactive guide visit: [http://www.visitflorida.com/beaches](http://www.visitflorida.com/beaches)

**Lighthouses**

People are continually enchanted by the history, lore, and romance embodied by lighthouses. Visiting and learning about lighthouses has become a passion for people of all ages. Being that it's nearly surrounded by water, Florida has a large number of lighthouses. Many are open to the public for tours, and some are even available to climb.

According to the Florida Lighthouse Association, there are 30 remaining historic lighthouses in Florida. Some of these are among the nation's oldest and tallest, such as Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse (2nd tallest in U.S.), the only Florida lighthouse registered as a National landmark. The Florida Lighthouse Association, whose mission is to preserve Florida’s remaining lights, offers some great information on the history of lighthouses in Florida at the website [http://www.floridalighthouses.org.](http://www.floridalighthouses.org)
Fishing and Boating

Not many places in the world, let alone in the United States, can beat Florida when it comes to the quality of fishing and boating. In fact, with 7,700 lakes, 10,550 miles of rivers, and 2,276 miles of tidal shoreline, Florida is the “fishing capital of the world” and some would consider it the boating capital of the world also. Florida has a large variety of species of fish, from largemouth bass in the fresh waters, to redfish along the shoreline to sailfish offshore. More anglers come to Florida to fish than anywhere else in the nation.

Florida has the third highest number of boat owners in the nation, ranking behind Michigan and California. And why wouldn’t it, with water everywhere you turn? Boating is a favorite recreational pastime of many Floridians and visitors to the state and an excellent way to relax and spend time with friends and family. No matter where you are in Florida: North, South, East or West, inland or on the coast, good fishing and boating are just outside your door.

For more information on fishing and boating in Florida, as well as license information for both, visit: http://www.fishingcapital.com and http://www.myfwc.com/boating