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OVERSEAS

Will Donald Trump return to Mar-a-Lago, Palm Beach?

There’s speculation the president will go back to his oceanfront palace in Florida



Mar-a-Lago is worth \$300 million. Donald Trump, pictured with his wife Melania, bought the resort in 1985
MICHAEL WARREN/GETTY; MIKE THEILER/ALAMY

Hugh Graham

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The sun is shining and the taxes are low. The palms are swaying and the lifestyle is high-luxe. Welcome to Palm Beach.

The swanky Florida resort — the average sale price in the town in 2019/2020 was \$7.76 million — has been home to captains of industry since the Gilded Age, but the concentration of one per centers has never been higher: at last count it was home to 43 billionaires and more golf courses than any other county in America.

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It may soon gain a new full-time resident. If they can ever get Trump out of the White House, speculation is rife that he will return to live at Mar-a-Lago, his oceanfront palace in the Sunshine State. But he may have to launch yet more legal battles in order to remain in his “Winter White House”.

When Trump was granted permission to turn the 128-room Mediterranean-style mansion into a members’ club in 1993 — the same year in which he confessed it was fortunate he was not running for political office, given his penchant for beautiful women— he reportedly signed an agreement with the town council that he would not use it as a private residence.

Before Trump arrived, Palm Beach was a Waspy old-money enclave where protocol was king. Rules included no whistling on public streets after midnight and no “missing dog” signs posted on trees. “His battle with the Palm Beach town council to turn Mar-a-Lago into a club was the first political campaign of

Trump's life," wrote Laurence Leamer in his book *Mar-a-Lago: Inside the Gates of Power at Donald Trump's Presidential Palace*. "This battle provoked a populist, libertarian reaction in Trump. It became the engine that helped to carry him to the White House."

Now he may have to battle his way back home. "He has really got the deck stacked against him," says Carina Bendeck, a local resident and real estate consultant.

Trump has been in litigation with Palm Beach ever since he arrived in 1985: he has been involved in more than two dozen local lawsuits in state and federal courts, most involving Mar-a-Lago.

Built in 1927, the opulent mansion was the home of Marjorie Merriweather Post, the cereal heiress, who put in a citrus grove, a nine-hole golf course and two bomb shelters on its 17 acres. When Trump tried to buy it from the Post Foundation for \$15 million in the early 1980s, his offer was rejected — so he bought the beach at the front of the property through a third party and threatened to build a monstrosity blocking Mar-a-Lago's ocean view.

"That was my first wall," he said in an interview. "That drove everybody nuts. They couldn't sell the big house because I owned the beach, so the price kept going down and down." He paid \$8 million for the property (it is worth about \$300 million now).

Then, when he was facing bankruptcy in the early 1990s, Trump tried to subdivide the estate for development. The city council refused, so he sued them. Eventually they allowed him to open it as a club — subject to residence conditions. Trump has fought Palm Beach over the size of his flagpole, flight routes over Mar-a-Lago, the size of his extension and the height of his ficus hedges (he keeps them low to show off his castle).



Palm Beach — Mar-a-Lago is in the foreground
WANG YING/XINHUA/ALAMY

Even Trump's fiercest critics concede his arrival did some good in Palm Beach. "Before Trump none of the private clubs in Palm Beach accepted Jews or African-Americans," Bendeck says. "He opened up membership to minorities. I don't think he did it because it was the right thing to do. But it was a smart business move. Now things have changed. There is more diversity here."

Trevor Abrahmsohn, managing director of the London estate agency Glentree International, has owned a home in Palm Beach for 35 years and has watched it change beyond recognition. "The Palm Beach crowd is still very preppy and perfectly coiffed. Old money tends to be more sophisticated and softly spoken. They will be driven around in Cadillacs or Mercedes and the newer money will drive Lamborghinis or Maseratis. If you've got it, flaunt it."

The epicentre of Palm Beach affluence is Worth Avenue, the shopping street that was rocked this year by the closure of Neiman Marcus (a Saks Fifth Avenue remains). "I go there to people watch," Abrahmsohn says. "You see 85-year-old women in bright red lipstick, mutton dressed as lamb, with their perfectly coiffed dogs. It has the most incredible galleries that sell contemporary art for millions. It is immaculate, with Italianate architecture, granite pavements and 'vias', little walkways that make you feel like you are in Capri."

But you are unlikely to see Trump out at high-end restaurants such as Sant Ambroeus and La Goulue. He rarely leaves his

compound, preferring to eat in its public dining room (he likes his steak burnt and served with ketchup) and mingle with members (joining fee \$200,000), asking them how they like his mother's meatloaf recipe. In keeping with the Versailles-inspired decor, Trump has installed a Louis XIV-style ballroom with 40ft ceilings, put \$7 million of gold leaf on its walls and spent \$100,000 on four gold-plated bathroom sinks.

Abrahmsohn has dined several times at Mar-a-Lago and met Trump at his golf club last January. "It is amazing the hero worship that goes on in the club. They love him. Nobody is too small or insignificant for Trump to talk to. I talk to the Maga supporters who stand on the bridge; they tell me Trump gets the Secret Service to invite them in and will spend an hour talking to them."

British expat Shelley Gubelmann, who has wintered in Palm Beach for 40 years, has barely laid eyes on the man. "He is a total hermit. If he came to live here I don't think it would really impact us, although it depends on security arrangements. When he visits we get his supporters on the bridge holding placards and cheering him on. The road closures have impacted us. A two-minute journey can now take 20 minutes."

Rosalind Clarke, broker at Premier Estate Properties, an affiliate of Christie's International Real Estate, agrees: "There is an awful lot of inconvenience when he is here, with the road closures. Houses next to Mar-a-Lago are also a hard sell because of the flight noise." (Trump had succeeded in stopping flights over Mar-a-Lago, but they are expected to resume in 2021.)

But Clarke concedes that after his 2016 election victory, interest in properties near Mar-a-Lago increased. "People who buy homes on Woodbridge Road get membership. A lot of people joined Mar-a-Lago because they can hobnob with the president. It has been an advantage for them, business-wise."

Palm Beach is still a hot market right now: 29 homes over \$10 million sold in the past year, including one to the rocker Jon Bon Jovi for \$43 million. But the spree has nothing to do with Trump, and more to do with New Yorkers and New Jerseyites arriving in droves to take advantage of the low taxes; the pandemic is also driving them out of cities to more rural,

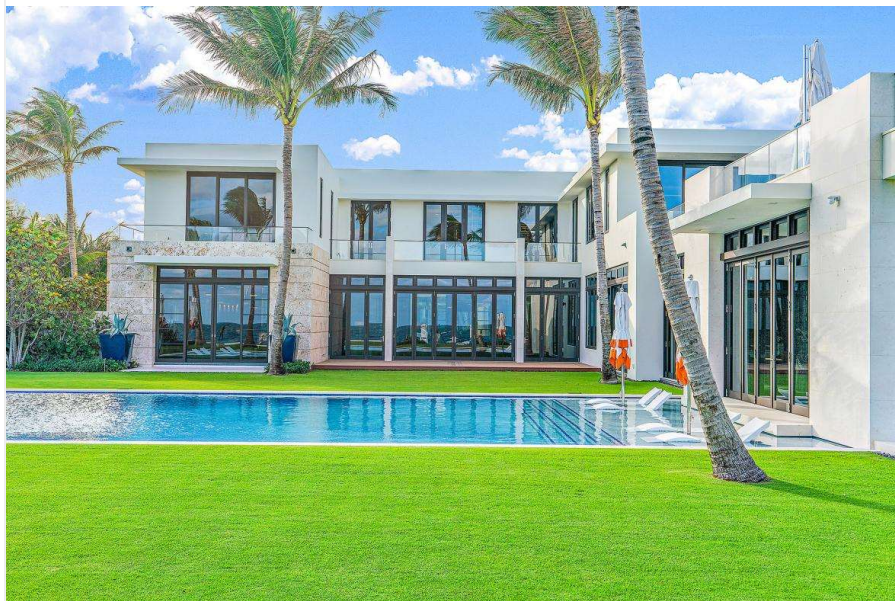
outdoorsy places. It is a small island — 18 miles long and one mile wide, population 8,800 — with a limited supply of houses. An entry point would be \$3 million for a three-bedroom property. Clarke is about to market a ten-bedroom beachfront new-build for offers over \$145 million.

There is a British contingent. The Zoopla founder Alex Chesterman has spent \$19.5 million on two neighbouring houses; the insurance tycoon Sir Peter Wood has splashed more than £65 million speculating on properties. Clarke, who hasn't left since arriving from London in the 1970s, thinks the effects of a full-time Trump down the road would be negligible. "He represents a tiny portion of the island. Some people would never have him for dinner, although many of them might do now because he has saved them a lot of money on taxes."

As Trump once said in an interview: "I'm the king of Palm Beach. They all come over, they all eat, they all love me, they all kiss my ass, and they all leave and say: 'Isn't he horrible.' But I'm the king."

Time will tell whether the king will live in his castle.

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