



BILLIONAIRE PLAYGROUNDS

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Where the super-wealthy go to have fun

"If you could do anything, what do you do with a blank canvas?" asks Mike Ryan, owner and developer of the Residences at The Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman, which plays host to some of the world's wealthiest vacationers.

Call it what you want—blank canvas, *carte blanche*, "anything goes." For those with 10- and 11-digit bank accounts, nothing in the world is off-limits; not even the thin air above. Some billionaires spend their downtime in flying palaces, while others prefer to ramble on ranches that stretch far beyond the horizon. For those with ultra-means, a weekend jaunt might involve kite-surfing in Greenland, cooking lessons with Michelin-starred chefs and a private airstrip in the Alps.

No matter their differing tastes, the billionaires on this year's Forbes list have at least one thing in common—when it's time to play, the world is their sandbox.

Some seek out solitude. Chocolate-bar heir Forest Mars, Jr., for example, prefers the high prairies of his southeast Montana ranch, where 82,000 acres mean few intrusions by nosy neighbors. Other billionaires insist on privacy even while en route. Saudi Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Al Saud's version of "big sky" is his own Airbus A380 Flying Palace. This double-decker aircraft is reportedly being outfitted with a marble-paneled dining room, a bed resembling a Bedouin tent, a tilting whirlpool bath with sensors to keep the prince level during turbulence and a missile defense system to strike down attackers.

Princes aren't the only billionaires who enjoy taking to the air. Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page are avid kite-surfers. When they're close to home, they ride the breeze along San

Mateo's muddy little Third Avenue Beach. But when they really want to fly high, they head for...Greenland.

In fact, Greenland was recently host to three billionaires. Bill Gates, too, did a little downtime at Apussuit Adventure Camp, a heli-skiing resort 15 miles outside Maniitsoq in West Greenland. Meanwhile, Page and Brin were in Ittoqqortoormiit, one of Greenland's most remote areas, catching the wind where monster-sized icebergs reach 15 stories tall.

More than just untouched and pristine landscape, they come for the seclusion. "There are few places left on earth where you can venture half a mile outside town, get over a hill and find no trace of humans," explains Anders Stenbakken, of Destination East Greenland. (When even Greenland isn't remote enough, the Google moguls soar even further—above the earth, at Space Camp. See slideshow.)

Another billionaire playground is the Bahamas' sleepy Harbour Island, where media mogul (and creator of the Fox Broadcasting Network) Barry Diller owns a waterfront abode. The isle is three miles long and half-a-mile wide and just 200 miles from Miami. It wouldn't be unusual to find Diller and his fellow island homeowners munching on conch fritters at the beloved beachfront joint Blue Bar.

Several billionaires on the Forbes list have at least one thing in common with travelers of more modest means: They love France. The world's most popular tourist destination is also a favorite playground for the mega-rich—from the Provence vineyard of IKEA founder Ingvar Kamprad to the sun-drenched St. Tropez villa of Gucci owner and fashion-retail mogul François Pinault.

One traditional, yet still exclusive, playground for Francophile billionaires is the ski resort town of Courchevel, where the new Russian tycoons congregate for lavish winter parties. As the *Washington Post* reported, "For the Russian visitors, Courchevel's attractions are the privacy it offers and its fabulously expensive hotels, bars and fashion boutiques. It is also one of the few Alpine resorts with a private airfield for executive jets and it is a short trip across the border to the Swiss banks where many rich Russians bank their millions."

While the charms of France and the Bahamas are undeniable, some corporate moguls prefer their playgrounds to be on American soil. Billionaire businessman George Soros has a manse in laid-back Ketchum, Idaho, adjacent to Sun Valley. He and other famously wealthy types appreciate the area's laid-back atmosphere and the easygoing neighbors. "People here are much more interested in how your skiing was that day, or if you caught a fish, than who you are," explains Bronwyn Patterson of the Sun Valley/Ketchum CVB. Developer Steve Wynn, John and Theresa Heinz Kerry and *Rolling Stone* founder Jann Wenner also keep residences here.

One billionaire who's long appreciated America's playground potential is Ted Turner, the larger-than-life media man—and the largest private landowner in North America. An outspoken preservationist, Turner continues expanding his super-sized ranches on the great American plains. The largest now spreads across seven states, including Nebraska, Montana, Oklahoma, Kansas, South Dakota and New Mexico. He hopes to own two million acres before he dies; he's not far from his goal.

But owning everything isn't everything. Billionaires are also known to seek out singular experiences that play into their other hobbies or interests. With deep enough pockets, it's now possible to scuba dive with Jean-Michel Cousteau, cook with renowned chef Eric Ripert and improve your backhand with coach Nick Bollettieri, who trained Andre Agassi and the Williams sisters.

Ultimately, what distinguishes a billionaire's playground from, say, an ordinary *millionaire's* playground is the quality of experience. "Before," says Mike Ryan, "people justified their hard work and success by buying a very, very expensive watch or giant mansion. Now they have a need to define themselves by their experiences rather than the material things. So when they're sitting on their porch looking into the sunset of their life they can say... 'I went kite-surfing in Greenland!' Now that was priceless."

SLIDESHOW



© *The Residences At The Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman*

Steve Case: Grand Cayman

For AOL founder Steve Case and other owners of oceanfront homes at the Residences at the Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman, arriving is half the fun. A personal butler greets guests at the airport and drives them in a golf cart to the Residences' private dock; from there, an Intrepid powerboat whisks passengers across the North Sound. The master suites overlook a private beach and the sparkling sea beyond, and include personal infinity pools, huge wraparound decks, cathedral ceilings and outdoor rooftop showers. Home-owners also have a luxury BMW 6 or 7 Series at their disposal, lifetime memberships to Greg Norman's on-property golf course and access to the Nick Bollettieri-designed tennis center.