In two-and-a-half decades, Lakewood Ranch has allowed its residents to reap the kind of lifestyle perks most communities take generations to sow.

BY RANDI DONAHUE AND HEIDI KURPIELA

Lakewood Ranch turned 25 this year. Given its success and current growth forecast, we see no reason for it to have a quarter-life crisis.

The 31,000-acre community, with roots in both Sarasota and Manatee counties, is considered the master-planned community to which all other master-planned communities are compared — ranked No. 2 in the nation, second only to Central Florida’s retirement mecca, The Villages.

Purchased by the Uihlein family in 1922, the outpost wasn’t considered development-friendly until the late 1970s when the family began exploring other uses for the land after years of operating its as ranching and agri-business Schroeder-Manatee Ranch.

That all changed in 1994, when SMR announced its foray into community development with the groundbreaking of Lakewood Ranch, a cattle ranch-turned-residential community east of Interstate 75. When the first village opened in Summerfield, people living in Sarasota and Bradenton considered it out in the boondocks. Oh, how the times have changed!

Today, more than 31,000 residents proudly call Lakewood Ranch home. Although it’s hard to narrow down all the reasons why the community is beloved, we can easily highlight 25 — starting with polo and ending with the zippy new gravity rail at Bob Gardner Park. So, without further ado, here are the 25 reasons we love Lakewood Ranch.
Main Street Resembles a Norman Rockwell Painting

Lakewood Ranch Main Street is a bona fide slice of modern Americana with a Rodeo Drive twist. (The palms lining the sidewalk throw a Beverly Hills vibe, but the down-to-earth merchants and chummy pedestrians are downright Midwestern in spirit.) A true crossroads of the community, Main Street boasts a plethora of food and drink opportunities that draw everyone from executives looking for a quick a cup of coffee on the way to the office to retirees looking to settle in for a long breakfast. This commercial enclave is so walkable and well-planned, you could cavort downtown for days and never get bored — or need to start a car. There’s cinema and sushi, putt-putt golf and organic groceries, places to workout and places to meet for happy hour, places to get your hair cut and places to buy fancy soap. Who needs Main Street in downtown Sarasota when everything you need is on Main Street in Lakewood Ranch?

The Moms Rock

It’s no secret that Lakewood Ranch is brimming with kids. Families settle here because the houses are spacious and more affordable than in other areas. The thing that sets this community apart from other family-friendly communities isn’t its real estate, it’s the large-and-in-charge Lakewood Ranch Moms Group. Founded more than a decade ago by a group of motivated moms, this all-women army knows it takes a village to raise little ones, and it mobilizes the villagers for you. At more than 300 members, the group functions as a lifeline for area mothers, especially new-to-town ones, and it mobilizes the villagers to benefit local children’s charities. lwrmomsgroup.com

Unpretentious Polo

Legend has it when SMR executives started playing knock-around polo with their ranch hands 30 years ago, they played for kicks ... and booze. According to Sarasota Polo Club lore, the first rider to fall off his horse was saddled with buying beer for all the other players. The game became official with the first advertised match, and soon a real club took shape. In 1991, the 158-acre Sarasota Polo Club opened off Lorraine Road, ushering in decades of world-class polo and internationally known players. Today, the club — sold last year to well-known Kentucky equestrians James Miller and Misdee Wrigley Miller — features seven Bermuda grass fields, a half-mile horse track, a 72-horse boarding facility, clubhouse, pavilion and 22 weeks of game play. Every Sunday from December to April, the club opens its gates to spectators, who turn out in droves to tailgate in natty attire. If you’re picturing snobby Pretty Woman-style divot stomping however, think again. Polo may be known as the sport of kings, but in Lakewood Ranch, it’s refreshingly egalitarian. sarasotapolo.com

Cyclists Stick Together

The irreverently named Village Idiots Cycling Club takes full advantage of Lakewood Ranch’s interconnected streets, generous bike lanes and unblemished pavement. The recreational club, which also runs the more serious Village Idiots Racing Team, is one of the area’s most popular meetups, drawing flocks of spandex-clad cyclists of all ages to Main Street’s Village Bikes for morning and evening rides. An official USA Cycling Club, the group began 13 years ago as a handful of friends planning rides via email. Now, hundreds of cyclists go out for rides, which often end over a stack of pancakes or a pitcher of beer. Check out the Village Idiots’ Facebook page for info on weekly rides and pop-up pedals. villageidiotscycling.com

Nathan Benderson Park is Huge

OK, so it’s not technically in Lakewood Ranch, but Nathan Benderson Park is close enough to be considered a major perk. NBP is 600 acres of green space, 400 acres of which is an open lake dedicated to recreational sports and spectator competitions such as rowing, kayaking, canoeing and dragon boat racing. With several international rowing regattas under its belt, NBP is regarded as one of the state’s premier spots for world rowing events. It’s also a venue for food festivals and concerts. The nonprofit organization that operates the facility — Suncoast Aquatic Nature Center and Associates — is looking to expand programming by adding soccer, archery and drone racing.
CRICKET IS A BIG DEAL
Strikers, batsman and jaffas, oh my! In 2006, Lakewood Ranch became home to the Sarasota International Cricket Club, a nonprofit organization hatched in 1983 by hobby cricket players eager to bring the world’s second-most popular sport to the Suncoast. The club runs year-round, offering locals the chance to learn, play or watch a match. If you know nothing about the game or you find yourself in a sticky wicket and you’re looking for a unique pick-me-up, head to Parry Field near the end of University Parkway for a cricket match. The club’s Six-a-Side Cricket Festival held each year around Thanksgiving is a weekend-long event that draws teams from all over the world. The event will celebrate its 25th year this fall — just like Lakewood Ranch.

DOGS RULE
It’s good to be a dog in Lakewood Ranch. The community boasts six dog parks and a plethora of pet resorts, doggy day care centers, rescue facilities, bow-wow boutiques and Fido-friendly fundraising events. Last October’s Barctober Fest, benefiting the Animal Rescue Coalition, was one of the area’s biggest pet festivals, with the exception of the old Pug Parade, which used to lure masses of pug lovers from all over the state to Adventure Park.

GREEN SPACE IS SACRED
Despite steady growth and development, protecting the wetlands and natural ecosystems of yore was an essential part of the Lakewood Ranch development process. As was savoring continued green space for resident use. Lakewood Ranch hosts more than 7,000 acres of lakes, parks and nature preserves, as well as more than 150 miles of multisurface trails for residents and visitors. According to LWR planners, “40% of the community will be kept as open and recreational spaces.” Now, THAT is something to brag about.

EATING OUT IS AN ADVENTURE
Think Epcot Center is the only place in Florida where you can eat around the world? Think again. The restaurants in Lakewood Ranch are surprisingly diverse for a community that’s existed for only 25 years. The culinary lineup on Main Street alone is delectably ethnic: bruschetta from Italy (Main Street Trattoria), barbecue from the Deep South (Nancy’s Bar-B-Q), churros from Mexico (Casa Maya), ramen from Japan (Hana Sushi) and cassoulet from France (Paris Bistrot), and a dozen new restaurants are slated to open in 2019. Foodies rejoice!

WILD THINGS ABOUND
We all know homebuilders love breaking ground in Lakewood Ranch, but before single-family real estate cropped up, wild animals called it home. And guess what? They’re still there! Don’t let the manicured lawns and town homes distract you from the fact that bobcats, boars and snakes still lurk off the beaten path. Not so furtive are the sandhill cranes seen crossing busy roads at inconvenient times, or the river otters and stotic alligators seen hanging out in the lakes and rivers. Oh, and let’s not forget the threatened gopher tortoise, for which SMR has set aside 38 acres.
THERE’S NO SHORTAGE OF DESIGNER DUDS
Looking for an upscale and independently owned boutique? In the mood to browse the merch at Louis Vuitton? Deep-pocketed shoppers in Lakewood Ranch aren’t hurting for good stores. From the Mall at University Town Center (home to high-end retailers such as Saks Fifth Avenue and Lilly Pulitzer to the more low-brow Forever 21) to the keepsakey Wish on Main Street, quality retail therapy is at every turn.

FARM-TO-TABLE PRODUCE
The Market at Lakewood Ranch grew out of a need for a Community Supported Agriculture veggie pick-up location. Now, thanks to the efforts of Monaca Onstad, Lakewood Ranch’s director of community relations, the produce pick-up spot has blossomed into a full-fledged farmers market. The market, which kicked off December 2017 at the Sarasota Polo Club, is a collaborative effort between SMR and Worden Farm, an 85-acre certified organic family farm and CSA program based in Punta Gorda. The market runs from 3-7 p.m. every Wednesday through April and features live music and free sunset yoga for residents looking for a little hump day Zen.

THERE’S A CLUB FOR EVERYTHING
When we say Lakewood Ranch loves clubs, we’re not talking about the late-night drinking and dancing variety. We’re talking about the well-run clusters of people who routinely gather for a common purpose. Whether you dig soccer, wine, mah jongg, photography or gardening, there’s a group of like-minded hobbyists happy to welcome you to the club. Residents band together over just about anything in Lakewood Ranch: genealogy, history, jazz music, gourmet cooking, pickleball ... There’s even a club for empty nesters. To find your peeps, visit lwrcac.com/clubs

THE GOLF COURSE LIVING IS TOP NOTCH
If you’re into living where you golf, then East County is manna from country club heaven. Breathtaking courses cut through multiple communities, including Lakewood Ranch Golf and Country Club, Esplanade Golf & Country Club and Lakewood National. Professional athletes love to retire here because they can step outside their lanai and knock out 18 holes any time of the year.

HOMES ARE BUILT TO ORDER
Retirees. Young professionals. Young families. Empty nesters. Lakewood Ranch is a multigenerational pole-star that offers truly custom living. In a master-planned community, the architecture can often appear cookie cutter unless builders are willing to work with clients to design spaces that are unique and one-of-a-kind. Custom luxury homes are cropping up all over the ranch, especially in marquee developments such as The Lake Club and Country Club East, which has taken the community’s profile from far-flung suburbia to an elegant hideaway.
BUSINESS IS BOOMING
Lakewood Ranch is said to have one of the lowest vacancy rates for office space in the region, probably because the community does mixed-use development so well. At the heart of this phenomenon is the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance, which has become the backbone of the small business community. In addition to offering business support, the LWRBA hosts more than 100 events a year, connecting more than 2,500 members.

DEVELOPERS HAVE A CONSCIENCE
Yes, housing developments disrupt the environment. But, in Lakewood Ranch, an eco-minded homebuilders are pumping out projects that are energy efficient and respectful of preservation space. Since 2004, more than 14,000 acres in Lakewood Ranch have been certified “green” by the Florida Green Building Coalition. Keeping in line with the community’s reputation for sustainability, Lennar Homes announced in 2017 that its new Polo Run subdivision would equip all 500 of its single-family homes with rooftop solar panels to help offset up to 60% of home energy needs — making it the first all-solar neighborhood in Lakewood Ranch.

IT NO LONGER FEELS FAR AWAY
There was a time when Lakewood Ranch residents got sick of hearing they lived in the middle of nowhere. No one seems to say that anymore. Here’s why: Lakewood Ranch is 17 miles from Siesta Key, 13.9 miles from Lido Beach, 7.8 miles from the Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport, 9.9 miles from downtown Sarasota and 38 miles from St. Petersburg. Even Tampa International Airport is less than an hour away. If anything, Lakewood Ranch’s location has gotten more convenient over the years, thanks to its proximity to the interstate.

THE HOSPITAL JUST GOT BETTER
The Lakewood Ranch Medical Center is nearing the end of its $28 million renovation. The facility and staff carry no shortage of accolades to support its re-energized mission, including an “A” grade in patient safety and a first-place ranking for “Excellence in Care Transitions” among acute care hospitals. In addition to adding an advanced robotic surgery center and being home to multiple heart catheter labs, the hospital offers advanced breast diagnostics at its Breast Health Center and is the first hospital in the state to offer FDA-approved technology for the treatment of prostate cancer.

YOUR SOCIAL CALENDAR IS HANDLED
In today’s high-tech world, it can be hard to make meaningful real-life connections. Fortunately for residents in Lakewood Ranch, the community runs a nonprofit solely dedicated to organizing events and managing social groups. LWR Community Activities was formed to foster a sense of community on the ranch. Led by energetic man-about-town Keith Pandeloglou, the 501(c) works closely with residents to curate events. This year’s lineup includes the Irish Celtic Festival in Adventure Park (March 9), the Backyard Concert Series in Summerfield Park (March 10), LWR Talks Speaker Series at Lakewood Ranch Golf & Country Club (March 19 and April 16), EGGstravaganza in Adventure Park (April 13), Main Street’s Tribute to Heroes Parade (May 19), BooFest (Oct. 25) and Holidays Around the Ranch (Dec. 13). lwrcac.com
IT’S GROWING INTO A BIOTECH HUB
Collaboration Opportunities for Research and Exploration, or CORE, was created to bolster Lakewood Ranch’s growing life-sciences sector by appealing to biotech companies looking for new headquarters. In an economy that’s historically focused on tourism and real estate, the move to build a 300-acre health and science business park signaled a push to bring high-paying jobs to the area. In 2018, Mercedes Scientific, a laboratory supplies company, became the first medical-related business to break ground on the campus. Situated off State Road 70 and Lakewood Ranch Boulevard, CORE will soon be the home of Florida Cancer Specialists’ new $16 million treatment facility, slated to open later this summer. corelwr.com

THERE’S ROOM TO RUN
Premier Sports Campus has 140 acres of Celebration-seeded grass and 23 FIFA-regulation fields that host mammoth sporting events. A statewide destination for soccer, rugby and lacrosse tournaments, the campus is already a hot spot for Ultimate Frisbee, food festivals and running events. On March 23, it will host The Great Inflatable 5K, an inflatable obstacle course race with an all-inflatable after-party. The former SMR-owned venue was purchased last year by Manatee County. When officials announced they plan to add an aquatics center and library to the property, it quickly became one of Lakewood Ranch’s most anticipated projects.

MUSIC ON MAIN NEVER GETS OLD
Since 2006, Music on Main has been the only place in East Manatee County where people with two left feet can feel comfortable dancing in the street. From 6-9 p.m. on the first Friday of every month, Main Street is closed for a free block party complete with rollicking live music, food vendors, beer trucks and kiddle activities. On March 1, Tampa Bay reggae band Jah Movement will shake up the scene with its blend of calypso and funk. Yeah mon! And, each month a different charity benefits from the event. lakewoodranch.com/event/music-on-main

THE CIRCUS ALWAYS COMES TO TOWN
Anyone travelling south on I-75 can see Circus Sarasota’s Ulla Searing Big Top off University Parkway. The red and white tent sits at the north end of Nathan Benderson Park. Every February and March it presents weeks of dazzling European circus arts entertainment. Pedro Reis, Circus Arts Conservatory co-founder and high-flying legend, says no two performances are the same. This year’s circus runs through March 24 and is followed by Cirque des Voix (March 22-24). circusarts.org

THE GRAVITY RAIL AT BOB GARDNER PARK IS PURE JOY
A two-directional swing ride that zips riders down a sloping track, the Gravity Rail at Bob Gardner Park is a hidden jewel. It runs on body weight and gravity. Kids and adults find it thrilling because there’s nothing else like it around. Finding the ride requires walking the park’s sidewalks for a decent stretch. Outdoor enthusiasts are loving this new 40-acre park that opened last April between Mallory Park and Arbor Grande. It has a playground, dog park (with splash lake), multiple pavilions, a baseball diamond and a nine-hole disc golf course. Like all the other parks around, it connects to a large network of trails. The trails are beautiful, but it’s the swing ride that sets Bob Gardner above the rest.