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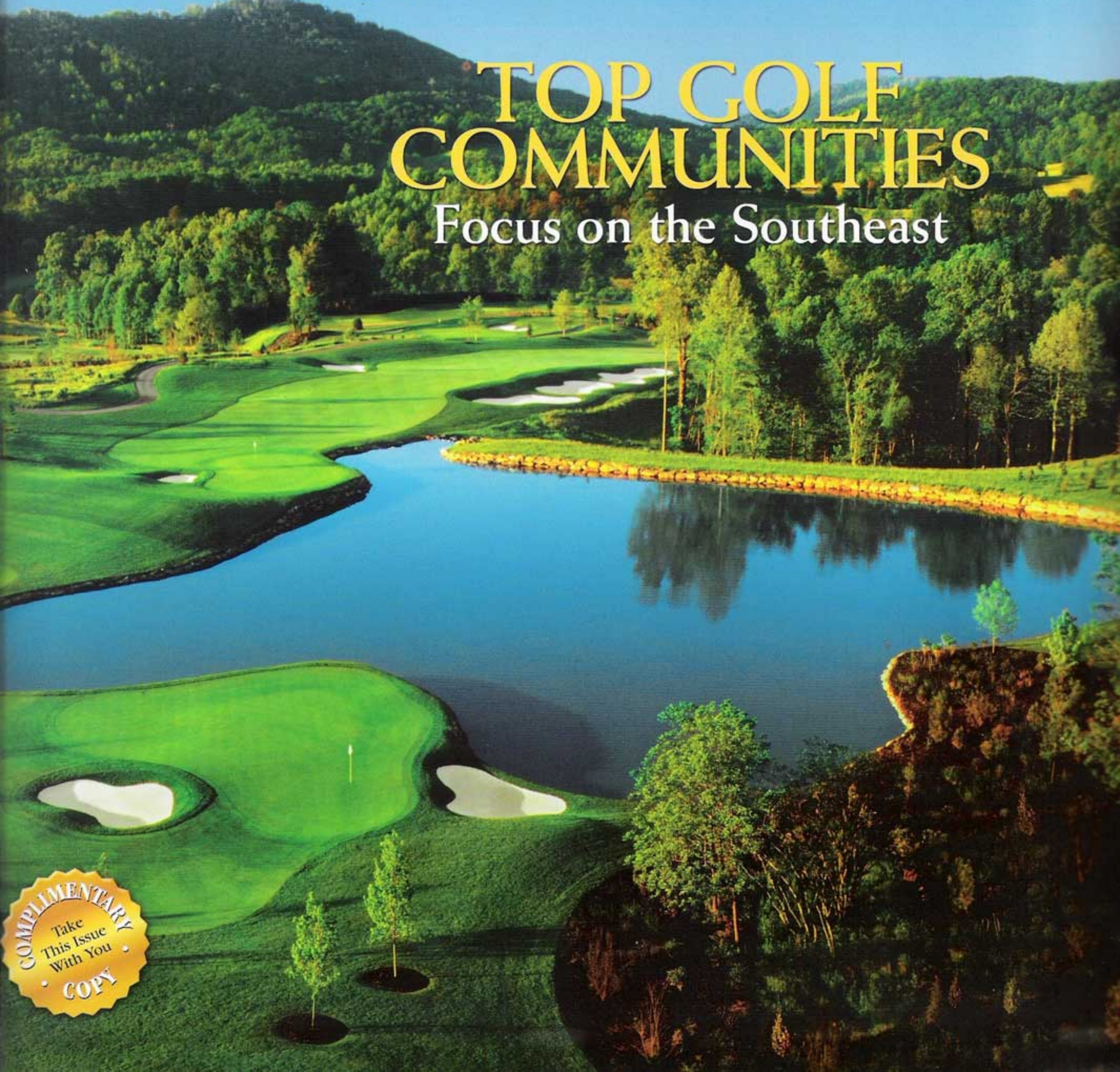
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Renting a Summer Villa Abroad?

Be sure to choose the right rental agent and plan carefully.

Retreating abroad to a rented villa or estate for two weeks or more with family and friends is becoming a popular summer pastime. Luxury rental agents in Europe and the Caribbean report that business is booming.

Driving the rental trend is the high cost of foreign real estate and scarcity of choice coastline properties, making investment less practical. In addition, more vacationing families are finding they just want to kick back and relax in foreign settings with the freedom to change locations year after year.

Among this year's hottest rental destinations are the French Riviera, the Virgin Islands and select parts of Latin America such as Honduras and Panama. But no matter where you rent, plan carefully, perform due diligence and review your contract carefully.

Know Your Needs

Affluent vacationers who decide to rent often start by asking friends and foreign business associates if their properties are available. While this approach is convenient, there's always the risk that you'll be stuck with a house that lacks must-have amenities, is too far from the beach or doesn't have a chef or cleaning staff.

A better bet is to seek a villa or estate rental through a travel agent or a large, well-known real estate agency such as Coldwell Banker, Christies Great Estates or Sotheby's International. Or you can use a smaller agency that specializes in specific regions.

"Before you fall in love with a property's photos online, make a list of your needs," advises Jill Devriendt, a director of Coldwell Banker Europe. Your list should include your desired number of bedrooms and baths; distance to the airport, town and beach; type of views; level of seclusion; pool size; and even the thread count of bed sheets.

Once you know what you want and need, set a budget, since prized properties can exceed \$100,000 a month, not including staff or cleaning.

Values can be found in quieter regions. "One of the least-known but increasingly popular rentals is a villa on Corsica for part of your stay and a yacht for the balance," says Devriendt. A villa and yacht that accommodates six adults cost about \$90,000 for a summer month, she says.

You also can find values in towns adjacent to big-name destinations. For example, Ramatuelle on the French Riviera is just a few miles from hot-hot St. Tropez — But villa rental prices in Ramatuelle are about 30 percent less for the same space and duration.

Watch Your Back

Ask your rental agent lots of questions about any villa you want to rent and the surrounding area to troubleshoot unpleasant surprises.

Nasty wild cards can include too little privacy, loud roadway traffic, summer construction projects, noisy discos nearby, weekend pool parties, too-distant grocery stores, harsh-surface beaches, poor cell phone service and defective high-speed internet connections, fax machines and printers.

"Many people want the option of working while they're away," says Nancy Anderson of McLaughlin Anderson Luxury Villas on St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands. "You need to provide your agent with a list of your family's needs and indicate which ones are must-haves."

A growing number of high-end villas in the Virgin Islands now provide luxury amenities ranging from gourmet kitchens to home gyms and flat-screen TVs. In addition, many agencies can arrange for services such as personal yoga training, massage therapy, nannies, professional chefs and food shopping services.

Given the demand, clients are urged to book these services months before arrival, says Anderson, whose agency represents numerous high-end villas in the region, including The Distillery and Gun Point on Tortola, Blue Serenity and Star Garden on St. Thomas, and Kismet and Delfina on St. John.



Ask your rental agent questions about any villa you want to rent and the surrounding area. Shown here is Star Garden on St. Thomas.

Don Hebert Photography

"Our guest concierge service can hire almost any service a client requires, reserve the time and even transact the down payment, since many clients are uncomfortable transferring money to people they don't know," she says.

Some experts also say it's wise to call two or three references — people who recently stayed at the property—to uncover any major drawbacks and urge your agent to make adjustments.

You also should have the names and numbers of local service providers and repair people in case the air conditioning, phone, cable TV or Internet service fails.

Review the Terms

Once you are ready to move forward, your rental agent will send you a contract. Be sure to review the document carefully.

The contract should clearly outline payment and cancellation policies as well as liabilities and other terms and conditions, such as minor breakage.

"In the Caribbean, most high-end villa rentals are on the honor system," says Anderson. "If guests find something broken when they arrive, they should let us know immediately — And if they break something, they should do

the same."

If the rental contract doesn't offer a "waiver of subrogation" — a clause that states the owner's insurer cannot come after you for payment in the event you cause serious damage to the property you're renting — consider taking out extra liability coverage.

"Talk to your homeowner's insurance company or agent to see what type of supplemental coverage is necessary and available to protect against major damage," says Martin Steere, a partner with Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, LLP in Los Angeles. ☺

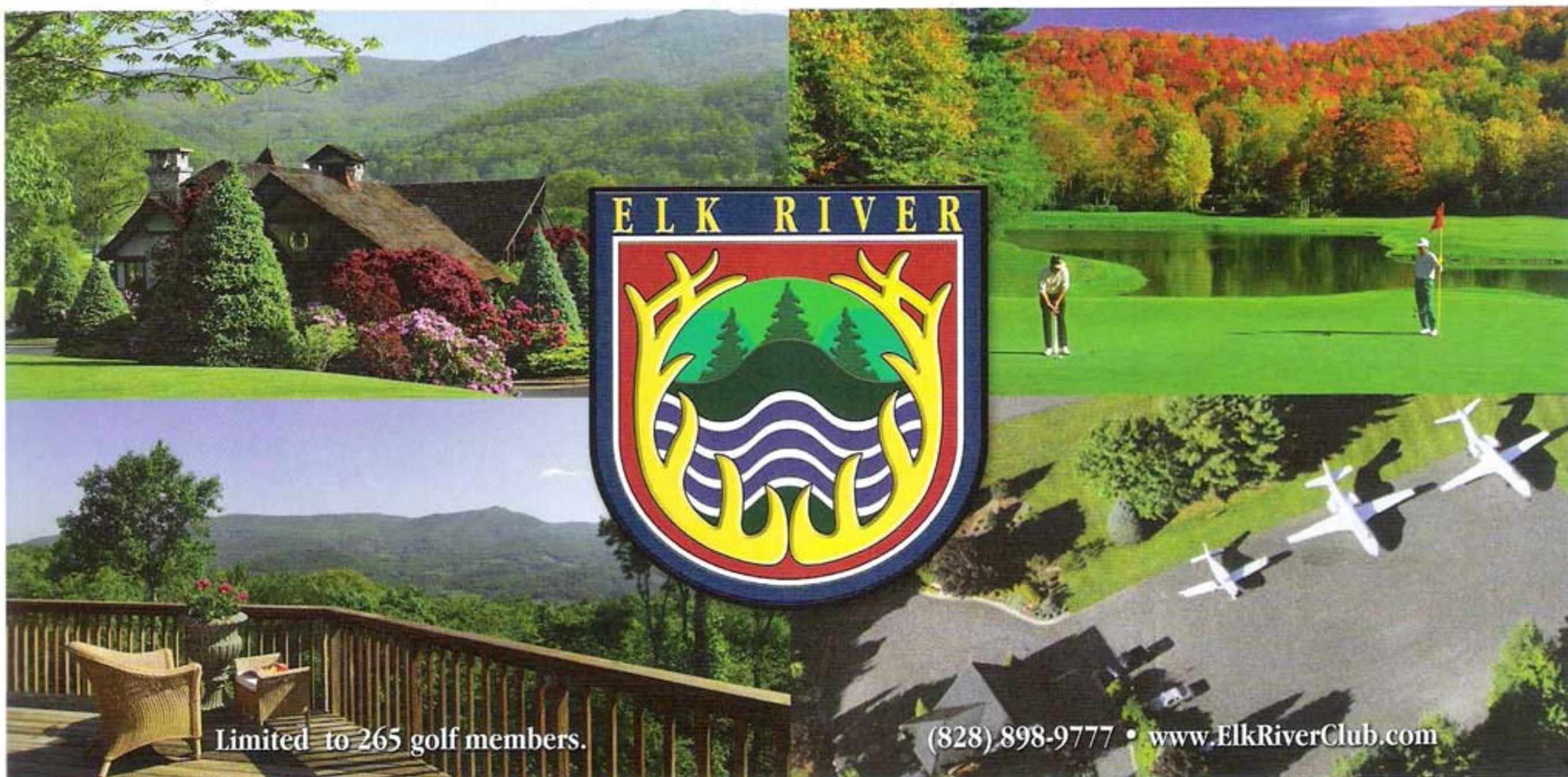
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