

10 Summer Home Mistakes

By [SUSHIL CHEEMA](#)

Ian and Barbara White-Thomson are selling their dream summer house, an oceanfront five-bedroom on Peaks Island, near Portland, Maine.

They bought it only three years ago. But it's become a 4,208-square-foot burden.

Maine Dilemma



Bob Delaney

Ian and Barbara White-Thomson's second home on Maine's Peaks Island.

The couple, who make their home in Pasadena, Calif., sunk nearly \$1 million into renovations—on top of the \$1.8 million they paid for the home in 2006. They gutted the kitchen and redid the living room. They opened up views to the Atlantic Ocean by removing a fireplace that separated the living and dining areas, putting a glass screen in its place.

They say they're still smitten with the place. Nevertheless, last June they listed it for \$2.5 million and have since cut the price to \$2.3 million.

"The house is really too big for us," says the 73-year-old Mr. White-Thomson, who retired as CEO of Borax, a borate technology company, 10 years ago. "The house is terrific for the one week a year when we can get all of our family and grandchildren there," he adds. He and his wife have three adult children and five grandchildren. "The rest of the time, it's too big, and when we are not there at all it has to be heated and it has to be gardened."

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The White-Thomsons aren't the first couple to get stuck with a too-big house in a far-off locale. But now their problems are compounded by the downturn in the luxury home market.

Prices for high-end houses are the [lowest](#) they've been in some time. A good time to buy certainly, but also a good time to get swept away in a less-than-ideal transaction.

Here are some mistakes to avoid when you're looking to buy a summer house:

1. Buying on impulse: "There are residential brokerages with beautiful places on their windows hoping you make that mistake. Don't," says Glenn Kelman, the president and CEO of real-estate site Redfin.
2. Befriending the Realtor: Since many second-home buyers are new to town, often their only 'friend' is their real-estate agent, "who is going to make a boatload of money when they buy," Mr. Kelman says. "Work your connections to find somebody who knows somebody who already lives there." Those people can provide insight into the realities of living in the area and even about a particular property. "There are so many times where the only guy who would buy that house is the only one who has no idea what its history is," he adds.
3. Forgetting maintenance costs: "Often, [second homes] are in extreme places," says Mr. Kelman. "It's expensive to heat the pool in Whistler, British Columbia, and it's expensive to keep the locusts off in Costa Rica." Regardless of location, the costs of landscaping, mowing and pool maintenance must be considered. As the White-Thomsons learned, you'll have to pay those costs even when you're not there.
4. Not thinking about the weather: In some areas, such as Florida, extra insurance for events like hurricanes is an added factor. Storm damages can add to upkeep costs, as well.
5. Buying in a popular spot: A weekend home can pose a problem if it's in a very popular place, like New York's tony Hamptons. Traffic out to Long Island's east end can be a bear on a Friday—and not everyone has their own helicopter. "All of a sudden Friday at 6:00 comes along and they are piling everyone into a car," says Kathy Braddock, a co-founder of Charles Rutenberg Realty. "You spend the entire time talking about what time you should leave on Sunday to avoid the traffic," she adds.
6. Buying in the boonies: If air travel is required to get to the second home, it should be reasonably close to the airport, Mr. Kelman says. "You don't want to fly there and then rent a car and drive there for God knows how long," he says. "If it's in the boonies near where you live, you don't want it to be so far away that you can't get there without ducking out of work at 4:00." For the White-Thomsons having a second home closer to their primary residence in California may have allowed them to use it more, but they made a commitment to use the home at least two months a year. "If you don't use it, it's a tremendously expensive hotel," Mr. White-Thomson says.

7. Forgetting that you might have grandchildren: Empty nesters who buy a second home may outgrow it quickly when grandchildren start to arrive. "I hear lots of stories of people buying, say, a condo in Florida that they plan to retire in," says Amy Bohutinsky, a vice president of communications at real-estate site Zillow.com. A condo sounds great when the kids are in college, but soon enough you have grandchildren. "What used to be a family of four is now a family of eight and kids running around and all of a sudden you can't fit."

8. Forgetting that you might not want to see your grandchildren: On the other hand some empty nesters don't want to accommodate the entire family. "It's kind of a chance to cleanse" after years of needing ample storage space and extra rooms to accommodate a family, says Ms. Braddock. Rather than maintaining a larger home, it might make more sense to rent hotel rooms for extra guests, she says.

9. Not checking out the rental rates: Those people who use a home only for a few weeks a year and want to rent it the rest of the time should look into the property's rental history before buying, says Jim Oxnam, a broker with Brown Harris Stevens in the Hamptons. "If someone needs the money to pay the mortgage or to improve the house, it might be nice to rent the house for a season," he says.

10. Thinking you want a summer home: "A lot of people get very caught up with the idea that a weekend home would be a lovely thing to have, but I don't think they put a lot of thought into if they really want to go there every weekend," says Ms. Braddock, who lives in New York City.

When her children were young, Ms. Braddock and her ex-husband had owned a second home where the activities revolved around the kids. More recently she rented a cottage in Staatsburg, in New York's Hudson Valley, paying about \$2,700 a month on a year-long lease. This time around her oldest was in college and the other in high school, and she and her partner were pretty bored. Looking at antiques, reading the paper and walking around nearby Rhinebeck take up only so much time, she says: "It was the greatest validation that I don't want a weekend house."