

Home is where the hangar is

Recession or not, a number of aviation estates (sort of like the bastard children of golf estates and airports), are in various stages of development around the country.

And though some developers are reporting sales slower than they'd like, private aircraft owners do seem committed to getting closer to their planes.

"Right now you are probably paying R1 500 to R2 000 a month for a hangar," says Graham Cooper, whose estate agency is the marketing partner for the proposed Malmesbury Aviation Estate, about 10km from Malmesbury in the Western Cape. "If you have one stand you pay once and you also don't have problems like engines being stolen on the outfields or fuel being siphoned off."

The Malmesbury development will be the biggest of its kind in the country, with 227 stands linked to the private runway. For about R1.25-million each stand owner will be able to get out of bed, walk through to the garage, get in a plane and taxi off.

Two flight schools will offer training on everything from ultralights to light commercial planes. The airfield will not be instrumented or controlled and in weather foul enough to preclude a visual approach that will mean no flying.

But Cooper, an ultralight pilot, doesn't expect his buyers to commute to the office every day. He anticipates that leisure flyers will want to pop up to Vredendal for a weekend breakfast, perhaps. He says 60 individuals with exactly that kind of flying in mind have signed up to a waiting list to buy stands.

The estate has been granted the various aviation licences and rights required, but still faces what looks set to be an uphill battle in the formal approvals at local and provincial government levels.

The developers chose the site because it is nowhere near major flight paths and that is exactly the gripe of some local residents: the changes the development will bring. "It's about the noise pollution, but it is also about the sense of place," says Diana Simons of the Swartlands Forum. "The precedent this creates will allow others to follow and soon we'll have aircraft buzzing everywhere."

Similar, though smaller, developments elsewhere have not run into the same complaints and are more concerned about the impact of the recession on their sales. At Aero Coves, a section of The Coves on the Hartbeespoort Dam, six of the planned 15 runway stands have been sold, according to estate agent Daphné McKay.

The landing strip has been there for decades; it has avoided much of the regulatory requirements and residents have not exactly had a noise-free environment, says chairperson Robin Stumke. "This area is used to stack up the planes when they can't land at some of the other airfields, so we always have lots of them circling.

The small volume that we'll add won't make a real difference." Aero Coves will provide seven extra hangars for homeowners elsewhere in the development and guests of owners, making for a maximum of about 30 planes using the field, mostly at weekends.

At the Zandspruit Bush and Aero Estate near Hoedspruit there are no concerns about noise pollution either, but the economy is biting deeper, perhaps because it is in strictly holiday-home territory.

"We've had lots of people who've been up to see it," says director of the development Martin den Dunnen, who flies a Cessna 206. "Then they tell me 'I just need to sell my holiday flat first' or 'I need the money from my beach house to buy it' so they can't commit and pay."

Zandspruit will have 38 stands from where owners can taxi on to the runway, with another 20 hangar spaces sold as sectional titles. The idea, Den Dunnen says, is that those who want to live off the runway can still house their planes, but can also sell that space independently. He foresees that some owners may leave their planes in the open parking area over the weekend rather than shelling out for a hangar.

"Our main market is Gauteng, the guys who will fly up for the weekend, but we're also looking at Durban," he says. "There is a lot of active flying there and it's a nice hop from there to Hoedspruit." Zandspruit is in pre-sales, but uptake has been slow enough that the developers are looking for a financial partner who can shoulder the cost of developing infrastructure up front.

"Some people have looked at aviation estates before, but they never got off the ground," Den Dunnen says. "And right now you can get infrastructure cheap because people need the work and the supplies are cheap. If we can get everything built now, then our sales will be easier."