

July 29, 2007

IN THE REGION | NEW JERSEY

All This, and the Duke Estate Too

By ANTOINETTE MARTIN

RARITAN



WHAT is immediately striking about the expensive apartment complex opening here on the site of a Civil War-era woolen mill is that it has an unusual assortment of neighbors.

On one side of the new 224-unit building is a modern shopping center; behind it is a traditional, and tightly packed neighborhood of older single-family homes. Facing it is the 2,700-acre Duke estate — with the Raritan River running through it, fields and fields of corn, miles and miles of woods, and 11 exotic gardens that include an Italian courtyard, an Indo-Persian watercourse and French parterre plantings.

Tourists can of course formally visit some portions of the estate, for an admission fee, but its neighbors across the street at the new rental complex, called River Park at Raritan, have free access to some of its grounds. All it takes is a stroll across a historic cast-iron truss bridge and past an ancient, empty stone structure, which once belonged to the estate and looks as though it came from the fictional campus of Hogwarts. As if all this weren't enough of a departure from the norm, there is continental breakfast, laid out each morning, starting at 6, in a common area called the Club Room.

River Park, situated two blocks from the Raritan train station, and part of a state-designated redevelopment area, also offers the now fairly typical list of amenities: swimming pool, tennis and basketball court, high-tech wiring, fitness center, business center, billiards room and, of course, a concierge.

“We think there’s a little something for everybody here,” said Tom Baraniecki, the property manager, “and that we’ll draw people at all stages of life.”

Companies that provide temporary corporate housing have leased about 50 units. Other early renters at the complex, where finishing touches are still being applied by construction crews, run the gamut, says Mr. Baraniecki — from empty nesters who have second homes in [Florida](#), to young couples with children, to single professionals who work long days in [Manhattan](#).

The apartments, too, are diverse, ranging from 788 to 1,519 square feet, and from one-bedroom flats to two-bedroom lofts, most with balconies. There are 17 different floor plans.

Monthly rents range from \$1,665 to \$2,810 — well above those for most apartments in surrounding Somerset County, and more like rents at Pier Village on the beach in revitalized Long Branch, or an upper-floor rent in a chic new tower in Hoboken.

Amenities cost extra in many cases, too. An assigned space in the parking garage below the building goes for \$80 a month, and an assigned outdoor space is \$45 a month. The Residence Club fee — which is mandatory and covers access to all the sports and entertainment facilities, as well as breakfast — is \$550 for the duration of the lease. A satellite TV package with HBO and broadband Internet is \$49 a month.

There are also rules governing pet ownership. Dogs over 30 pounds are not allowed; smaller dogs cost \$50 a month, cats \$25. And for each pet, Mr. Baraniecki said, there is a nonrefundable \$500 deposit.

Still, butterflies flitting across the road from the Duke Estate are free. A walk to the riverbanks is a gratis delight. And passage across the river to the cornfields requires only putting one foot down after the other.

A tour of parts of the Duke property does require a reservation and a ticket, costing, in most cases, \$5 to \$10. A guided family bike tour taking in the lakes, waterfalls and bridges, for example, is \$10 for adults, \$5 for children. A self-guided moonlight tour through various natural habitats is \$5. Tours of the gardens cost \$10 per person, or less, depending on the size of the group.

Some of the land in this neighborhood was contaminated by industry long ago. It was cleaned up using Transit District grants and loans before it could be redeveloped. In adjacent Somerville, remediation work has been done at a military depot where mercury was once stored.

Yet the river appears pristine, and fishermen regularly spin their reels off the footbridge. And the Duke property, established by James Buchanan Duke, founder of the American Tobacco Company, and later home to his daughter, Doris, provides an enveloping green belt only a couple of miles away from the Somerset Corporate Center and the Bridgewater Commons Mall.

“Several of our residents like to walk their dogs across the river to the Duke estates on a daily basis,” said Mr. Baraniecki, who is employed by Silbert Realty and Management. The River Park apartments were built and are owned by a group of developers calling themselves Raritan Town Center L.L.C.

The brick-faced complex is designed in the shape of a W, so as to maximize the number of corner apartments and windows, according to Brian S. Silbert, president of the management company.

The 23 split-level loft units are all on the fourth floor. The two-bedroom lofts range from 1,215 to 1,519 square feet; each has an upstairs bedroom, bath and sitting area.

Ceilings are at least nine feet high, and each unit has granite kitchen counters, track lighting, an oversized soaking tub, a walk-in closet and a stackable washer/dryer. In addition, each apartment is equipped with surround sound and security alarms.

“When planning this new community,” Mr. Silbert said, “we did a careful market study of the immediate area and Somerset County, what was already available, and what was needed. We realized that there is enough medical professional and retail, including the lovely shops in downtown Raritan, the restaurants and supermarkets. But what the area lacked was a truly upscale apartment complex.”

