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## For temporary housing, they'll play matchmaker

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Across the Tampa Bay area, thousands of vacant condos and apartments languish in the lonely hearts club.

For the past two years, it has been Dan and Claudia Gorman's job to dress them up, roll them out and hook them up with out-of-towners.

The Gormans — he's a deactivated Marine Corps captain, and she's a native of Brazil he met while guarding the American embassy in Rio de Janeiro — operate Avenida Suites. The company matches dozens of Tampa condos and apartments with corporate visitors and military officers on temporary stints at MacDill Air Force Base.

Avenida is one of several temporary housing services feeding off the housing glut since the market cratered three years ago. Tampa's Channelside and Harbour Island, where hundreds of speculators unwisely gambled in real estate, supply most of the units.

The Gormans deal in four-month minimum stays, and many struggling condo complexes require tenants to lease for at least a year. But for buildings that do participate, the service seems to benefit everyone: The Gormans furnish and market empty units for a slice of the rental income. The absentee owners keep making their mortgage payments. And with more lights glinting from condo windows, neighborhoods feel more alive than dead.

Chris Hyatt paid \$320,000 in 2007 for a two-bedroom condo at the Place at Channelside. Developers went bankrupt last year when depositors walked away from units without closing. Despite the pounding his finances were taking, Hyatt decided to stick it out as an investor.

"I didn't know whether to sell, rent or move in myself. I sent e-mails to friends across America suggesting they move here. I was striking out everywhere," Hyatt said.

After he pays the Gormans their cut, Hyatt clears about \$1,800, not quite enough to cover his mortgage and monthly condo fees but plenty to keep him from turning in his keys to the bank.

The Gormans charge about \$100 a day, undercutting pricey suites at the nicer hotels in town. They show off one of their furnished units at the year-old Seaport apartment complex in Channelside.

The multistory complex opened last year at the height of the housing slump. Average apartment vacancy across the region exceeds 10 percent for the first time in more than a decade.

The Gormans leave little to chance. The living room, stuffed with leather sofas and a flat-screen TV, overlooks the

Seaport swimming pool. Fresh dark-wood furniture adorns the two bedrooms. Claudia has hung paintings and candle sconces.

Thick towels drape from bathroom racks. There's even wine on the granite counters in the kitchen.

"If you get a two-room suite at the Marriott, you're looking at \$170 to \$300 a night," Dan Gorman said.

Claudia Gorman gleans her decorating tips from an experience three years ago, when the family moved to Tampa from North Carolina and the family was crammed into a temporary hotel room.

"We hated it. We stayed for two weeks without a washer and drier in the room. We pretty much lived in our suitcase," she said.

Matthew Hundley, a lieutenant colonel in the Marine Corps Reserves in Texas, was assigned to MacDill a year and a half ago. He grabbed the Gormans' contact number from a bulletin board used by Marines at MacDill.

The couple put him up in a condo at the Place at Channelside. It's big enough to accommodate his family when they visit. And most everything's within walking distance.

"It's truly a home away from home. I absolutely love it," Hundley said. "I can walk to the movie theater or restaurants. About a mile away is the St. Pete Times Forum to see a hockey game or concerts. And there's no traffic to speak of."

With a supply-and-demand imbalance expected to last years, Tampa's condo market will see more neighbors like him.

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