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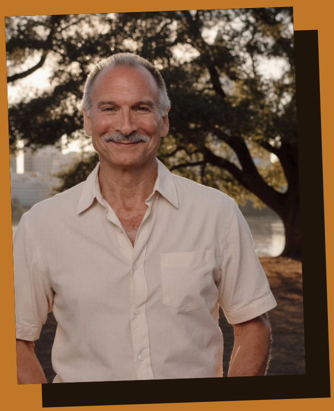
VOLUME ONE / FOR BUYERS

THE AUSTIN Buyer's FIELD GUIDE

A straight-talking guide for buyers navigating the Austin market.



A RELOCATION GUIDE — 2026 EDITION

A LETTER

Most of the people reading this guide are making a decision about Austin.

If that's you, this is for you. Most of my clients are reading about Austin before they're standing in it — scrolling Zillow at midnight from a different time zone, trying to figure out which neighborhood is theirs. They have a job relocating them, or a cost-of-living equation that finally tipped. They have ninety days. Sometimes thirty.

I've been in Austin real estate since 1981. Over four decades, I've watched this market through every cycle — the oil busts, the dot-com boom, the pandemic frenzy, and the correction that followed. I know how Austin behaves and how it rewards the buyer who comes in prepared.

What follows is the conversation I'd have with you on our first call — compressed into ten pages. The market realities, the neighborhood questions, the process, the mistakes. None of it is a pitch. All of it is what I tell people every week.

Pour a coffee. Take your time. The market is waiting, but it isn't in a rush.

— Ken

Austin is in a buyer's moment.

The Austin market that defined 2020–2022 — homes selling in a weekend, multiple offers as the default, prices climbing aggressively quarter over quarter — has corrected into something that looks more like a normal real estate market. Inventory has expanded significantly from its lows. Days on market have lengthened. Sellers are pricing realistically. The pace of decision-making is finally yours to set.

For relocating buyers in particular, this shift is welcome news. The frantic pace that used to push out-of-state buyers into rushed decisions is gone. You can tour a home twice, sleep on a decision, ask your spouse, walk the block on Google Street View, and submit an offer that reflects actual due diligence rather than panic.

This doesn't mean Austin is suddenly cheap, or that buying here is risk-free. It means the conditions favor a thoughtful buyer over an aggressive one. The advantage now goes to those who know what they want, who understand the neighborhoods they're considering, and who are willing to negotiate with patience.

For buyers especially, this is opportunity. You have time to actually understand Austin before you commit to it. The rest of this guide is built around that posture — slow down, learn the city, decide with clarity.

> "The advantage now goes to those who know what they want."

Begin with questions, not listings.

The most common mistake I see in relocating buyers is starting with the home search. Scrolling Zillow at 11pm in another state feels like progress — but the buyers who end up in homes they actually love almost never start there. They start with questions about themselves and what their next chapter needs to feel like.

01 What does a normal Tuesday look like in Austin a year from now?

02 Who in your life will be visiting often, and where will they sleep?

03 What does your real, lived commute look like — not in miles, but in mood?

04 How much yard, and how much time do you actually want to spend on it?

05 How important is walkability to coffee, dinner, parks, schools — versus space?

06 What's your tolerance for a renovation versus a turn-key home?

07 How long are you actually planning to stay before the next move?

08 Five years from now, what would a regret look like?

Your monthly payment is more than the price.

Texas has its own rules around the cost of a home, and relocating buyers — especially those coming from no-property-tax or low-property-tax states — are routinely surprised by what an “affordable” Austin home actually costs to own.

Pre-approval, not pre-qualification.

They sound similar; they aren't. Pre-qualification is a back-of-the-envelope estimate. Pre-approval is a lender's verified statement of what they'll actually loan you. In any market, sellers expect pre-approval — but in relocation deals where the buyer's not local, sellers want it more. Get pre-approved before you tour anything seriously.

The Texas property tax reality.

Texas has no state income tax, and it makes up for it on the property side. Effective rates in Travis County tend to land between 2% and 2.5% of the home's assessed value annually. On a $ 900,000 Austinhome, that's roughly $1,500–$1,875a month — often a third of the total monthly payment. If you're moving from California or New York, this might shock you. Build it in from day one, not as an afterthought.

The hidden costs.

Beyond principal, interest, and taxes, your real monthly cost includes homeowner's insurance (Texas storm and hail premiums are not gentle), possible HOA dues, mortgage insurance if you're putting under 20% down, and a maintenance reserve every honest homeowner sets aside (about 1% of home value annually). The all-in number is what determines whether you can actually live in the home.

The down payment math.

20% down isn't required. Many of my relocation clients close with 10% down, especially when they're rolling proceeds from a coastal sale into an Austin purchase and want to keep liquidity for the move. The trade-offs are mortgage insurance and a slightly higher monthly payment. There's no universally right answer — only the one that fits your savings, your income stability, and your appetite for keeping cash on hand.

Austin is many different cities, depending on the block.

A home in Tarrytown and a home in Barton Creek share a city and a price range, and almost nothing else. Below is a brief orientation to the neighborhoods I work in most often.

DOWNTOWN AUSTIN

Skyline views, Lady Bird Lake, and the heartbeat of the city.

Downtown Austin offers a rare combination of urban energy and natural beauty. The Lady Bird Lake hike-and-bike trail, world-class dining, and a walkable street grid make it Austin's most dynamic address — and a serious option for buyers who want zero commute and maximum lifestyle.

WESTLAKE HILLS & ROLLINGWOOD

Hill country estate living with the best public schools in the Austin area.

Westlake Hills and Rollingwood sit on the hills west of downtown with Hill Country views, Lake Austin access, and Eanes ISD — consistently ranked among Texas's top public school districts. For buyers prioritizing space, privacy, and education, this area is often the final answer.

HIGHLAND PARK WEST

Central Austin’s most coveted ridge, with downtown views and live oak canopy.

Highland Park West sits on a limestone ridge in the heart of Central Austin, with nearly 180-degree views of the downtown skyline. The neighborhood combines mid-century architecture, massive mature oaks, and a location that gives residents instant access to every part of the city.

TARRYTOWN

Austin’s most graceful established neighborhood, steps from Lake Austin.

Tarrytown is Austin's version of a classic American residential neighborhood done correctly: mature oaks, walkable streets, proximity to the lake, and a mix of homes that range from tasteful renovations to significant new construction. It is consistently among the most in-demand addresses in the city.

SPANISH OAKS

Gated Hill Country luxury 20 minutes from downtown Austin.

Spanish Oaks is a private, gated community in the Hill Country west of Austin, centered around the members-only Spanish Oaks Golf Club. The community offers custom estate lots, panoramic views, and a level of privacy and security rarely found this close to a major city.

OLD WEST AUSTIN

Historic streetcar neighborhoods with character, walkability, and downtown proximity.

Old West Austin encompasses Pemberton Heights, Bryker Woods, Enfield, and adjacent neighborhoods that developed along Austin's original streetcar lines. The result is a collection of historic homes — Tudor Revivals, bungalows, and Colonial Revivals — on walkable streets close to

Touring to keys, in five steps.

01 The Discovery Call.

Before we tour anything, we talk. A 30-minute Zoom where we figure out what you actually want — not bedrooms, but life shape. Where you want to spend your weekends. What your weekday looks like. What your spouse cares about that you don't.

02 The Neighborhood Tour.

I'll walk you through 4–6 Austin neighborhoods that fit your criteria — virtually if you're not here yet, in person if you are. By the end, you'll have a clear top two and you'll know why.

03 The Curated Search.

We tour homes that meet your criteria, not whatever Zillow's algorithm pushes. If you're not in Austin, I do FaceTime walkthroughs with you watching live. We narrow ruthlessly.

04 The Offer and Inspection.

When the right home appears, we draft an offer that reflects current market conditions, the seller's situation, and a price defensible by recent comparable sales. Texas's option period gives us seven to ten days post-acceptance to inspect and renegotiate. We use it well.

05 Close and Settle In.

Closing day is just the beginning. I help with movers, school enrollment, contractors for the inevitable first-month repairs, and the Austin-specific knowledge that makes the first six months feel less foreign.

What you can actually ask for now.

An Austin market that's normalized favors a buyer who's prepared to ask. Below are the specific concessions and terms that are negotiable in today's Austin — many of which were unimaginable two years ago.

Asking for repairs.

After inspection, request specific repairs in writing or a credit at closing equal to the cost. In a buyer-leaning market, this is increasingly granted, especially for items that affect insurability or livability.

Rate buydowns.

Sellers can buy down your interest rate for the first 1–3 years, lowering your monthly payment significantly. Underused, especially in relocation deals where buyers are stretching to enter the market.

Closing cost concessions.

Asking the seller to cover 1–3% of closing costs effectively reduces your cash-to-close. Common in today's market, especially valuable for relocation buyers managing dual housing costs during the move.

Inclusions.

Appliances, window treatments, the patio furniture. All negotiable. Often included if you ask, especially when the home has been on the market for more than 21 days.

Timing.

If your relocation timing requires flexibility — closing before your moving truck arrives, or a leaseback so the seller has time to find their next home — ask. Sellers will often grant timing concessions in exchange for price certainty.

What I see go wrong most often.

01 Touring before pre-approval.

Wastes everyone's time and weakens your position when the right home appears.

02 Trying to be your own relocation agent.

Reading Reddit threads and watching YouTube tours doesn't substitute for someone who walks these blocks every week.

03 Rushing the neighborhood decision.

The neighborhood will outlast the house. Spend more time on the area than on the floor plan.

04 Letting the listing agent represent you.

They have a fiduciary duty to the seller. As a relocation buyer especially, you deserve someone whose duty is to you.

05 Ignoring property taxes when comparing markets.

A "cheaper" Austin home can cost more monthly than a higher-priced California home, depending on the tax math.

06 Treating the offer as a final number.

Most negotiations have three or four moves. Expect them.

08 — WHEN YOU'RE READY

Let's start with a 30-minute call.

No pressure, no pitch. Just a chance to tell me what you're considering, hear what I know about the neighborhoods you're looking at, and answer the questions that don't have Google answers. A 30-minute conversation almost always clarifies more than three months of solo browsing.

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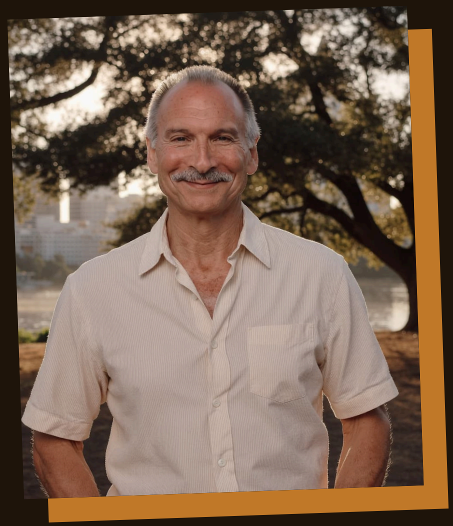

— Ken

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