The Out-of-Town Buyer’s Guide to Lake of the Ozarks

Relocation and second homes for buyers from Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago, Omaha and Des Moines

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Welcome to the lake

Lake of the Ozarks is a reservoir created by Bagnell Dam on the Osage River. Ameren Missouri runs it as a hydroelectric project and manages about 1,150 miles of shoreline under a federal (FERC) license [1]. The 92-mile Main Channel, also called the Osage Arm, has four major arms branching off it: the Gravois, Grand Glaize, Big Niangua and Little Niangua [2]. The lake touches four counties (Camden, Miller, Morgan and Benton), and several towns sit along the shore [3].

The main roads are **US Highway 54**, **State Highway 5** and **State Highway 52**. Highways 54 and 5 meet in Camdenton. Highway 54 serves the east, north and part of the south side of the lake, and Highway 5 serves the west side. The Community Bridge links Horseshoe Bend to Shawnee Bend and Highway 5 [2]. Nearby airports include **Lee C. Fine** (Lake Ozark State Park, Kaiser), **Camdenton Airport / Lake Aviation Center**, **Grand Glaize** (Osage Beach), **Columbia Regional** and **Springfield** [2].

This guide gives you the local knowledge most out-of-town buyers wish they’d had before their first showing weekend.

The lake areas at a glance

Area	County	What it's like
Osage Beach	Camden *and* Miller	The lake's biggest commercial hub, with lodging, shopping, dining and services. About 5,100 residents and more than 3 million visitors a year [4]. Lake Regional Hospital and the Osage Beach Premium Outlets are here [11]. The county line runs through town, so confirm which county a property is in [5].
Lake Ozark	Miller and Camden	Home to Bagnell Dam and the Bagnell Dam Strip (Business 54 / Bagnell Dam Blvd), near the busiest lower stretch of the Main Channel [2][3]. Has its own city rules for nightly rentals (see below) [3].
Camdenton	Camden (county seat)	A year-round town surrounded by the Niangua arm, and a trade center for the area [4]. Highways 54 and 5 meet here [2]. County offices (Assessor, Planning & Zoning, Wastewater) are here.
Sunrise Beach	Camden and Morgan	A small village (about 431 residents in 2020) on the west side along Highway 5 [4][31]. A quieter west-side alternative to the Osage Beach corridor.
Village of Four Seasons	Camden	An incorporated village of about 2,383 residents (2020) on Horseshoe Bend [4]. It has its own ordinances, including rental rules, and its own dock electrical permit program [6][7].
Laurie	Morgan and Camden	A small west-side city (about 939 residents in 2020) on Highway 5 [4] [31]. A west-side small town between Sunrise Beach and Gravois Mills [31].
Gravois Mills	Morgan	A very small town (about 129 residents in 2020) on Highway 5 [4][31]. Sits near the Gravois Arm on the quieter northwest side.

Jacob's local take: [Placeholder: 1–2 sentences per area in Jacob's own words, such as favorite coves, restaurants, or the buyer each area fits best.]

Lakefront vs. off-water

Lakefront means the lot touches the shoreline. That usually gives you the chance to have a private dock, which needs an Ameren permit (see below). Expect to think about the shoreline structures (seawall, dock, lift), lot grade (flat lots are easier to walk but often have shallower water, while bluff lots have deeper water but more stairs or a tram), and dock insurance [8][9].

Off-water homes cost less to buy and maintain, and there's no dock or seawall to look after. Many off-water owners rent a boat slip, buy into a condo or HOA with a community dock, or use public access and marinas. These homes make a lot of sense for year-round relocation buyers, or for anyone who wants lake living without the upkeep of a shoreline.

How the numbers compare (most recent public data): In September 2026, the median sale price for lakefront single-family homes was **$592,500**, and the year-to-date median was **$625,000**. Lakefront condos had a median of **$320,000** [10]. *[Placeholder: current off-water median from the LOBR / BDAR MLS]*

Mile markers and coves: how locals give directions

- **Mile Marker (MM) 0 is at Bagnell Dam.** Numbers go up as you travel upstream. “MM” with no arm named means the Main Channel [2][11].
- **Each arm has its own mile markers.** For example, Public Beach #1 at Lake of the Ozarks State Park is at the **12 MM of the Grand Glaize Arm** [2]. “MM 8” on the Gravois and “MM 8” on the Main Channel are completely different places, so always ask which arm [11].
- **Cove vs. main channel.** Main-channel lots get big views and lots of boat traffic and wake, especially on summer weekends at the lower mile markers. Cove lots are usually calmer and more protected, but depth and dock density vary from cove to cove [11].
- **Before you buy, visit on a summer weekend** and run the route by boat to see the traffic, noise and depth for yourself.

Docks and Ameren shoreline permits

Ameren Missouri regulates the shoreline under its FERC-approved **Shoreline Management Plan (SMP)** [1].

- **A permit is required first.** You need an Ameren permit before building or installing a dock, seawall, pier, pump or other structure on project lands [1][12].
- **What a dock application needs** [12][13]:
- Scaled drawings showing the dock’s size
- The distance to your property lines (extended out into the lake)
- The distance to the docks on each side and to the center of the cove or channel
- A copy of the fire-district (or Four Seasons) electrical permit or inspection
- Engineer-sealed plans for docks over 3,000 sq. ft.
- **Changes need approval.** Any change to a permitted facility needs a modification approval [14]. When you buy, ask the seller for the **existing Ameren permit number(s)** and make sure the dock that’s actually there matches the permit.
- **Electrical permits are separate.** Local fire protection districts and the Village of Four Seasons require **electrical inspections and permits** for private docks with power. You pay a fee to the local fire department in addition to Ameren’s dock permit [7].

- **The Corps of Engineers may get involved.** Work other than docks that sits below elevation **658.5 feet** or affects a wetland also needs Corps of Engineers approval. That covers projects like seawalls, dredging and bank stabilization [12][13].
- **Plan for the winter drawdown.** Ameren lowers the lake each winter. The 2025–26 target was about **654 feet**. Dock cables, hinges and walkways need to move freely as the water drops [15].

HOAs and condos

Many lake condos and subdivisions come with a community dock, slips, pools and shared upkeep. Before you commit, get these items in writing:

- **Declarations, covenants, bylaws and rules.** Look especially for **rental restrictions**, which can ban nightly rentals even where zoning allows them [16][3].
- **The current budget, reserve fund statement, and any planned or recent special assessments.**
- **The master insurance policy declarations page.** Check whether it covers “walls-in” or “bare walls,” whether the community dock is covered and for how much, and whether there’s loss-assessment coverage [9].
- **Slip details.** Find out whether the slip is deeded or assigned, its size, and whether it has a boat lift.

Nightly-rental (short-term rental) rules by county and HOA

Missouri has no statewide short-term rental framework, so the rules depend on whether you’re **inside city limits**, which **county** you’re in, and your **HOA**.

- **Unincorporated Camden County.** The county doesn’t require a short-term rental permit, but its zoning code doesn’t list nightly rentals as a permitted R-1 use. A 2022 circuit court ruling in a neighbor dispute found that nightly rental in R-1 zoning wasn’t allowed under the code, and no confirmed code fix has been found since. **Ask Camden County Planning & Zoning in writing** whether nightly rental is permitted for your parcel’s zoning (573-346-4440 ext. 1350) [16][17][18].
- **Miller County.** The county has no zoning, so unincorporated areas have no county STR license or cap. City rules (like Osage Beach or Lake Ozark) and subdivision covenants still apply [19].
- **Morgan County.** The county has zoning, and STRs are reportedly allowed mainly in the Agricultural Residential and Lake Residential districts. Confirm the parcel’s zoning and any permit requirements with the County Commission (573-378-4643) [20].
- **City of Lake Ozark.** Ordinance 2022-50 allows residential vacation rentals in the R-1 and R-2 districts [3].

- **Osage Beach.** Reportedly requires a **30-day minimum stay in R-3** (multi-family) zones [18].
- **Village of Four Seasons.** Reportedly requires a **31-consecutive-day minimum** rental, which effectively bans nightly rentals. Check the current Village ordinances [6] [21].
- **HOAs and condos.** Their rules can be stricter than any of the above [16].
- **Lodging tax.** In June 2024 the Missouri Supreme Court struck down the statutes behind the lake-area lodging tax and stopped its collection [22]. State and local sales tax obligations can still apply, so confirm current requirements with the Missouri Department of Revenue and a tax professional.

If rental income matters to your plan, make your offer contingent on written confirmation from the county or city and a copy of the HOA rules.

Lake-home inspection checklist

On top of a standard home inspection, plan on these lake-specific checks:

- **Septic.** Missouri and Camden County don't require a septic inspection when a home is sold, but a buyer or lender can ask for one [23][24]. Hire an inspector **licensed by the Missouri DHSS**. An *inspection* includes a hydraulic load test of the soil treatment area. An *evaluation* doesn't [24]. Lots that adjoin the lake need a county permit for any septic construction or repair, whatever their size [25]. Older systems deserve extra attention, so ask for the permit history.
- **Seawall.** Look for cracking, undermining, leaning and erosion behind the wall. Confirm the seawall is permitted by Ameren [12].
- **Dock.** Check flotation, framing and decking, cables and anchors, walkway hinges, and the roof. Confirm the dock has a **current fire-district electrical inspection or permit** and that it matches the Ameren permit [7][12].
- **Boat lift.** Check the motor and controls, cables and pulleys, the cradle and bunks, the capacity rating against your boat, and the electrical wiring.
- **Well water, if there's no public water.** Test for bacteria and other contaminants.
- **Grade and drainage.** Look at retaining walls, stairs, and any tram or lift on a steep lot.

Insurance and flood

- **Homeowners policies often cover "other structures" at about 10% of the dwelling limit.** That may not be enough for a dock. Some policies exclude docks, or exclude damage from waves, ice or boat impact. **Get written confirmation of your**

dock coverage and limits, and add a dock rider or an inland-marine policy if you need one [9][26].

- **Flood.** A standard homeowners policy doesn't cover flood. Lenders generally require flood insurance only when the home is in a FEMA high-risk zone and the mortgage is federally backed [9][27]. Ameren's project boundary is a shoreline-management line, **not** a FEMA flood-zone line [27].
- **Flood maps may change.** Camden, Miller and Morgan counties adopted their current FEMA maps in 2018 (Benton County in 2009). SEMA is working on a Lake of the Ozarks remapping project, and the current maps stay in effect until new ones are adopted [28]. Check the FEMA map for any parcel you're considering.
- **Renting it out?** A standard homeowners policy may not cover rental use, so ask about a vacation-rental policy [9].
- Insurance quotes: *[Placeholder: preferred local insurance agent partner]*

Property taxes by county

Missouri assesses residential property at **19% of appraised market value**. Your actual rate depends on the levies for your school, fire, ambulance and library districts [5]. Approximate **effective** tax rates, as a share of market value:

County	Approx. effective rate	Covers
Camden	~0.47%–0.49%	Camdenton, much of Osage Beach, Four Seasons, Sunrise Beach (most)
Miller	~0.57%–0.61%	Lake Ozark (most), part of Osage Beach
Morgan	~0.55%–0.65%	Laurie (most), Gravois Mills, part of Sunrise Beach
Benton	below ~0.45% in some areas	Upper lake / Warsaw

Sources: [5][29]. These are estimates. Pull the actual tax bill for any property you're considering from the county collector.

Primary vs. second home: Missouri's Homestead Preservation program applies only to primary residences, not vacation homes. If you're moving to the lake full-time, ask the assessor about it after you close [5].

Buying from out of town

1. **Start with a call.** We'll go over your budget, how you'll use the home (weekends, retirement or rental), how much boat traffic you're comfortable with, and how close you want to be to services.

2. **Get preapproved** for the right loan type. Second-home loans and investment loans have different rules.
3. **Watch homes by video.** I can do live video walkthroughs and boat tours of the shoreline.
4. **Plan one efficient showing trip.** Most buyers see homes by car and then take a boat ride to see them from the water.
5. **Make inspections and rental verification contingencies** in your offer.
6. **Close remotely if you need to.** Missouri allows remote online notarization by a Missouri-registered notary using approved software, and the signer can be anywhere in the U.S. [30]. Confirm with your title company that they offer it.
7. **Have a plan for when you're gone.** Arrange home watch, dock and boat care, and maintenance with local pros before you leave for the season.

Ready to find your place at the lake?

Whether you're coming from Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago, Omaha or Des Moines, I'll help you find the right area, the right water and the right home, then help you look after it once it's yours.

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Call or text 573-286-5582 to set up a free 20-minute lake strategy call.

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