

# SPHERE

THE LONG LENS ON LUXURY





**Clockwise from above:** Chelsea Barracks hides a secret state-of-the-art underground tennis court housed in The Garrison Club; relaxing spaces in the 18,500 sq ft leisure club



# GAME, SET, MATCH

Why adding a tennis or padel court to your property raises the stakes

WORDS ZOE DARE HALL

**H**idden beneath Belgravia's streets is a rare and unexpected sight: a cavernous, pristine green and white space that houses London's, and quite possibly the UK's, only subterranean tennis court.

Part of an 18,500 sq ft leisure space called The Garrison Club at Chelsea Barracks – where one-bedroom apartments in the latest phase, 9 Mulberry Square, start at £3.4m, and you can spend £55m on a turnkey townhouse – this court is usually available only to residents and their guests.

But on one early summer's day, I am invited to be among the first to test out this unusual and glorious court. Fluffy clouds and soaring birds are being projected on the 13-metre-high ceiling (plenty of space for even the most wayward of lobs), so it couldn't feel less underground. The glass-like surface – one of

just four ASB GlassFloors to be installed in the UK, its glass, ceramic and aluminium combination is designed to last 60 years – is fast and, despite appearances, not remotely slippery. And the LED-illuminated lines can, at the press of a button, switch to accommodate other sports including basketball or five-a-side football.

One devoted fan is Laura Ward, the founder of Exeat (exeatweekend.com), a sustainable women's tennis-wear company whose products, including dresses costing from £220 and white tennis balls that remind you of the 1970s, are stocked at The Garrison Club. "This court is so surprising and so glamorous with its subterranean setting, and it's hands down my favourite hard-court surface in the country," says Ward, whose business is entirely inspired by her halcyon tennis-filled weekends "under golden skies"

when she came home from boarding school.

These days, Ward is part of a devoted racket-wielding local community in Wiltshire, having chosen her village purely to be close to the 200-year-old Pythouse Tennis Club. She also has a hard-surface indoor court with pickleball markings (her team are all fans of the latest tennis-style US export) in her company's Salisbury HQ.

Having a private outdoor tennis court is always a luxurious use of space. If you have less than 1.5 acres of land, forget it, according to Harrod Sport, suppliers of nets and posts to top tennis tournaments. And in central London, where every inch counts, it's almost unheard of. So it's telling of the perceived pulling power of tennis that Chelsea Barracks' developers, Qatari Diar, decided to equip this voluminous space not with underground parking, more gym or spa space or even



**Clockwise from left:** Snoddington Manor is now on the market, complete with a swimming pool and a hard-surfaced tennis court located in the paddock; Longchase, also on the market, has a recently renovated private tennis court; a pop-up padel court at Battersea Power Station – its popularity has led to four indoor courts being installed this autumn



**With golden skies in short supply this year, tennis courts seem the more pragmatic choice than an outdoor pool in the UK**

apartments, but with an amenity that can mostly only be used by up to four people at a time. “We had a vision to create a truly exemplary health and fitness space,” says Richard Oakes, Qatari Diar’s chief sales and marketing officer. “We knew we wanted to include a tennis court. We needed to create a truly unique and usable space for all to enjoy, so the multi-functional court offers a range of sports at championship level that everyone can play, from families to serious athletes.”

It’s proving a hit, too; the court was recently booked out for nine hours solid in one day. And its launch comes at a time when tennis – and its newer, easier-to-play off- shoots, padel tennis and pickleball – are having a moment. In fact, it’s been on the up since the pandemic when participation spiked by 372% because it was a sport you could still play with social distancing.

Ward may have been ahead of the game with Exeat, but from old-school ‘tenniscore’ fashion sparked by the steamy tennis film

*Challengers* to Andy Murray’s moving last hurrahs at Wimbledon and the Olympics, tennis has been pretty hard to miss in recent months.

With golden skies in short supply this year, tennis courts also seem the more pragmatic choice than an outdoor pool in the UK. Given the horrendous cost-per-swim ratio to heat and maintain an outdoor pool for little use, estate agents in prime spots around London say buyers often balk at these watery money pits. Tennis courts, on the other hand, usually add value to your property. It’s a how much is a piece of string question, but Michael Graham estate agency says the average cost to build a court is £45,000 (compared with £85,000 for a pool) and it can add at least £75,000 to the value of a country house.

Charlie Wells, managing director of Prime Purchase buying agency, adds that “tennis courts are much more popular than swimming pools, which is understandable given our climate, and the appeal is universal –

American, European and particularly British buyers all covet one.” He mentions clients whose Georgian country house included two adjacent courts, “ideal for entertaining and tennis parties”. A court isn’t generally as aesthetically pleasing as a pool, Wells adds, “so if you are installing a tennis court, keep it well hidden and tucked away behind a hedge, so it isn’t detrimental to the environment of the house, and keep it green and traditional. Leave the garish blue astro to the local hockey club”.

You will also need planning permission to build a tennis court – and that is becoming increasingly hard to acquire, says Charlie Warner, partner at Heaton & Partners buying agency. “The issues are largely to do with surfaces and court netting. We’ve seen people come up with compromises like grass courts and temporary netting to get around these planning restrictions.”

So installing your own tennis court is becoming a greater luxury than ever. And it’s one that many owners are happy to share.

When Simon Hearn, 66, spent about £30,000 installing the hard-surfaced court in the paddock of Snoddington Manor, the home he and his wife Henrietta bought 23 years ago, they didn’t want it to be purely “our asset” he says. Instead, they created a community amenity of sorts. “We encouraged the people who live in the nearby hamlet to use it. Anyone who played put some money in a jar and it all went to the Samaritans,” says Hearn, a former City recruitment company owner, who volunteers for the charity. They also hosted a Ukrainian family with three children who still live nearby and regularly use the courts.

Hearn’s nine-bedroom manor house comes with 50 acres of land and an outdoor pool. But it’s the sociable games with neighbours, the hard-fought family tournaments and all-year-round enjoyment that he remembers most fondly. “We’ve had very few problems with the court, apart from having to shoo off the odd guinea fowl who strays on to it,” reports Hearn, who is hoping to downsize and has





**Clockwise from left:**  
 Contemporary Villas del  
 Tennis at Abama Resort in  
 Tenerife offer stupendous  
 views; historic Can Calo in  
 Valldemossa, Mallorca, with  
 its tennis court and clifftop  
 location, is currently on the  
 market; Abama Resort's  
 tennis court complex

put the estate on the market through Strutt & Parker for £3.6m (or £4.25m if you'd like the three-bedroom lodge too).

The tennis court was a big part of the appeal when Mark Hayward, founder of the UFO record label in the 1990s, bought his home near Ascot in Berkshire in 2011. The seven-bedroom, 10,000 sq ft house called Longchase – now on sale for £4.65m through Savills – sits on a 1.74-acre plot that includes a “leisure complex” with an indoor pool. Close to the house, tucked behind a hedge, is the private tennis court that Mark renovated during lockdown as the roots from the neighbour’s row of towering trees had started to burst through the court.

“It cost us just under £20,000 and took three months to dig it up and re-lay it, but it was worth it. My wife’s friends from the local David Lloyd club used to come here all the time to play. We couldn’t get rid of them!” laughs Hayward, 64. He also planned to set up a tennis coaching company, offering lessons to locals, but the pandemic intervened. “Having an outdoor pool – which we built in our last home – is nothing but hassle and cost. But a tennis court is much easier and we use it every day.”

With padel tennis now the world’s fastest-



growing sport, having a padel court – one-third the size of a tennis court – has become the preferred and more practical option for many prime developers and tennis-loving homeowners. Battersea Power Station is installing four permanent indoor courts this autumn for residents and visitors and Berkeley’s Oakhill development in Kent has a court buried in woodland. “It’s fun, easy, and sociable and has a much cheaper entry point than other sports facilities,” says Fraser Hamilton, director at Padel House, who will design and build you a padel court from around £20,000 (plus £35,000 for the groundwork) or the “flexi” variety that sits on a solid platform, so it’s transportable in theory, when you move home, from £50,000.

Should you want your family crest on the glass, customised lighting or a different colour surface, they can do that too. “If you own a £5m home with a significant amount of land, you will usually already have a pool and a tennis court. Tennis players tend to become padel players, so a padel court is the latest addition,” Hamilton comments.

Pickleball is similarly gaining ground as an easier and space-saving alternative to tennis. On the super-prime Wentworth estate in Surrey, a new six-bedroom mansion – on sale

for £16.5m through Winkworth Sunningdale – is nearing completion with a pickleball court designed for its 1.2-acre garden. There are lesser-known benefits to having the fully-sized version, however. “A tennis court is the perfect size for putting up a marquee that seats 150 people,” says Charlie Wells. “When you need to host your child’s 21st birthday party or a wedding, it can be very useful indeed.”

For buyers looking for overseas holiday homes where they can indulge their love of tennis, the cool, contemporary three-bedroom Villas del Tennis – priced from €2.22m – at the Abama Resort in Tenerife are just steps away from the resort’s seven tennis courts. But be prepared for the ocean views from this hilltop site to distract you from your driving volleys.

And it’s hard to beat the Algarve’s premier resorts, notably, Quinta do Lago – whose elite sports facility, The Campus, nurtures future young stars at its tennis school but is a sociable spot for all levels of tennis and padel players. Due to high year-round demand, they’ve just added some indoor padel courts too.

The neighbouring Vale do Lobo resort has also expanded its tennis offering, now with seven padel courts and 12 hard and clay tennis courts. “Many owners enjoy the active lifestyle here and want homes near the Tennis Academy

– and our recent considerable investment in the Academy is pushing up prices for these homes,” comments Alda Filipe, real estate director at Kronos Homes, which owns and operates Vale do Lobo. Properties within walking distance of the courts range from €500,000 apartments up to vast €7m villas.

Those who prefer rural isolation to resort life can find some glorious properties with the whole package, from Tuscan farmhouses with a court among the olive groves and vines (Italy Sotheby’s International Realty is marketing a majestic €28m estate in the Massa Marittima that also has its own golf course). And Mallorca – the tierra that nurtured Nadal – stands out as a destination for tennis lovers, according to Jessica Bishop at DDRE Global. “There is no single hotspot here, but Deia and Valldemossa in the northwest are idyllic countryside settings that are particularly popular with a lot of HNWIs,” she says.

Charles Marlow estate agents has just the place: a historic clifftop-perched estate called Can Calo in Valldemossa, featuring many sea-breeze-cooled terraces overlooking its private pool and tennis court – yours for €13.75m. From underground London to Mediterranean hilltops, the tennis-loving super-rich are spoilt for choice.