Sun, sand and paradise in the Turks and Caicos

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Roberta Avery

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ROBERTA AVERY PHOTO

The view over Grace Bay from a suite at the Gansevoort Resort.

PROVIDENCIALES, TURKS AND CAICOS— Talk of making these islands in the sun part of Canada has, so far, come to naught, but that hasn't stopped a Canadian invasion of home buyers seeking a piece of paradise.

And they are sure to feel at home.

After all, Canadians are running the hospital, the power plant and the airport expansion on Providenciales, one of the 40 islands that make up Turks and Caicos, located about 200 kilometres east of Haiti.

Take a walk on Grace Bay Beach's sugary white sand on the night of a big game — hockey that is — and you'll hear cheering fans gathered around the big TV at Canadian-owned Gansevoort Resort.

Retired Mounties have been hired to head up the police department, and Grace Bay Car Rentals, the largest car rental company on the islands, is owned by Todd Foss of Saskatoon. Kenny "The Hitman" on the local radio station broadcasts from his home in Collingwood, Ont.

"I came on holiday in 2006 and fell in love with the island," says Ottawa-born Bruce MacLaren, who first purchased a $3.75 million penthouse at Gansevoort and then a share in Apollo Developments Ltd., the company building the resort (www.gansevoortturksandcaicos.com).

Apollo is the brainchild of Kitchener-born, Rob Ayer, 45, who made his money in the dot.com company Onvia. Ayer also fell in love with the islands on his first visit in 2001.

“I wanted to put my money into bricks and mortar and I knew this place was going to boom,” says Ayer.

He assembled a parcel of prime land on Grace Bay Beach and in 2007 began building a 52-unit upscale condominium hotel.

Launching in the middle of an economic downturn came with plenty of challenges; evidence of the times can be seen just down the beach in an abandoned condominium development. On West Caicos, a Ritz-Carlton project that included a real estate offering of villas priced at $2.3 million stalled when it was 75 per cent complete after the demise of Lehman Brothers, the project’s backer,

To ensure his condominium purchasers a good return on their investment despite the economic downturn, Ayer shrewdly partnered with the trendy upscale hotel brand the Gansevoort Hotel Group of New York, which operates hotels in New York, Miami and Toronto.

The result is a good return for owners, who have placed their unit in the hotel rental pool, says MacLaren.

The project is about 75 per cent sold to buyers from the northern United States and Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa. Prices start at $525,000 (all prices U.S.) for a studio apartment and go up to $1.795 million for a three-bedroom unit.

“These are pre-construction prices being offered post construction,” says MacLaren.

A more affordable option is buying a unit in a fractional ownership offering at Gansevoort. A one-quarter share in a studio unit starts at $150,000 for 12 weeks of use.

Another newly opened Grace Bay project is Canadian-owned Villa Del Mar (**www.villadelmargracebay.com**).

This 42-unit condominium hotel development was launched by Canadian lawyer Greg Greatrex, who brought in Ontario-based developer the Kaitlin Group to partner on the project (**www.kaitlingroup.net**).

By building just off Grace Bay Beach (200 steps from the beach), Villa Del Mar is able to offer an attractive price point starting at $299,000 for a 700-square-foot studio. A two-bedroom unit sells for $499,000 and the one remaining penthouse is $799,000.

Villa Del Mar is more than 50 per cent sold with 80 per cent of buyers being Canadians.

“They like the island and plan to visit regularly; they also see it as an investment,” says Greatrex.

Villa Del Mar offers a rental program and so far condominium owners have received a return that offsets a good portion of their condo fees and utility bills.

While Gansevoort hotel guests are mainly from the United States, the vast majority of guests at Villa Del Mar are Canadians who gather round the property’s two swimming pools to chat about the weather — the weather they are missing back home in Canada.

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Hotel occupancy is expected to soar once the airport runway extension is completed and direct flights from Europe will start coming in, says Nova Scotia native Alan Lawley, director of development and operations at Villa Del Mar. “That will have a big impact for our owners.”

Lawley also focuses on giving guests a “Canadian” experience in terms of service.

“Attention to detail, following up on things, the kind of service Canadians expect,” he says.

Graham Canham started his career in real estate sales in Toronto, but eight years ago he moved to the Turks and Caicos.

“I knew this place was going to take off,” he says, and sure enough, property prices boomed.

“There was some incredible appreciation,” says Canham, an agent with Coldwell Banker.

The economic downturn took its toll, but that’s not necessarily bad news, says Canham.

Buying on Turks and Caicos eight years ago was a leap of faith, but now the growth and the infrastructure is already in place. “Yet, you can buy at yesterday’s prices,” he says.

Both at Gansevoort and Villa Del Mar, prices are still at the preconstruction level although both are fully operational.

Plans to make Turks and Caicos part of Canada — there have been three proposals since 1974 — is not a popular notion on the islands, says Canham.

“We don’t have income tax here,” he says.

Roberta Avery is a freelance writer who specializes in new homes and condominiums in cottage/ ski country and sun destinations. She can be reached at ***robertamavery@gmail.com****.*