

Luxury Resort Poets Cove Set to Open on Pender Island

By Michael McCullough
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What promises to be the most luxurious resort in the Gulf Islands officially opens today on Pender Island.

Poets Cove Resort and Spa is opening on the site of the old Bedwell Harbour Inn, demolished two years ago by its owners of 15 years to make way for the new, \$40-million development.

With room rates ranging from \$300 to \$800 (for a three-bedroom cottage) a night, the "boutique property" offers fine dining, a full-service spa, swimming pools, a marina and activities including sailing, diving and wilderness experiences, owner Michael Kanovsky said.

Kanovsky and his partners aim to attract wealthy, seasoned travellers looking for a unique and "environmentally sensational" vacation. While the primary market is in Vancouver, Victoria, Seattle and Alberta, the resort will also cater to international travellers and boaters stopping by on their travels up the Inside Passage.

The resort also has meeting space to host corporate retreats and conferences of up to 120 people.

Poets Cove has been a long time coming. Kanovsky, a former competitive sailor who also owns Calgary oil and gas exploration firm Sky Energy, said he "fell in love with this part of the world" and bought the Bedwell Harbour Inn 15 years ago with the intention of renovating the property.

The old hotel was run down, but had an enduring appeal to boaters passing through the Gulf Islands. He wanted to run it for a few years first to understand the property and the market, he said. In the process, he moved his family to Victoria from Calgary.

It then took six years to get the zoning and building permit from the Islands Trust, the unique and famously development-wary regional government that rules the inhabited islands in the Strait of Georgia and Howe Sound.

In the course of that process the partners -- Kanovsky; Bill James, a veteran of the hospitality business; Don Douglas, an Alberta developer; Donald Seaman, a Calgary businessman; and Alberta architect-turned-developer Lorne Prokopy -- opted to downsize the development and focus on the high end of the market.

Islands Trust chairman David Essig called Poets Cove "a model, a textbook case" of responsible development that takes into account community concerns.

"The developers have done it with a great deal of sensitivity," Essig said.

The name Poets Cove came from the site's romantic association for islanders, Kanovsky said. The scenic spot is known for playing host to a number of marriage proposals.

The resort sits on 14 acres of South Pender Island. The main lodge has 22 rooms, restaurant, lounge, ballroom, spa and fitness centre. There are also 15 waterfront cottages, all with DVD- equipped home theatres and radiant heat tile floors, and nine "sea- view villas" set further back from the shore.

To help finance the project, Poets Cove began selling the units on a quarter ownership basis (guaranteeing 12 weeks of access or rental income per year) in late 2002. So far, all the cabins except the display one and 60 per cent of the villas are sold, and the hotel rooms go on sale shortly, Kanovsky said.

Poets Cove will retain a certain number of hotel rooms to ensure availability for guests, he said.

On the water, there's a 110-slip marina with its own Canada Customs office and "marine centre" featuring a general store, activities centre and public swimming pool. (Guests and residents have their own private pool attached to the spa.)

The group hired Susan Kelly, a Canadian who had managed Four Seasons hotels in Chicago and California and, most recently, the Hotel Bel Air in Beverly Hills, as general manager.

The interior design was done by Wimberly, Allison, Tong & Goo, known for styling Four Seasons and Ritz-Carlton resorts worldwide. The food will be overseen by chef Martini De Board, formerly of the Westin Resort & Spa and Umberto's in Whistler.

For Kanovsky, the difficulty of getting to this stage has an upside: There likely won't be another resort like it in the Gulf Islands any time soon.

"We're in the middle of Canada's newest national marine park," he said.

[Illustration]

Color Photo: Owner Michael Kanovsky stands outside the upscale Poets Cove Resort and Spa.; Color Photo: The Poets Cove resort on Pender Island is a new \$40-million development.