



Canouan Island: One Man's Big Deal

by Gregory B. Gallagher



Antonio Saladino is a humble man with a compelling history as a successful international businessman and head of his own Swiss bank. So why would someone with such an accomplished background decide to jump into building a luxury destination on a barren island in the Caribbean? “I knew I would change the lives of the islanders if I started this project,” he says looking back on the last eighteen years of work. “But I had no idea it would take so long, nor be so expensive.”

Born in Sicily prior to World War Two, his childhood memories are filled with the grit of his family's survival near Palermo. Determined that education would catapult him ahead in his adult life, Saladino admits since childhood he wanted “to be better than other

people at whatever field or opportunity came into my life.” He would go on to exhibit a Midas touch with numerous projects.

Profitably trading for the largest brokerage houses on Wall Street would eventually lead Saladino back to Europe to join the legendary Agnelli dynasty (owners of auto maker Fiat), subsequently establishing his own private bank in Lugano, Switzerland. Like his other ventures, Saladino grew his banking business from a two-person office to one employing 90 people. With an astute awareness of decreasing profits, Saladino sold his bank before the current volatility hit the financial world.

In 1990, he went on vacation to the Caribbean island of Mustique. While there, he sailed with friends to

minuscule Canouan Island, belonging to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Smitten by the unassuming residents, the unusual beauty of a volcanic island with many sandy beaches, and the exceptional lack of any development whatsoever, Saladino saw a glorious opportunity-in-the-making.

His instincts inspired him to commence the multifarious construction of a luxury destination where nothing existed, upgrading the quality of life for the island residents along the way. In the process, he began bringing his own brand of magic to Canouan Island, at a time when some sort of wizardry was drastically needed.

Turtle Island

Canouan Island was first discovered by the *Arawak* and *Ciboney* tribes from South America. Nomadic hunter-gatherers, petroglyphs telling their stories can still be seen on rock formations around this tiny island. Centuries after these first nations had established agriculture and shipbuilding prowess here, the aggressive *Caribs* then conquered Canouan in a series of violent attacks.

Pirating and the nefarious slave trade ensued in the region during the 1700's until 1834, with the island bouncing back-and-forth between French and English whaling, cotton and sugar interests. In 1921 a massive hit from a hurricane all but demolished every structure, except for a 17th Century Anglican chapel, which had been brought over from England stone by stone by the notorious Swagg family. In the aftermath of this unusual hurricane (Canouan lies outside the normal range), most of the inhabitants moved to the coastal areas of the island.

In 1979 independence was formally established as part of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, with Canouan Island becoming one of 32 islands belonging to this relatively new nation southwest of Barbados. "*Canouan*" means turtle in the antiquated Carib/Creole *patois* dialect. The island itself encompasses 1694 acres (685 hectares) of wooded, hilly land, surrounded by spectacular coral reefs and white sandy beaches, and until recently was unknown except to sailors and fishermen. Since it measures only 3.5 miles (5.6 kilometers) by 1.25 miles (2 kilometers), it is possible to walk the entire circumference in a day. Hills rise to 800 feet (245 meters), with Mount Royal being the pinnacle.

As recently as 1960, Canouan Island had zero infrastructures. The population was enduring blatantly impoverished conditions. They did not have a single jetty, airport or road, and the only car belonged to the one policeman. There was no power source, clean drinking water, telephones, in-door plumbing, schools, or doctor, and only a primitive ferry system. Their sole source of income was from the sea.

Daunting Task

The notion of overhauling an obscure Caribbean island with no electricity would be daunting to most of us. But Antonio Saladino faced this conundrum and



other major calamities blocking his mammoth task. There was no workforce to do the actual work necessary, working age men having left the island in search of livelihoods elsewhere. The island populace of 200 was restricted to wives and babies, together with some older children and elders, plus legions of goats, donkeys, and turtles.

Saladino speaks with a certain dry, nostalgic humor about those first difficult days. He and his team had to sleep in a converted cargo container until the initial buildings were fabricated. Those structures became the Tamarind Beach Hotel (www.tamarind.us), the second resort on Canouan near the village of Charleston. The population grew to 900 with the availability of Saladino's work. He says now that "...I never made the mistake of thinking that this project would happen quickly. I observed the way locals worked, and saw that it was very slow by European or North American standards."



Raffles Resort

Magic Touch

Using his magic touch in business deals, Saladino signed a 99-year lease on 1200 acres (485 hectares), and reached out to attract successful brand names to join him in his dream: Donald J. Trump, Singapore-based Raffles Resorts, American Airlines, Moorings Yacht Company (see sidebar), and Amrita Spa. These icons now stand sentry over something much larger than simply building a new resort destination. Virtually the entire population is now involved in a sustainable tourism marvel.

The recently expanded Canouan Island Airport, able to handle commercial jets, sets the stage for the Raffles Resort (www.raffles.com) team welcome. Chauffeured to the idyllic reception perch overlooking the turquoise Caribbean Sea, guests are issued a personal golf cart for the duration of their stay. Driving the grounds presents a 12,900 square-foot swimming pool, Jambu's Bar & Restaurant, Trump International Golf Club, Amrita Spa (www.amritaspa.com), swanky Italian fashion boutique, and La Galleria, home to Bellini's Bar and La Piazza fine dining restaurant.

Accommodations consist of a series of one and two-storied villas spread over lush hills surrounding Carenage Bay and divvied up into six sizes ranging from two-level, three-bedroom ocean-view villas with cathedral ceilings, to one and two-bedroom "personality" garden suites, each having its own plunge pool.

Luxury in the Details

The romance and mystique of this locale is sensually inviting and striking décor fingerprints abound in each of the villas; terra cotta planters contrast against blue tiles, choreographed with a robust palette of hand-painted Italian trim, Frette linens, subdued lighting and tropical blossoms, providing guests with an ambiance of plush calm throughout.

It is admittedly difficult to impress a global clientele who are regularly pampered with top-drawer services and state-of-the-art amenities wherever they travel, but

the Raffles Resort succeeds handsomely because of a long tradition of leadership in luxury hospitality. The reality of the resort preparations for their VIP guests results in a feeling of true elegance, and even extends into the award-winning Amrita Spa treatment villas.

Each of the nine private *palapas* come distinctively capped with Venezuelan thatch, and perch hillside overlooking the sapphire lagoon below. Two additional units directly over the azure waters of the bay provide a closer peek at the indigenous marine life while being massaged. Among the most sensitive features of the Amrita Spa is their attitude regarding client time for solitude on either end of a treatment. Guests are encouraged to kick back for thirty minutes, thereby maximizing on their total experience of rejuvenation. Eleven different therapies are available, performed by a serene team from India, China, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

The pinnacle of Antonio Saladino's luxury resort community is the recent construction of the newest phase called Grenadines Estate Villas (www.canouan.com). A stunning set of individual residences under the keen construction team of his Canouan Resorts Development Limited (CRD). Built into the gentle slope of the hills surrounding Carenage Bay, these structures vibrate with the planet's finest design elements, Italian craftsmanship, and technology conveniences.

Many villas boast panoramic views over both the sea and Trump International Golf Course, where it is possible to see Tiger Woods, or Tony Blair and friends playing one of the most challenging courses in the Caribbean. With plenty of property apportioned each residence to ensure exclusivity, and the complete services of the Raffles Resort team on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, it is easy to see why the exclusivity attracts these names.

Canouan Island's highest point, Mount Royal, rises nearby to a height of 800 feet, and is home to Villa Monte Carlo standing alone overlooking the sea. This graceful structure houses both the Trump Club Privée

casino, and La Varenne fine dining room. From a palatial deck it is easy to view the astounding coral and neighboring sister islands of Union, Petit Saint Vincent, Prune, Mayreau, Mustique, and Tobago Cays. Some of the finest diving is found surrounding the latter.

Humanity Saladino Style

When I asked Antonio Saladino recently if he had any philanthropic activities, he answered most definitely in the negative. He explained he did not have enough time to accomplish his goals on the island as it was, let alone try to be fair in serving charitable causes. He added, "In the past I worked with charities as a part of my corporate profile, but I simply do not have the time anymore."

If a person was to look a little closer at some of the time spent by Saladino, one might see quite clearly that much of his consideration, time, and resources are, in fact, spent on nurturing, sponsoring, and supporting the community surrounding his resort creation. Here are just a few examples:

When I first visited, one of the employees had just returned from buying 200 Christmas presents to be given to the children living on the island. Add to this the program of education scholarships Saladino awards each year to promising local students, enabling further study. One begins to understand the quiet force of this man working behind the scenes.

Some of the CCA corporate headings listed on his website (www.ccalimited.com) say it all, promoting concepts like diversity, integrity, quality, teamwork, dedication to people, accountability, and community. Thankfully these ethics and morals are not simply words on a website, but very much a comprehensive philosophy alive under Mister Saladino's tutelage, and carried out daily by his colleagues, employees and community partners.

Sustainable Futures

It is obvious when interacting with Canouanians, that Antonio Saladino is injecting a new level of enthusiasm. He inspires all ages to proudly become self-sustaining. Under his mentorship, hundreds of locals learn how to use sophisticated tourism implements, social skills and technologies. By establishing these programs, he motivates residents to write themselves a ticket to a much larger world. Some of the employees he trained are already working in resorts in Asia and Europe courtesy of their internship with the Saladino group.

At another nut-and-bolts level, the island "team"

Moorings Legacy Continues

The yacht legacy of The Moorings Company continues to evolve, despite the death of founder Charlie Cary in 2007 at age 89. Founded on July 4, 1969 in the British Virgin Islands, Charlie and his wife Ginny began building yachting dreams for novice sailors and experts alike throughout the Caribbean and beyond. They soon aimed at setting the international standard of excellence for yacht leasing, ownership and maintenance.

Starting with a modest stock of half a dozen Pearson yachts, Moorings quickly grew into the premier global company of more than 850 boats designed by industry leaders Morgan, Gulfstream and Beneteau. Moorings is now operating worldwide in Tonga, Australia, Tahiti, French Riviera, Bahamas, New Zealand, throughout the Caribbean and in 20 other countries. One of the most interesting locales for Moorings' clientele is surely Canouan Island, backdrop for the movie "Pirates of the Caribbean".

What makes Canouan Island so compelling for yacht owners is its southeast Caribbean location away from the traditional hurricane activity. Roughly 100 miles due west from Barbados, it is possible to start out from Canouan Island and virtually sail to "all the anchorages most treasured by Caribbean cruisers". The weather is idyllic with temperature ranges in the 75 to 85 degree zone, as northeast to southeast winds create amazing conditions for sailing, touring or loafing on the boat.

Of course it helps that Canouan Island is able to offer families and larger groups the option of services from the legendary Raffles Resort. Moorings has seasonal 10 percent discounts on boats chartered from Canouan island until December 15th, as well as an American Airlines discount of 25 percent on all catamarans and mono-hulls booked in conjunction with airline tickets to the island for the same period.

If sailing is your passion or just an armchair dream, The Moorings Company on Canouan Island offers not only the best professional track record of 99% return bookings, but also a full menu of exciting luxury resort components, designed to exceed most expectations, and allow the experience of sailing to maximize its effect on travellers.

www.moorings.com



has constructed a water recovery system underneath the 18-hole Trump International Golf Course. This is a mammoth logistics project, but it does not stop there. They have also installed several desalination plants, and with these engineering feats, provide both the residents and the resort guests with abundant potable water.

As the business and humane policies of Saladino succeed, intermingle and evolve, he paves the way for other significant projects to become a reality. Leading this list is the proposed Canouan Island National Coral Reef Park, beckoning a new influx of eco-tourists, divers and marine biologists to the area. Together with Tobago Cays Marine Park (www.tobagocays.com), Canouan Island has positioned itself at the epicentre of a new tourism attraction for the entire region. Achievements of this magnitude would have been impossible to imagine twenty years ago.

To realize how one person has impacted an entire populace in such meaningful ways is not only encouraging, it is inspirational. Antonio Saladino is making good on the opportunity presented to him on Canouan Island when he first landed. His legacy will reverberate for years in the wake of his impact on an impoverished people. Of course Antonio typically underplays his astounding role on Canouan and in the lives of its people, humbly scoffing at the notion of anyone being interested in him or what he has accomplished. He said to me recently, “It’s no big deal, my life is nothing special, really, no



big deal.” In the final analysis, I know the residents, families, and visiting guests of Canouan Island would beg to differ. It is a big deal.

Information Links:

- www.rafflescanouan.com
- www.svgtourism.com
- www.ccalimited.com
- www.canouan.com
- www.amritaspa.com