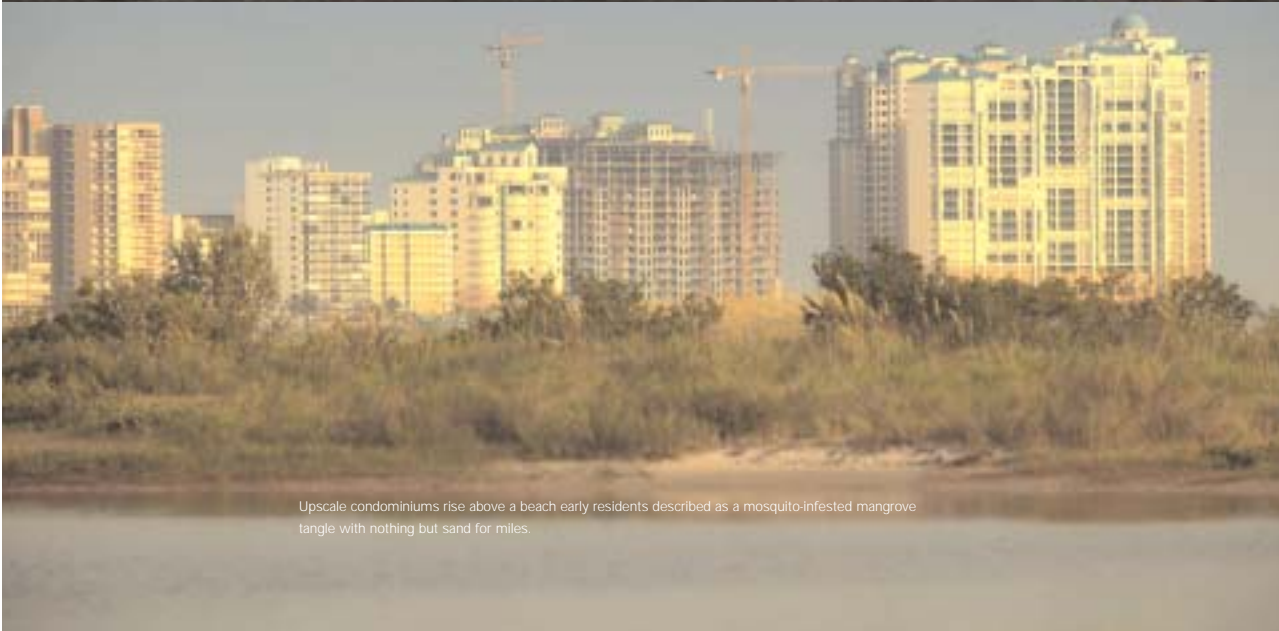


THE MATURING OF MARCO ISLAND

A person is silhouetted against a bright sunset, standing in shallow water and holding a fishing rod. The sun is a large, glowing orb in the sky, and its light reflects on the water's surface. The background shows a line of trees on the shore.

Marco Island, the largest and most sophisticated of the sun-soaked siblings of Florida's Ten Thousand Islands, celebrates its 40th anniversary by looking ahead.

BY BILL SCHILLER • PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIG BOKALDERS



Upscale condominiums rise above a beach early residents described as a mosquito-infested mangrove tangle with nothing but sand for miles.

It's not unusual for those facing the milestone of 40 to take stock of where they've been and set a course for the future. Author Brenda Kinsel suggests, "It's time to do the unthinkable. Turn the focus on yourself and do a major check-in ... get current ... take a good, long look, and discover yourself anew." Indeed, that's what is taking place on Marco Island as it prepares for its 40th anniversary celebration in January.

Modern Marco began paving the road to development in the early 1960s, when Elliott, Robert and Frank Mackle of Deltona Development Corp. bought most of Marco Island for \$7 million. Their master plan called for 125 miles of roads and 90 miles of canals. Land was set aside for more than 12,000 home sites, 425 acres for hotels, 340 acres for apartments, 275 acres for commercial development, and 113 acres for schools and churches. The island officially opened Jan. 31, 1965. With successful marketing campaigns in Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Boston, Western Europe, Latin America and the Far East, about 25,000 people came for the opening of the island. For \$75, visitors were treated to three days and two nights at Deltona's Marco Beach Hotel and a return flight home.

By the end of 1973, the population was estimated at 5,000 full- and part-time residents with more than 700 single-family homes and 1,500 condominium units. But the boom slowed in 1976 when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers denied dredge and fill permits for Barfield Bay and Big Key. Environmentalists and conservationists kept Deltona tied up in proceedings — and on the brink of bankruptcy — all the way to the Supreme Court. In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the Mackles' appeals, so they turned their undeveloped holdings into nature preserves.



Upscale homes and businesses are vying for Marco's abundant waterfront locations, including The Esplanade, a residential, retail and restaurant complex with a marina (above), developed by Jack Antaramian, who helped shape the revitalization of downtown Naples along Fifth Avenue South.

mangroves. Today's hallmark is The Esplanade, a combination of Naples sophistication and Marco casual developed by Jack Antaramian, the man responsible for setting architectural standards along Fifth Avenue South in Naples.

Restaurateur Lou Vlasho hopes The Esplanade, which combines high-end retail, restaurants and residences, will be to Marco what Fifth Avenue South is to Naples. As the

principal behind Fifth Avenue's Vergina and StarPlace restaurants, Vlasho knows that culinary charm is important, but the additional secret ingredient for success is atmosphere. With development of The Esplanade, Vlasho says he saw a golden opportunity to expand. "We sensed that the market was coming of age and it was time to take Marco to the next level."

He has opened a Marco version of Vergina at The Esplanade, the more casual Bayview restaurant next door, and an outside gazebo bar between the two. The difference between doing business on Marco and in Naples is like night and day. "In Naples, the biggest sport is people watching," Vlasho says. "When you ask people on Marco why they have come, you'll hear them talk about the weather, the beaches. They're not so interested in watching other people, but watching nature. It's the biggest draw."

Those who have been coming to Marco for a while will notice that as new commercial properties abound, some of the longtime fixtures are receiving modern makeovers. Leon Agami, proprietor of Marco Walk, is wrapping up 18 months worth of renovations at the 30-something-year-old shopping center. "We are a very important part of the island, right across from the Hilton, and we need to

Contemporary Characteristics

Decades later, the Mackles' vision is still evolving. "I've seen inland lots that sold for as little as \$60,000 two years ago selling for more than \$600,000 today," says Tom Wagor, president of the Marco Island Chamber of Commerce. "We've been through spurts like what we're seeing now before. We've experienced peaks, then a period of leveling out, but we've never seen a reversal and for now, Marco is continuing to blossom."

According to Marco Island Realtor Maury Dailey, 57 homes sold for more than \$1 million in 2003 compared to 37 in 2002. This year, the number of million-dollar homes on the market climbed to 97, most of which are located on waterfront canals.

Although limited canal-front parcels are still available, Wagor says, the trend is to raze older waterfront homes to make way for newer, grander estates. If that sounds similar to Naples, it looks like it too, starting with the approach to the island. Signs of growth — and glamour — are spreading from the island to the routes leading to it, including the five high rises to overlook McIlvane Bay and the Marco skyline being constructed at Hammock Bay by WCI Communities, to Fiddler's Creek, Collier County's largest

undertaking. A string of businesses are planned along County Road 951, including Lowe's, Eckerd Drugs and a Wal-Mart Supercenter to be located across from the entrance of Eagle Creek.

"Marco is upscaling," says Patricia Wyche, London Bay Homes marketing director. The company is currently completing its largest home yet, a 23,000-square-foot model with seven bedrooms, a 90-foot pool and three waterfalls, located on South Barfield Drive. "Naples no longer has all the mega homes," Wyche says. "Marco's luxury market is starting to boom."

With economic indicators projecting growth on both residential and business fronts, the City of Marco Island is focusing on improvements needed to accommodate more people. The most visible of those will be along Collier Boulevard, Wagor says. Citing a laundry list of projects, including repaving and widening roads, repairing storm drains and burying utility lines, Wagor says the overdue work is a vital part of Marco's future. Improvements are expected to begin in 2005 and take nearly two years to complete. The projects will not only give the area a facelift, but help decrease flooding and alleviate the heavy traffic over the Judge S.S. Jolley Bridge, which is also targeted for improvement.

Just as significant as the pending construction to accommodate the city's maturity is the community's drive to preserve the natural elements that define Marco Island, namely Rookery Bay. The Rookery Bay Estuarine Research Reserve was established in 1978 as a national preserve dedicated to researching and maintaining the environment and educating the community about the unique habitat of Southwest Florida. The "Friends of Rookery Bay" program began in 1987 so that locals could get involved. Generous donations and numerous area volunteers have helped the preserve to expand during the last 25 years.

Earlier this year, the progress of Rookery Bay was marked by the completion of an environmental learning center with classrooms, dormitories for researchers and a marine lab. With the community's support, Rookery Bay provides libraries, schools and civic organizations with important information about Florida's environment and offers a welcoming natural habitat for visitors.

Beyond the Beach

Residents familiar with the island in the early Deltona days talk about miles of undeveloped roads and Tigertail Beach as a mosquito-laden, deserted stretch of sand and



upgrade and facilitate what is going on here,” he says. “The island is growing up, property values are going up.”

Agami can testify to change in the area in the two years since he acquired the property. The mall was only 42 percent occupied in November 2002, but only three storefronts remained available for lease this past summer.

For businesses, there’s another environment that is attractive. “The market is more accessible than that of Naples,” says Juan Munera, who relocated to Marco about five years ago to open The Studio Gallery. “Naples is so diffused that it’s difficult to know the best way to target your market. Marco is small enough that everyone knows you in no time, and word-of-mouth advertising is more effective than it would be in Naples.”

Along with its rising reputation, Marco Island is climbing up the favorites list as a luxurious vacation destination. When the all-suite Marco Beach Ocean Resort opened in December 2001, it added a new jewel to the island’s crown of resorts. The Gulf Bay Hotel Co. property prides itself on the top-notch services and first-class amenities that earned it a place on the Preferred Hotels & Resorts Worldwide list. Designed to meet five-star standards, the resort, with 100 one- and two-bedroom accommodations, has been rumored to be a celebrity hideaway.

The AAA-rated, Four Diamond Marco Island Marriott Resort, Golf Club & Spa opened in 1979 after the Mackle brothers sold their Marco Beach Hotel and Villas to raise funds for Deltona Corp.’s court battles. After major expansion, the once-small hotel now has 673 rooms, and in December 2003, opened a 24,000-square-foot spa and ballroom for 2,000 guests. With 780 employees, the Marriott is the island’s largest employer.

The hotel’s owner, Massachusetts Mutual Financial Group

The natural setting of the island continues to attract visitors and developers, as it has since the first settlers populated the island. The Marco area served as a thriving empire for the Calusa Indians, who dominated the region for more than 1,500 years before disappearing in the early 1700s.

of Springfield, Mass., also has decided to capitalize on the upscale residential trend by building the 17-story Madeira luxury tower north of the Marriott Resort, where the last four villas of the old Marco Beach Hotel stood. The 3,000- to 4,000-square-foot units range from \$1.3 million to more than \$5 million, and all 101 were reserved with \$50,000 deposits before groundbreaking in February.

Condos have been on the rise since the first six-story building called Emerald Beach was built in 1966, and there appears to be no end in sight for the demand.

In September 2000, WCI purchased land at Cape Marco, a gated community of towers planned at the southernmost tip of the island, and by early 2001, sales began for Belize, a 24-story luxury tower. The 148 residences sold out with an average price of \$1.6 million and the highrise was completed in June. Now, WCI is building Veracruz, the final Cape Marco tower, expected to be completed in early 2006. Units in the 24-story tower were offered for sale in February 2003. Within the first week, 122 reservations were received on 123 units hosting an average price tag of \$2 million.

A Look Back

Despite the island’s bright future, gallery owner Munera finds value in understanding its roots and has assembled a collection of photography that shares the story of Marco’s growth, now on permanent display at Marco Island City



Hall. “Marco wasn’t an easy place to live in the early 1900s,” Munera says. “It was like something out of the Old West. Before that, there is a lot of history with the Spaniards and the ships that would come here to stock up on supplies. But really, the history goes back much further.”

From its indigenous natives to the earliest pioneers and their industries, the island’s history is intricately linked to the rest of Southwest Florida. The Marco area served as a thriving empire for the Calusa Indians, who dominated the region for more than 1,500 years before disappearing in the early 1700s. Explorer Juan Ponce de Leon, who set sail from Puerto Rico in 1513, headed for Marco in search of freshwater supplies. Beginning in the 1800s, pioneers braved hurricanes and mosquitoes to scratch out a living on clam canning and fishing.

Some of the island’s rich history can still be found in locales such as the Old Marco Island Inn and Suites, which is built around a Queen Anne home built in 1883 by island pioneer Capt. William D. Collier.

It was Smithsonian Institution archeologist and ethnographer Frank Hamilton Cushing who helped put Marco on the map with his 1896 discovery of the famous “Key Marco Cat” — a six-inch-tall, carved wooden statue of a cat- or panther-like creature found during excavations of Calusa Indian mounds on Key Marco.

His team collected an unprecedented array of artwork,

tools, jewelry and other artifacts, which are still displayed today by the Smithsonian Institution. “Ask anyone in the field and they will tell you the Marco Cat is one of the most important discoveries in all of North America,” says Bill Perdichizzi, president of the Marco Island Historical Society. The cat sculpture is expected to eventually serve as a centerpiece of an exhibit in the planned National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

Perdichizzi says there is still plenty of history worth preserving and the society is currently working with Collier County to develop a new museum on Marco. The society has begun a three-year campaign to raise \$3 million needed to build on land donated by the county.

“We really see it as something more than just a tribute to Marco’s history, but something that’s very representative of Florida’s history,” Perdichizzi says. “So much history has been lost. It’s difficult to calculate what really matters to people. We have all this growth, new homes, new businesses, plans for the future ... this museum will be decided by how important people feel it is to preserve the past.” **NI**

