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"A beachfront 'lifestyle' for the price of a car"

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NARRAGANSETT --- Kirk and Terri Bozigian of North Providence are relaxing on the sand at Bonnet Shores Beach Club. Their three children - a boy, 7, girls 9 and 11 - are nowhere to be seen. They could be playing tennis, or in the freshwater pool, or hanging around the game arcade; wherever they are, the Bozigians are sure they're safe.

The Bozigians are owners of one of the smallest condominiums in the state: a bath house. These tiny units, which come complete with deed and tax bill from the Town of Narragansett, are really like memberships in a private club.

The Bozigians are in their seventh year. Their unit happens to be a double: 8 by 8 feet with shower. But there are even smaller ones: 4-by-4 with no shower; two people with sharp elbows had better take turns changing into their bathing suits.

It may be primitive, but once you step outside it's posh: 24 acres of land, 1,800 feet of beachfront with lifeguards, 75-foot pool with swimming coach, tennis courts with tennis pro, restaurant, bar, snack bar, showers, toilets and beach kids to help you carry your stuff in from the car. There are craft classes for children on weekdays, live entertainment on Saturday nights. (On a recent Saturday about 9 p.m., when a reggae band was playing, more cars were coming into the clubhouse lot than were leaving it.)

Over 3,000 member-owners share the common facilities.

"Basically we love the beach," said Terri Bozigian. "The beach was easy for me, especially when we had small children. It's a family beach." Kirk Bozigian added that his sister and husband, and their children, belong, "so the cousins are together all summer."

The beach also drew Al and Donna Skinner, who bought a cabana this year. (He's the basketball coach at University of Rhode Island.) They have a 1-year-old boy and a 2-year-old girl.

"It gives the kids a place to come, and I don't have to worry about lugging things to the beach," said Donna Skinner, who had visited the club with a friend last year. "Everyone watches out for everyone else. It's like a little community - friendships that you make. It's nice."

Bonnet Shores Beach Club is having a "developer selloff." The small bath houses are selling for \$9,995, which can be paid for in 48 monthly installments of \$208. If you pay in cash, you get a 10 percent discount, which makes the price \$8,998.

"For less than the price of a new car, a family of four can buy a permanent lifestyle," said developer Anthony F. Mansolillo.

Larger bath houses with showers cost \$14,500. Cabanas, which have showers but not necessarily toilets, run from \$33,000 to \$60,000. (The most expensive cabana, no longer available, cost \$99,000.)

There are 1,069 units in all, of which 450 are cabanas. (Six are beachfront cottages, the only facilities on the property in which people can stay overnight.)

When the beach club was first built in 1928, it was touted as "the equal of Newport's finest." But by 1932, after a plan to develop a yacht basin had been unsuccessful, it was sold at foreclosure. During the '30s, and continuing into the '70s, there was talk about acquisition by nearby property owners or by the state; nothing ever came of it.

In 1945, it was acquired by Narragansett Development Co., a group that included J. Howard McGrath, then U.S. Solicitor General and former Rhode Island governor. In 1949, a new clubhouse patterned after the Carol Beach Club in Palm Beach was built. McGrath's ties in Washington drew to the club people from the Washington and Virginia area, some of whom still come here.

McGrath's group sold all its stock in Narragansett Development to a new group in 1961, and one of its first moves was to terminate former state senator Harry T. Bodwell, who had been manager since the club's inception. Bodwell issued a mournful statement, in which he recounted: "It is 33 years since we first began with 71 bath houses at this beach. In these 33 years we have weathered four hurricanes. In 1938 we were completely wiped out, but we rebuilt with complete bathing facilities. Again in the 1944 hurricane the plant was wrecked, and again was rebuilt. In the 1954 hurricane the main pavillion and the first section of double-decked bathing cabanas survived, although we suffered heavy damage in the destruction of 46 furnished beach apartments and six cottages. . . ."

Mansolillo bought the property in 1985 for \$2.4 million, and then resold it to Seaside Realty Trust, which included himself and Paul Roiff, who remains a partner. The trust then spent \$7 million on renovation and restoration of the facility, which Roiff said had been allowed to become "sawdust" under the prior owners.

They also built 240 new cabanas, as a second story over the cabanas on the first level, and are now adding 60 (the last 60 of 1,069).

In some instances, such as retention of six-flight windows, Seaside tried to stay true to the history of the clubhouse, but other parts were new. Mansolillo said he looked for a casual ambiance that was "classy like Abercrombie & Fitch, not classy like Saks 5th Avenue."

The plan to sell units as condominiums was announced in 1987, and it still seems the first such sale of a private beach club in Rhode Island (although a property owner in South Kingstown sold parking lots as condo units). So far, Mansolillo estimates that \$14 million in deeds have been recorded.

Mansolillo remarked that, unlike some prominent private beach clubs on either side of Narragansett Bay, nobody at Bonnet Shores checks an applicant's bloodlines. Consequently, member-owners include "ethnic" people who might not get into, say, the Dunes Club, and it includes not only doctors and lawyers but firefighters.

Condo fees are \$473.78 a year for bath houses, \$947.60 a year for cabanas. Town taxes are about \$150 a year. There may also be assessments; for instance, bath house owners were assessed \$75 and cabana owners \$300 in 1991, when a hurricane caused \$1.7 million in damage, of which a part was covered by insurance.

There are formulas to keep Bonnet Shores from looking like Scarborough State Beach on a hot weekend in July. For instance, bath houses come with four memberships, cabanas with eight; after that, there are additional fees, but owners still can't exceed eight on bath houses, 16 on cabanas. Guests cost \$4 on weekdays, \$8 on Saturdays, \$10 on Sundays.

Mansolillo said that, although Seaside built additional units, traffic at the club remains about the same, since prior owners had sold "walk-on" passes that didn't include use of either a bath house or cabana.

Until this year, Mansolillo and Roiff had continued to rent bath houses and cabanas to people who wanted to use the facilities without buying a condo. But now that they're down to about 300 units, they want to sell them off. They don't plan to take rentals hereafter.

Mansolillo guessed that, at a rate of about 100 units a season, all Seaside's condos will be sold in 36 months. Roiff thinks they'll be gone in a year and a half.

Mansolillo said that one unit, at least, won't be sold: his own. He enjoys the club too much.

"I plan to die in this place," he said.



CAPTION: CABANA DAY: Chris Brady of Narragansett opens up the cabanas at Bonnet Shores Beach Club for another day. The interiors are customized by the owners.

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