

Urban escape route with edgy appeal

Ocean resort is a dramatic medley of rock, water, glass, steel and wood

By Suzanne Morphet, Special to The Sun August 11, 2009

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Each suite at Black Rock Oceanfront Resort, in Ucluelet on Vancouver Island, has a balcony, fireplace, flat-screen TV and floor-to-ceiling windows with breathtaking views.

Photograph by: Black Rock Oceanfront Resort, Vancouver Sun

Black Rock Oceanfront Resort

Project location: Ucluelet

Project size: 133 suites

Prices: from \$260,000

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Developer: Black Rock Oceanfront Resort Inc.

Architects: VIA Architecture

Occupancy: January 2009

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On the first days of selling the Black Rock Oceanfront Resort suites on Vancouver Island, developer Mike Duggan first turned away 100 prospective customers at the door and then sold all 133 units in three hours. That was in 2005.

Last December, the resort finally up, but the economy down, all those people who had rushed to put a deposit on a unit now have to come up with the remainder of the purchase price -- which ranged from \$260,000 to \$795,000.

Of the original 133 buyers, 106 closed.

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resort-real-estate market, a market Duggan has been intimately involved in as president and founder of Boutique Hotels and Resorts of British Columbia.

Among the hotels Boutique Hotels manages are L'Hermitage in Vancouver, The Oswego Hotel in Victoria and Watermark Beach Resort in Osoyoos.

Sometimes referred to as the "Whistler model," all Duggan's properties are developed as strata hotels, where units are sold to individuals who can use them part of the year, while the rest of the year they're part of the rental pool.

Duggan says Black Rock, in Ucluelet, was the first of his properties that hasn't had a good "closing ratio" but he prefers to look at the bright side.

"The good news is when we were closing in December 2008, which was arguably the peak of recessionary woes and thinking that 106 people did close."

Ucluelet is the former fishing and forestry town 40 kilometres from Tofino and at the opposite end of Long Beach. While Tofino embraced tourism at least a decade before Ucluelet, Ukee - as the locals call it - is catching up.

The architect of the Black Rock Resort believes the community of 1,652 permanent residents has the opportunity not just to match its early-bird neighbour, but to do even better.

Ron Lea points to Ucluelet's well thought out Master Plan and its nine-kilometre Wild Pacific Trail -- a pedestrian pathway that hugs the coastline on either side of Black Rock Resort and offers spectacular vistas.

And he points to Black Rock Resort itself, which he says is to Ucluelet what the renowned Wickaninnish Inn is to Tofino.

The two properties are strikingly similar, as well as polar opposites.

Each sits on a rocky promontory of land that is whiplashed by wind and waves in winter and can be bathed in rain, fog or sunshine at any time of the year.

Both have restaurants that sit as far out on their respective promontories as possible without falling off the edge.

And the interiors of both were designed by award-winning BBA Design Consultants of Vancouver.

But that's pretty much where the similarities end.

In fact, Sharon Bortolotto, Principal of BBA Design Consultants, cringes at the thought that anyone might see parallels between the two resorts.

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"We tried very, very hard to make them unsimilar," she says, while explaining the challenge of designing something original where others share the same ocean, rock and trees. "Because everything is natural West Coast, how do you tweak it so that they're not copies of each other and are unique?" she asks.

The answer in this case: "Modern Ocean", her nickname for Black Rock. "It's a little more sparse and aggressive to some degree, and it's a little more edgy" than the Wickaninnish, she says, describing the overall look and feel created by rock, water, glass, steel and wood.

The lobby of Black Rock is nothing if not dramatic, with a curved glass wall two stories high overlooking a surge channel that cuts into the middle of the rocky promontory. Overhead, row upon row of cedar beams line the ceiling, suggesting perhaps the bottom of a first nations cedar basket.

Architect Lea says he was constrained by the size of the promontory, but wanted to preserve the surge channel and use it as a focal point. "So we wrapped the hotel around the surge channel and in doing so it created rooms which were viewing to the west, the sunset, and rooms which were viewing onto the bay and to the sunrise, in effect."

Lea also got permission to relax the usual 7.5 metre setback from the high water mark in order to build closer to the surge channel.

In the grotto beneath the main floor and looking directly into the channel, where winter storms will throw up waves, logs and seaweed, is the resort's wine cellar, for parties of up to 140 people. "It's a pretty nice space," says Lea modestly of the room covered in slate tiles and furnished with cedar plank tables.

The resort's executive chef, Andrew Springett, is more expressive, describing the wine cellar as "the most beautiful room" he has ever seen. (Springett was at one time chef de cuisine at the Wickaninnish Inn; another point in common between the two resorts).

The other rooms at Black Rock - the ones you buy - are also impressive. Maximizing the views was of paramount consideration.

"The notion was that every bed should face the view," says interior designer Bortolotto, so that when you wake up in the morning, the first thing you see is ocean or forest. Even bathrooms feature spectacular views, courtesy of a 'window' that can be opened between bathroom and bedroom, to take advantage of the view from the latter.

The main lodge has 71 rooms, and there are 62 beach suites in fourplex-style cottages.

Owners can stay for 30 contiguous days and up to 150 days a year. The suites come with kitchens and Miele appliances.

Black Rock manager Carly Hall says the majority of buyers are from B.C. with a dozen or so from Alberta and three or four from California.

Sara Ratner was one of the people in line to purchase a unit at Black Rock Resort back in 2005.

Living in Vancouver at the time, she figured a place on the less developed West Coast would be a counterpoint to urban life.

And she liked the area as a place to invest money as well as time. "In 2005, Long Beach, etc, was as much on the map, if not more so, than Whistler and Victoria," she said. "So I knew it would be a good bet as an income producer/real estate investment."

Ratner considered walking away from her deposit when the economy took a tumble in December, but she's glad she didn't.

"It may not churn as in income producer this year or next but it can't help but be a winner in the long run. And in the meantime I really enjoy using it. The hotel has an uplifting atmosphere; I love the open feeling."

The turmoil in the real estate market hasn't dampened developer Mike Duggan's enthusiasm either. He has a second phase of 46 villas designed and ready to be marketed as soon as the remaining units in the original project are re-sold.

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