

# Venice of the



# Caribbean

## Canadian Visionary Leads Luxury Resort Chain to New Heights

by Gregory Gallagher

Each generation loves to celebrate their heroes. Throughout history, the lives of memorable inventors, orators, industrialists, and philosophers have inspired novels, songs, and legends. The Cousteau name is a perfect example, revered worldwide for introducing us to the magic of the underwater environment. In the luxury hotel domain, the preeminent name over the last century has been César Ritz, a farmer's son credited with changing the very language of upscale hotel keeping forever.

There is another hero quietly at work carving out a legacy of impeccable achievements in the highly competitive industry of resort development. His personal style of altruism is found in a most unlikely aspect of his business regimen - the ability to generate an energetic sense of hope and community in those around him. His name is Michael Ryan, and he loves to say he is "from Hamilton, Ontario." Ryan is also the owner and dynamo behind the construction and impressive development of the Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman.

Mike is the son of John P. Ryan, at one time the youngest Chairman of the Planning Committee for the City of Hamilton, and successful real estate developer in his own rite. The Ryan household of the 1960's and 70's was a hub of social interaction. This epoch was the most creative period in the history of this former steelworkers town, sometimes called the "City of Waterfalls."

Normalcy for Ryan the Younger was being surrounded by people who were high achievers. His earliest days included the city mayor at family picnics, meeting Hamilton Philharmonic conductor Boris Brott at the peak of his career, and idolizing ballet diva Karen Kain. Hamilton was in its prime with future Hollywood talents like director Ivan Reitman, comedian Martin Short, and Second City alumnus Dave Thomas.

Growing up in this Petri dish of creativity, Mike perceived the drive for personal best as the manner in which everybody lived. He assumed reaching for the heights of one's capabilities was the ultimate goal and thereby attainable. His entrepreneurship was ignited at the tender age of 15, when he assembled a group of older friends, hiring them out for small renovation jobs. His internship continued while working for his father, sharpening his future developer's teeth on construction projects in Canada, Europe, and the U.S. It was

Photo: Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company



Michael Ryan, left, with Jean-Michel Cousteau, whose Ocean Futures Society offers fun, educational programs at the Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman.

during this fertile period he discovered his innate talent to act when the time was opportune, when he developed his characteristic "Let's Do It" philosophy.

**F**resh from crafting infrastructure for what is now the Los Altos del Cacique residential/vacation community in Costa Rica, Michael Ryan was invited to gauge his interest in building a Ritz-Carlton in the Caribbean. The Grand Cayman Island site was occupied by a tired Holiday Inn a decade ago, hemmed in on both sides by other structures along famous Seven Mile Beach. Ryan was perplexed with the prospect of trying to wedge all of the amenities Ritz-Carlton would demand onto such a tiny site.

At a classic plot-shifting moment, while waiting in the Holiday Inn for his Ritz-Carlton contacts, Ryan spotted the missing link to his Ritz puzzle. Mounted on a notice board immediately in front of his seat in the lobby, barely legible and faded with time, was a sign advertising 144 acres for sale directly across the street. As Ryan would say later, "You have to be able to act upon luck when it presents itself to you in this life."

Ryan did act quickly; purchasing both the old Holiday Inn and the 144 acres, in the belief his ultimate goal would be possible with this combined real estate package. The fact that the additional acreage contained Venice-like lagoons leading to a protected North Sound waterway further elevated the potential of his project. The stage was set for Ryan to invite the world's stellar brand names to partner in his lofty concept.

Ryan was convinced it was essential for Ritz-Carlton to offer the world's finest leisure options in order to be an international success. He set his sights on obtaining these assets across a challenging set of parameters. The first goal was to attract the best golf course developer on the planet. He picked up

the phone and called Greg Norman to participate.

Norman's people invited Ryan to join them immediately in the Bahamas, where "The Shark" was mid-project creating someone else's dream course. Greg Norman wasted no time in announcing he liked Ryan's concept and would get involved. Once Norman was aboard, it became easier to attract others at the top of their game, like tennis guru Nick Bolletieri, chef supreme Eric Ripert of Le Bernardin in New York City, Jean-Michel Cousteau and his Ambassadors of the Environment program for children, plus Switzerland's La Prairie Silver Rain Spa.

Eventually dubbed the "Seven Wonders of Seven Mile Beach", Ryan mounted seven of the world's top attractions to enhance the hotel and lead a novel path of luxury vacation/residence options under the Ritz-Carlton name. This was the key to making his vision materialize. The opulent residential concepts directly linked to the standards, amenities and services of the Ritz-Carlton resort, increased the value of the real estate offerings while minimizing additional investment by developers.

**C**onstruction of hotel and residences began soon after obtaining strong partnership commitments, and was rolling along at breakneck speed, when Hurricane Ivan levied a direct hit on Grand Cayman in 2004. In typical philosophical fashion, Michael Ryan claims, "Hurricane Ivan turned out to be a blessing in disguise for all of us."

He continued by adding, "Think about it, how often have people said to themselves, oh I would love to redo that wing of my house, or re-build that part of my resort? Hurricane Ivan arrived and gave the entire community a glorious opportunity to accomplish these goals. In our case, it brought the entire staff together as nothing else

photo: Patrick McMullen



could. The morning after Ivan hit, all of my 1,000 employees turned up onsite to offer their services without ever having been called.”

“Remember,” Ryan adds, “ We were very close to our Grand Opening. Suddenly we became the central hub of a colossal re-building effort across the entire island. The Ritz-Carlton was the largest employer before the hurricane, so it was naturally the center of action after Ivan hit. Those days and weeks were some of the best times of my life. We worked nonstop in a communal fashion to reinvent this island, not just the resort.”

**W**ater damage to the nearly finished structures required stripping back to the bare foundation and starting over again for Ryan and his crew. The eventual Grand Opening, which took place one year late, in October 2005, became sweeter than ever, and great talents in the entertainment world were invited to launch the extravaganza, including Tony Bennett and Cheryl Crow.

Ryan fondly remembers, “In the aftermath of the storm, Greg Norman was getting all sorts of comments

Greg Norman designed golf course, built among lagoons, offers world-class golf to Grand Cayman for the first time.



suggesting he pull out of my project. But he is a man of his word, and believed in what we were doing so strongly, that he stayed through the hurricane, withstood the critics and maintained his commitment despite the rebuild delay.”

Ryan emphasizes, “We will deliver world-class golf to Grand Cayman Island

for the first time in the history of this destination.” The augmented golf course is central to this property’s appeal, and perfectly suited for Ryan’s “Venice-in-the-Caribbean” notion. The Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman Resort and residences will ultimately encompass 400 acres from the Caribbean ocean frontage to the North Sound inland lagoons.



## The Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman offers guests the best of everything, from its spectacular sunsets to world-class amenities and colourful reef dwellers.

Nineteen individual marine-themed dwellings are under construction at press time called The Deckhouses. Half of these have already been sold for between US 3.85 to \$8.69 million. Believing intensive research would separate these homes from the rest of this category worldwide, Ryan and his handpicked development/sales team traveled to 32 resorts, in three time zones, located in 12 countries, over a six-day period, to ensure they had their target articulated.

The Deckhouses are sure to enrapture clients by using eco-friendly, non-invasive building techniques, and fea-

turing luxury amenities never previously combined. Each unit will boast their own waterfront peninsula and beach, a private guest cottage, a boathouse equipped with an AquaRiva power boat made in Italy, personal infinity pool, BMW or Land Rover Defender, optional care of a personal butler, plus 1,000 staffers of the Ritz-Carlton practicing their "Endless Service" and "Commitment to Quality" methods.

The opulent add-ons to this "living by the water" lifestyle package include; use of the Nick Bolletieri tennis centre, Michelin three-star Eric Ripert gastronomy, lifetime membership at the North

Sound Golf Course, services of La Prairie Silver Rain Spa, plus access to Ambassadors of the Environment Program for children by Jean-Michel Cousteau (see Sidebar).

Vice-President and General Manager of the hotel Jean Cohen, says quite matter-of-fact, "We spent a full year conducting job fairs around the world searching for the preeminent service people for our project. Approximately one out of twenty-four made the cut out of all the applicants interviewed. We have spent the time since trying to match the right person to the right job, investing in this critical collaboration, to align successful service values within each of our ladies and gentlemen. As the ultimate sign of our success in this process, our property is the first new Ritz-Carlton location to ever win the Community Footprints Property of the Year Award for their integration into the local community."

Michael Ryan is re-writing the Ritz-Carlton book with a fresh kind of passion, originality, and excellence. He and his team are attracting legions of new clients as a result. Some of their novel ideas are even making their way into the Ritz-Carlton corporate culture, inspiring a new method of doing business in the future. Gone are the stuffy dress codes, and stiff service acumen. The Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman invites a relaxed resort-casual dress code throughout, and prides itself on casting the service ranks with these fine "ladies and gentlemen" culled from global interviews. César Ritz would likely approve of Ryan's Ritz overall, and applaud his heroic style.

Gregory Gallagher is an Olympus America-sponsored photojournalist using the E-series line of SLR cameras and lenses.

Photos: Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Sunset Wreck: Rick Mewburn, reef dweller: Dr. Richard Murphy



## OCEAN FUTURES SOCIETY

*"Every day a little bit of magic enters our lives and envelops us in the unlikely miracle of water."*

**Jean-Michel Cousteau, Ocean Futures Society.**

Ocean Futures Society program called Ambassadors of the Environment (AOTE) is offered at the Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman for children and adults, and is the key factor in convincing this writer to travel to Grand Cayman Island. When meeting Denise Naguib, the AOTE Director, and driving force behind this innovative concept, it becomes obvious how brilliant this Ritz/Cousteau mix promises to be.

When Mike Ryan and Jean Cohen heard about this unique children's educational program, originally designed for inner city Los Angeles kids to visit California's Catalina Island during hot southland summers, they knew they had to find out more. After speaking with Dr. Richard Murphy, who had worked with Jacques Cousteau and his son for over 30 years, and who directs science and education for Cousteau's Ocean Futures Society, Ryan and Cohen agreed to fly to California to see the program firsthand.

Dr. Murphy introduced Ryan and Cohen to Denise Naguib on Catalina Island, and then left them alone to audit the proceedings without his influence. When he returned at the end of the day, Ryan and Cohen were beaming, convinced the children's program would be a perfect compliment for their resort property and clientele. Two years later, the AOTE is one of the most exciting assets of the Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman, and talks are underway to expand the program to other Ritz-Carlton properties worldwide. Here are just a few examples of the dozens of activity modules offered to kids and adults alike:

### 1. *Have You Ever Seen A Blue Iguana?*

Grand Cayman is home to the endemic and endangered Cayman Blue Iguana, found nowhere else in the world. We learn all about this fascinating species and the international efforts to save them, and visit the blue iguanas at the breeding program at Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park. Afterwards enjoy a picnic lunch and group games in the park's beautiful gardens.

### 2. *Sea Floor Submarine Adventure*

Experience the thrill of journeying beneath the sea in a real submarine. A technological marvel, the Atlantis XI Submarine

was specifically designed for underwater sightseeing excursions. The spacious cabin is maintained at sea level pressure with no effect on the ears. The smooth ride and clarity of the water will amaze you as we explore Grand Cayman's underwater marine park to depths of 100 feet and explore the mysterious deep reefs off Grand Cayman, discovering the shy and exotic creatures of this alien world.

### 3. *Stingray Discovery Pontoon Adventure*

Our first stop will be to Stingray City where we will have chance to safely connect with these fascinating wild animals in their own habitat. Everyone will be moved by the grace and beauty of these incredible animals. Next, we stop will at the calm shallow waters of Starfish Point. Here we will get up close and personal with upside down jellyfish, hermit crabs, octopi, sea urchins, and of course, starfish.

### 4. *Underwater Videography Snorkel*

Make an underwater movie just like Jean-Michel Cousteau. We capture footage while snorkeling along a large coral reef teeming with a diversity of life. We learn videography fundamentals, such as focusing, shot types, framing, moves, story line and shot sequence as you create your own video that you can take home on DVD.

## AOTE Note

The naturalists who guide Ambassadors to Cayman's wonders have college degrees in natural or environmental science, are over age 21 and have experience working with young people. They are First Aid, CPR and Water Safety certified. They are qualified by Jean-Michel Cousteau's team, which is led by Dr. Richard Murphy. All staff are fully trained by The Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman human resources professionals and supervised by AOTE Director Denise Naguib. For AOTE Kids activities, two adults supervise a maximum of eight Ambassadors (4-7). For AOTE Youth activities, two adults supervise a maximum of 10 Ambassadors (8 and older). For more information, visit:

[oceanfutures.org](http://oceanfutures.org)

[aote.org](http://aote.org)

[www.ritzcarlton.com/en/Properties/GrandCayman/Childrens](http://www.ritzcarlton.com/en/Properties/GrandCayman/Childrens)