

Willa Vacations

Snowbird jet-setters follow the sun south to glorious private residences.

By Elan Head

There comes a point in even the happiest of winter holidays when you wish you were somewhere... warmer. Mexico. The Caribbean. Drinking Mai Tais instead of mulled cider; wearing swimsuits, not sweaters, and basking in a sun that packed its own bags and headed south several months before. Really, the only thing keeping you shivering in the states is family—only now it's easier than ever to involve the whole gang in your warm-weather fantasies.

The word to look for? 'Villa.' The term itself may be approaching overuse; what luxury destination these days lacks a 'Villa' this or 'Villa' that? But what it generally connotes—expansive, often stand-alone accommodations that offer space, privacy, and service—reflect a trend in upscale travel that's here to stay. Perhaps no one has caught on faster than developers down south. In Mexico and the Caribbean, hundreds of luxury villas offer all of the comforts of home, with dramatically better weather.

The traditional route to winter bliss has been to own your own beach house; now you can do so without the headaches. Pioneering a new wave in fractional ownership,

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Wimco offers a staggering portfolio of luxury villas across the Caribbean.

22 • STRATOS • Landings 2003



upscale residence clubs are planting their stakes in white sandy beaches, including those of Cabo San Lucas. On exclusive Punta Ballena, just up the Corridor from Cabo San Lucas proper, the Auberge Residences at Esperanza set the standard for villa vacations in Mexico. This gracious collection of gorgeously appointed, two- and three-bedroom private residences shares a location—and amenities—with the lovely Esperanza Resort. But unlike hotel suites, its 2,000 to 3,000-square-foot villas offer plenty of room for families and friends to unwind.

Unwinding: not hard to do in this Mexican paradise. It was pioneered, as a travel destination, by jet-setting celebrities in the '40s, who were drawn to the rugged beauty of its Baja desert location; its unbelievably good fishing; and its total, absolute

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The Auberge Residences at Esperanza set the standard for villa vacations in Mexico, located in Cabo San Lucas.

Striking private residences (shown here and right) beckon the well-beeled looking for seclusion, sunshine, and bizjet access.



Dip anyone? Splash down at Villa Gitana View, a beautiful ocean-view estate from St. Barth Properties.

obscurity. It still offers two out of three. And for the luxury traveler, its discovery hasn't been all bad: from world-class golf to mind-blowing spas, Cabo offers more amenities than ever before.

"We think of it as California South," says David Burden, president of the Carbondale, Colorado-based Timbers Company, which developed the Auberge Residences at Esperanza. According to Burden, a sizable expatriate population makes Cabo particularly comfortable for American travelers: "It's just putting your toe in the water of going out of the country."

Residential membership at Esperanza—which is titled fractional ownership assured by a *fideicomiso*, a type of trust—starts at \$315,000; annual maintenance dues begin at \$6,515. In return, you're guaranteed four weeks of vacation time each year during Cabo's prime season (October through June), plus unlimited short notice, space-available reservations. Interest has been overwhelming. The property's largest, most luxurious villas sold out

almost immediately, and the Timbers Company is moving forward with plans to build more.

It's also looking toward the Caribbean for its next residence club (it already has similar clubs in Snowmass, Colorado and Scottsdale, Arizona). Though the company has no firm plans there as of yet, perhaps you're not ready for ownership, anyway; maybe you'd rather flit from one luxury villa to the next as circumstances deem appropriate. Not a problem. You could

spend years in the Caribbean and never sleep in the same exquisite bed twice.

If the villa rental business has a 900-pound gorilla, it's undoubtedly the West Indies Management Company, or Wimco, which offers a staggering portfolio of luxury villas across the Islands. Some of these come with guests' privileges at hotels or golf clubs; others with dedicated butlers and staff (and you can tailor services at most villas to suit your needs). The variety of its offerings is overwhelming, yet even

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28 • STRATOS • Landings 2003

Details

• **The Auberge Residences at Esperanza**
(877) 615-7187
www.esperanzaresort.com

• **Wimco**
(800) 932-3222
www.wimco.com

• **St. Barth Properties, Inc.**
(800) 421-3396
www.stbarth.com

(Rates vary)

so, a few stand out. On Mustique: the five-bedroom Villa Carissa, a French Plantation-style estate with shaded verandahs, airy bedrooms, a large swimming pool, and herb and flower gardens. It rents for \$30,000 a week in the high season, mid-November through mid-April. On Barbados: The

Great House, Turtle Beach, a lushly landscaped, eight-bedroom retreat on prime beachfront land on Barbados' West Coast. Multiple pools, boats, scuba and snorkeling gear, and spacious grounds make this the perfect place to take the extended family. During the holidays, its weekly rental rate is \$70,000.

Not to overlook St. Barts. On this most desirable island, too, Wimco has some fabulous offerings, including Villa BJJ, an elegant and modern three-bedroom villa on the Lurin hillside (\$20,000 per week over the holidays). The infinity pool is particularly incredible. Atop the hill in Lurin, with panoramic views over the island, is Villa du Soleil, a colorful and charming four-bedroom. You can snag it for the holidays for \$45,000 per week.

Or consider St. Barth Properties, which has specialized in villa rentals exclusively on St. Barts since 1989. It maintains a portfolio of more than 120

private villas and 20 preferred hotels on the island. Standouts include Villa le Roi Soleil, also crowning a hill in Lurin, a four-bedroom villa with sweeping ocean views and extraordinary landscaping. Recently renovated to offer every luxury, it rented during the holidays for \$49,500 per week. If you prefer to be on the beach, look to Villa Gitana Reserve on Marigot Bay. Built by a prominent European family, it has four luxuriously appointed bedrooms and a private walkway to the beach; for large family gatherings, it can be rented with the Villa Gitana View for a total of seven bedrooms.

With so many paradises to choose from, what's stopping you? (If it's technology in every villa mentioned here means that if you really need to, you can bring your DVD of "It's a Wonderful Life.") When sand, not snow, is your winter paradigm, that "White Christmas" has never looked better. ☺