

“The Portofino Island Resort Development: A Behind-the-Scenes View of the Five Towers”
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With the Santa Rosa Sound to the north, the Gulf Islands National Seashore to the east, the Gulf of Mexico to the south, and private residences to the west, the twenty-eight-acre property known as Portofino is a rare beachfront treasure. Therefore, when they accepted a development opportunity, Robert Rinke and the late Allen Levin approached every detail with a shared vision that reflected deep appreciation for this natural beauty.

Throughout his life, Allen Levin, a native of Pensacola and graduate of the University of Florida, demonstrated his love for his hometown through community involvement and his generous support of causes and charities. He believed that quality growth and island beautification were essential to the area’s vitality and prosperity. Best known for his condominium developments, he broke ground for Tristan Towers over two decades ago. Other projects, including Verandas, Emerald Isle, Beach Club and, of course, Portofino Island Resort would follow with his partner Robert Rinke.

Having grown up in Huntington Beach, California, with the Pacific as his playground, Robert Rinke vowed that when the time came, he too would raise his children by the water. Upon graduating from college, however, he joined Dillard’s fast-track management training program and moved wherever he was told. A store manager by age twenty-four—the youngest in Dillard’s history—Rinke worked around the clock, earning a string of promotions during his eight-year tenure in retail. All the while, he imagined the day when he and his wife, Abby, would enjoy a more laid-back lifestyle by the ocean. The catalyst was the birth of their first child, Reese. “I had nothing to lose,” Rinke says, referring to the moment he held his newborn son and decided to give up the long days and nights he spent at work to be a father. In a matter of weeks, Rinke not only resigned, but he sold the family’s Jackson, Mississippi, home, packed up their belongings, and moved to Pensacola.

Loving life on the Gulf, Rinke quickly spotted potential in real estate. From his perspective, he once again had “nothing to lose” by purchasing a boarded-up condo property for auction in Gulf Breeze. “You should understand that my price frame of reference was the relatively exorbitant cost of a tiny beach shack in California,” explains Rinke. Starting out in property management and migrating to real estate sales, Rinke met Levin, and with their complementary strengths, the two launched Levin and Rinke Resort Realty.

When Levin and Rinke embarked on the Portofino project, they did so with a tremendous sense of responsibility to Pensacola’s residents and wildlife, investors and potential buyers, and generations of vacationers. Starting with a twelve-page vision plan, the team took no shortcuts in its implementation. Even with the most stringent, self-imposed standards, the process of meeting and exceeding an abundance of requirements—from those of local citizens groups to the Army Corps of Engineers—took more than two years. To fulfill every expectation, Rinke says, “We hired the best of the best.”

At last, the construction of towers one and two began in 2003. The third tower was started in 2003, followed by towers four and five in 2007.

Choosing among Florida's top five architects, they selected EDSA, a firm that is internationally acclaimed for ecotourism and environmental planning and has been involved in a diversity of projects—resorts, communities, cultural facilities, urban centers and more. Minimizing the development's ecological footprint and maximizing the property's total value became their goal.

Each of the five Portofino towers, for instance, stands one football field apart from the next with minimal paving (made of cobblestone rather than asphalt) that accommodates a roadway and overflow parking. Most vehicles are parked in one of the four-level decks beneath each building. This way, cars are protected from the weather and out of sight. Above all, the healthy separation and zigzagged positioning of towers leave 64 percent of the resort in a natural state while granting the most spectacular vistas.

Instead of the usual plan that crowds condominiums on the beach, Portofino's arrangement also delivers utmost privacy. Putting the first level of living space on the fifth floor ensures that lower floors have wonderful coastal views, and in the event of heavy storms, sand and water surge are unlikely to enter any residence. Passing the hurricane test is a satisfying claim for a resort that lies between two bodies of water.

In every aspect of construction, the marriage of structural and aesthetic superiority yields discernible advantages. The towers are three-sided to produce panoramic views that are unmatched by rectangular buildings. Even the most centrally located unit is not far from a corner. The triangular shape also creates a mirage of sorts. Depending upon a person's location on or away from the property, one or more towers will disappear behind others. The existence of the five towers is never overwhelming.

Another view enhancer is the width of each condo. Most beachfront high- and low-rises configure their units like narrow shoeboxes in order to claim that many have a glimpse of the water. Every Portofino unit enjoys an impressive water and coastline view—of the sound, the Gulf, or both—because all residences are at least twice as wide as the typical beach condo. In addition, floor-to-ceiling windows and sliding glass doors open to generous verandas with tempered glass railings. Whether one is inside or outside on the balcony, the land and seascapes are not obstructed by concrete walls.

Solid walls, nevertheless, have their purpose. Reinforced with steel, concrete is the mainstay of Portofino's Romanesque architecture. With the majority of other developers choosing gypsum, only one in five high-rise condominiums is built as soundly as Portofino. Why? The upgrade adds millions in material costs, and it takes 25 percent more time to complete a project of this scale. All the same, Rinke explains, "Our buyers are not glued to the Weather Channel each time a bad storm brews in the Gulf of Mexico."

Buyer peace of mind and long-term value remained a top consideration throughout the planning and construction process. Water intrusion experts on the design team, for instance, influenced the decision to use commercial-grade windows that are anchored to concrete frames by steel bolts. Balcony floors are also attractively tiled in a water-resistant material. As a result, water infiltration, even in hurricane-force winds and rain, has been scarce.

Interior appointments were also made in light of enduring function, beauty, and investment value. From any parking deck, visitors enter their building through an elegant, marbled lobby that is heated and cooled appropriately. Striking first impressions extend to each condo's entrance, where an eight-foot-wide double doorway awaits.

Refinements abound throughout, allowing the most discerning traveler to feel at home. Central to all two- and three-bedroom condos is an impressive grand salon with a view that is open to a luxury kitchen and large dining area. Oversized tile flooring, crown molding, granite countertops, Kohler plumbing fixtures, recessed lighting, top-of-the-line GE appliances, an exclusive Roman tub in the master bath, and a bathroom for every bedroom are Portofino standards. In the residences, owners and vacationers find everything one would seek in an upscale, gated community. It just so happens that this gated enclave abuts ten miles of unspoiled natural shoreline, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Santa Rosa Sound.

If its interiors, exteriors, and setting weren't enough to put Portofino Island Resort over the top, the on-site amenities most certainly would. These extraordinary features top the list: a sixty-foot heated lap pool for each tower, a world-class European spa, a state-of-the-art waterfront fitness center, a gorgeous indoor Olympic pool, two lavish outdoor lagoon pools, five lighted rubico clay tennis courts, dining options ranging from five-star elegant to easygoing casual, a sixty-three-foot catamaran, an array of boats and water toys, activities for all ages, and more—all of which come embellished with full concierge service. Needless to say, while Portofino's condos are value-priced, they challenge the luxury market to come close.

"We want our buyers to walk away from closing with immediate equity in their pockets," says Andrew Rothfeder, a partner in Levin and Rinke Resort Realty. For personal and professional reasons, he states that objective with conviction.

While enjoying success as a commercial property developer in Atlanta, Andrew Rothfeder received an invitation from the late Allen Levin to join his firm. Interestingly, the two had met when Rothfeder, who had been adopted and raised by his parents in Alabama, went searching for his birth parents. "My wife, Sara, and I were going to have children," he says, "so it was important to look into my background." The adoption agency led him to Levin, with whom he found a connection that went beyond sharing the same genes. Ironically, birth father and son had entered the same kind of work and discovered they had much more in common. Because they became so close, Rothfeder accepted Levin's business offer. Sadly, Levin died of cancer within the next two years, leaving Rothfeder and others to perpetuate his legacy.

A hands-on property management team has been fundamental to that effort. “All who have a stake in Portofino appreciate a long-term outlook,” says Rothfeder. The developers hired Premier Island Management Group, owned by Rob Babcock, to oversee the care of the property, its amenities, event sales, and rentals. Launched specifically to run Portofino, Premier is an on-site company, fully dedicated to this resort.

Quite unlike the typical management company that handles numerous properties and treats them all categorically, Babcock has taken up full-time residence at Portofino with his wife, Sabine, who presides over event sales, and their two young daughters to present a highly customized amenities package that is further individualized for each customer. Totally immersed in the lifestyle, the Babcocks desire what other residents and resort guests want to experience. Striving to anticipate every need and whim, Babcock and his team regularly brainstorm, adding and implementing fresh ideas to an already complete wish list of recreation and service options. Premier also manages on-site rentals, providing a turnkey solution to owners with incentives to vacationers, including a generous amenity package that is complimentary.

The message of utmost service, quality, and value has resonated among management, staff, owners, and guests. With the developers setting the tone, most attribute Portofino’s close-knit community to the friendly, can-do attitudes that prevail. From year-round residents to repeat vacationers, people universally express that “Portofino feels like home.” Not surprisingly then, numerous buyers first come to the island resort as renters before deciding to own. “Our target buyer is our visitor,” confirms Rothfeder. “By simply doing our jobs, we sell units every season without intentionally marketing to them.” Even so, such a gem could not remain the secret of a select few. Levin and Rinke have made a lifetime commitment to Portofino’s large investors and individual owners with an on-site sales office that reaches out to potential buyers across the globe.

The developers, nonetheless, know that demand cannot be manufactured, which is why they work tirelessly, always raising the bar for Portofino to set new world-class standards. Accordingly, many want to know what the visionaries have in mind for the future.

It just so happens that eight acres adjacent to Portofino have been earmarked for a four-flag hotel, crowned with luxury penthouse condominiums. As an extension of the existing island resort, the new project is proposed to enhance services beyond current capabilities—whatever that might entail.

The Portofino standard has been established, so anything that comes next will most assuredly be worth the wait.
