

NATIONAL POST



Since Nanaimo is only accessible to Vancouver's mainland by water or air, all Pacifica buyers receive one year of free commutes on the float plane, or 88 flights.

Harbouring beauty: A \$62-million renovation to Pacifica makes for very happy buyers, where condos start at \$450,000

Suzanne Wintrob, National Post · January 14, 2011

From the moment the float plane touches down in Nanaimo's harbour, an unexpected calmness rushes through this visitor's veins. It is late Sunday morning in early November, the sun is shining and the boardwalk along the water's edge bustling with joggers, dog walkers and a busker belting out First Nations tunes. Sailboats and fishing tugs line the marina and seagulls squawk as they scan the shore for goodies. The place

radiates such tranquility that it's hard to believe the big, busy city of Vancouver is just 20 minutes away.

But a scan of the skyline has this city gal confused. Only three condominium towers line the waterfront — 18-storey Seaview built in 1975, a 27-storey condo/townhome project called Cameron Island completed in 1997, and Cape Group's new 18-storey Pacifica project situated just above the boardwalk. Though there is talk of other residential towers to come, Pacifica is the current talk of the town. In fact, it won the Vancouver Island Real Estate Board's 2010 Commercial Building Award for excellence in a multi-family condo.

At \$62-million and 212,000-square-feet, Pacifica prides itself on being one of Canada's largest renovation projects. The 169-unit tower plus 26 two-storey townhomes sit on the site of the old Malaspina Hotel, once an elegant resort but torn down in the mid-1990s to make way for an office building and later a convention centre and adjoining hotel. None of these came to fruition and the site sat derelict for years. When Cape Group took it on five years ago, Nanaimo's 80,000-plus residents cheered.

"We walked into what looked like bombed-out Beirut," says Reisa Schwartzman, a partner at Vancouver-based developer Cape Group. "Anything from the bankruptcy had been stripped out so it really was just a concrete core. So we came in and finished the 7.5-km walkway around the sea wall. We built townhomes in front. We built underground on to the existing garage. We built townhomes on the backside. And then we built on top to do the rest of the tower."

Today, Pacifica is 80% sold, with young couples and empty-nesters calling it home. Some work at Nanaimo's Vancouver Island University — known for its tourism, culinary, nursing and heavy machinery programs — while others use it as their weekend getaway. Only 30 condos remain, ranging from 1,100 to 1,400 sq. ft., from \$450,000 to \$760,000. There is no gym or swimming pool, Ms. Schwartzman says, because they are not important to the outdoorsy island crowd. As she puts it: "The only amenity is the sea wall at your doorstep."

Of the three penthouses still available, the one getting the most attention is a fully furnished two-bedroom unit featuring 14-foot ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows, and a \$55,000 art collection. The interior's white walls and modern white furniture are meant to keep the focus on the water view, a concept clearly emphasized in the master bedroom with the low bed strategically placed in the middle of the room facing the expansive windows. Dishes, cutlery and housewares are included, too, all in an effort to entice city dwellers to Nanaimo's pristine shore.

“I found it was an island getaway from the city, almost like an urban sanctuary,” says Vancouver design consultant James Fraser of the \$855,000 suite. “I let Mother Nature be the focal point and be the backdrop to everything.”

The artwork is another interesting touch. Vince Dumoulin — a Montreal graffiti artist making bigger bucks since Vancouver’s corporate world came calling — picked up on the urban sanctuary theme with white-on-white wall sculptures and textured drawings. He has even inscribed colourful quotes on some of the walls, such as the master bedroom’s “Where the spirit does not work with the hand, there is no art.” Says Mr. Dumoulin, 28: “It should be very gratifying to know that they’re buying a space that’s ready-made and is allowing an artist to grow by leaps and bounds in his career.”

Since Nanaimo (home to jazz chanteuse Diana Krall) is only accessible to Vancouver’s mainland by water or air, all Pacifica buyers receive one year of free commutes on the local float plane, or 88 flights. That’s particularly appealing to Nanaimo Mayor John Ruttan, whose major focus as municipal leader is to lure Vancouverites to his city with a high-speed passenger-only ferry service from downtown Nanaimo to downtown Vancouver. He’s proud of the new convention centre, the \$28-million airport expansion, and the \$22-million floating cruise ship terminal that will be operating this spring. All will give a big boost to the local economy, with Pacifica doing its part to draw in the crowds.

“This is almost a whole new place when you look at the changes,” he says. “It’s addressing the revitalization of downtown. I’m so pleased with what we’ve done so far.”