



LAPS OF LUXURY
The pool at ONE Bal Harbour Resort and Spa, which is set to add a celeb-baiting beach club in hopes of attracting young jet setters.



Bal Harbour 2.0

Can a once-sleepy beach town with a famous shopping mall become cool?

| By *Malerie Willens* | Portrait by *Alfonso Serarols* |

Everyone's riding the reinvention train. Celebrities, corporations—occasionally even cities. One of the more subtle transformations of late has happened in Bal Harbour. In plastic surgery parlance, the chic little shire's had work done, but it's more a mini-lift than a Wildenstein-caliber overhaul.

The square mile of land that is Bal Harbour was purchased in the 1920s, designed in the 1930s and rented to the U.S. military for a dollar per year during World War II. It was incorporated in 1946 and soon began attracting the rich and famous with its sought-after location and glamorous new construction. One of the original incorporators, Stanley Whitman—who's now in his nineties and still reports to the office every day—built the airy, genteel Bal Harbour Shops in 1965, when monolithic indoor malls were coming into vogue.

The last few decades have cemented Bal Harbour's reputation for high-end retail heft, impeccably tended public and private space and moneyed gentility with a casual South Florida feel. In the new millennium, the Design District inherited the arty crowd, South Beach kept the party crowd and Bal Harbour remained Bal Harbour, with its famously deep pockets and older-skewing demo. That is, until the recent boom, which began with a literal boom.

The 2007 demolition—still viewable on YouTube—of Morris Lapidus's well-loved and well-worn Sheraton, né Americana,

made room for the still-under-construction St. Regis resort-condominium. (The Starwood property will open its ultra-luxe doors in 2012, promising three twenty-story glass towers full of over-the-top amenities.) The Sheraton's rubble worked like fairy dust, attracting international attention as the St. Regis commenced construction. So when the doomed Regent Bal Harbour, built in 2008, hit the market in 2009 after its owner went bankrupt, two young Colombian brothers with experience in real estate (but not hotels) plucked it from the ashes and transformed it into what's now ONE Bal Harbour Resort & Spa.

Juan and Jorge Arevalo, in their much-publicized real estate coup, have helmed such a successful makeover that they plan on introducing their ONE luxury concept to other markets. A respectable art collection, private beach, dog-positive ethos (pawcierge, anyone?) and elite amenities—not to mention a Nobu pop-up during the Super Bowl—have given the formidable property a wallop of it-factor. And then there's the members-only beach club, debuting in September. Designed by Hernan Arriaga, whose clients include Roberto Cavalli and Rita Schrage, it's pure A-list and charitable to boot, with \$500 of the initial membership fee benefitting the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Big brother Jorge believes "people have a perception of Bal Harbour as a sleepy part of Miami Beach, but CONTINUED...



...CONTINUED it's really growing and developing." The younger Arevalo agrees: "As more people are learning about this destination within a destination, we're seeing more travelers and more attention from locals."

More attention, indeed. Surprisingly, 2009 was a banner year for retail as much as real estate. Bal Harbour's destination status has always emanated from the retail prowess of its Shops, famously the most productive shopping center in the U.S. And the Shops

2009 was a banner year for retail as much as real estate in Bal Harbour. The Shops didn't just endure the recession; they flourished. The Hermès store reported a 17 percent upsurge in business at the same time that the rest of the world was secretly hawking its Birkin bags on eBay.

HARBOUR LIGHTS
Clockwise from top left: Jorge and Juan Arevalo, the brothers behind one of the efforts to make Bal Harbour more hip. Bal Harbour Shops, the most productive shopping center in the U.S. A suite at ONE Bal Harbour Resort and Spa.

didn't just endure the recession; they flourished. While the luxury market ailed, venerable French fashion house Lanvin (which enjoyed its own reinvention in 2001 when Israeli designer Alber Elbaz took the reins) opened its first American standalone in the Shops. It was a dramatic vote of confidence, harking back to 1971, when Neiman Marcus chose Bal Harbour for its first location outside of Texas. A high-profile addition like Lanvin sends a clear message, so it makes sense that the Shops' Hermès store reported a 17 percent upsurge in business at the same time that the rest of the world was secretly hawking its Birkin bags on eBay.

A percentage of Bal Harbour's profits have helped keep it pristine and high-functioning, thanks to Stanley Whitman's prescience. Soon after opening the Shops in the '60s, he helped spearhead an initiative mandating that

resort and restaurant tax monies be funneled into a tourism fund. Around the time the Arevalo brothers intervened in the Regent debacle, plans were hatched for spending that municipal money. In addition to the usual maintenance and operation, new programs sprung to life.

Thanks in part to a slow but steady influx of young families as residents and visitors, Miami Children's Museum partnered with the city to form Bal Harbour Kids Beach Camp. Based in the family-friendly Sea View Hotel but open to non-guests, the popular programs encourage eco-consciousness and artistic expression.

The money has also given Bal Harbour custom-designed Pilates and yoga classes on the beach, as well as a \$3 million seaside jogging path, all of which are free for hotel guests and city residents.

The fund has made its most noticeable mark in the cultural realm, with Movies on the Beach, live Performances on the Green and an Art Walk the third Thursday of the month. After a successful debut earlier this year, the Fall season packs an even bigger punch, with offerings ranging from mainstream and kid-appropriate to arty and indie.

You can't talk about culture without a shout-out to Books & Books, whose founder and local literary luminary Mitchell Kaplan expanded the Bal Harbour outpost last November, in keeping with the newsstand concept that's tailor-made for community carousing. The location now has more space and a fuller event calendar, particularly for kids. Kaplan believes in the Shops, which he describes as having a "wonderfully articulated point of view." Most of which, he says, is about "giving people an experience."

Providing an experience, rather than just more stuff to buy, has always fueled Bal Harbour's ethos, even if it's sometimes been obscured by the flash of heavy spending. In a town of only two hotels, seven restaurants and 3,222 residents, improving day-to-day quality of life is viable.

One of those improvements will be the entrance of über-restaurateur Stephen Starr (Morimoto, Buddakan, Steak 954), who is bringing his Japanese-inflected *je ne sais quoi* in 2011 with a 200-seat, \$7-million restaurant. The condo portion of the St. Regis is beginning to fill up. And covetable tenants like Carolina Herrera, Miu Miu and Michael Kors have landed in the Shops this past year, with more on the way.

Bal Harbour doesn't want to be South Beach or St. Barths. She wants to look like herself, only fresher and a touch more vibrant. You'll still recognize her, but you'll probably want to stay and hang out a little longer. **M**