

It's that time: Clocks go forward, smoke-alarm batteries get replaced

This weekend, when the clocks go forward, it'll be time to do the bi-yearly ritual: Change the batteries in the smoke detector (granted, maybe not at 2 a.m.). Although most Canadians do their duty, a poll reveals the smoke alarms they are powering may be on their last legs. The online poll, conducted among more than 2,200 Canadians living in homes 10 years or older, was commissioned jointly by the Canad-

SEASONAL EFFECTIVENESS

ian Association of Fire Chiefs and Kidde Canada, a manufacturer of smoke alarms. Most alarming was that 74% of people mistakenly believe smoke alarms never need to be replaced so long as the alarm sounds when the test button is pressed. Fire safety officials point out that this only

proves the unit has power, not that it is working within its acceptable lifespan. Another 37% of respondents believe their smoke alarms last for forever, which is certainly not true. *National Post*



Matt and Erica Hogan vacationed in Costa Rica and fell so in love with it that they bought 310 acres to develop a tree house community. Their vision includes having connecting pathways between structures, as in the rendering at left, and contemporary, comfortable interiors.



FINCA BELLAVISTA

THE NEXT BIG PLACE TO INVEST IN A SECOND HOME?

BRAZIL'S NATAL AREA

BY JESSIE HEWITSON

Tourists know about south Brazil — they head to the carnival in Rio or sip caipirinhas in São Paulo — but the north remains a mystery. This is mainly because it is hard to reach, but that is soon to change thanks to an increase in flights to the area.

When the San Gonzalvo airport opens in 2010, it will be the fourth-largest airport in the world.

With flights come second-home buyers. Natal certainly has a lot to offer, with white sand beaches and an average temperature of 28C. "Natal is moving fast," says Graeme Grant, of Resort Group International. "Aside from its natural beauty, it has a stable economy, low cost of living, and the investment in new hotels, golf courses and resorts is expected to exceed US\$1.8-billion over the next five years."

"It is also one of the safest cities in Brazil."

Resort Group International is selling the Elegance Natal Golf Resort, a half-hour drive from the city centre and 15 minutes from the new airport. It is a beachfront site with lakes and dunes behind it. Brazilian footballer Ronaldo owns a property, as do Antonio Banderas and Melanie Griffith.

Elegance Natal Golf, built by Spanish-based Grupo Sanchez, spans 400 acres and, when completed in 2010, will house 2,000 properties and Natal's first golf course. The first phase comprises one-, two- and three-bedroom flats, and two- and three-bedroom penthouses. Prices start at \$77,000 (Canadian) and go up to \$237,000 for a penthouse flat.

Elegance is part of the larger Grand Natal Golf project, which will have a Ronaldo Football Academy, a heliport, eight hotels and five golf courses.

"This is the start of an enormous future global tourism market for Natal," says Emma Holifield of investment specialists Property Frontiers. "Tourism in Brazil has increased from 4.1 million foreign visitors in 2003 to 5.5 million in 2005."

"Resort demand, rental rates and land prices are all increasing. The development we are selling — Natal Ocean Club — has already experienced price growth of 23% since we started selling three months ago."

Economists have high hopes for Brazil. Lehman Brothers recently recommended Brazilian property to its clients, and Goldman Sachs predicts the country will be the world's fifth-largest economic player by 2035.

Gary and Louise Brown, who divide their time between the United Kingdom and Cyprus, have bought a two-bedroom flat in Elegance Natal for about \$158,000. The couple, who have two children, invest in property full-time.

"We thought it had huge potential," says Ms. Brown. "It has year-round sun and this enormous airport about to open. It's very cheap to invest in Brazil right now, too, and you can pay in instalments."

"Holidayayers will be the linchpin of Natal, I feel. It will take them to kick-start everything else."

For more information, visit rgintl.co.uk and propertyfrontiers.com

The Daily Telegraph



Elegance Natal Golf Resort, top, and the Natal Ocean Club, above.

Tree-house retreats — with organic gardens and Wi-Fi

OUT ON A LIMB

BY JACK KOHANE

The blueprints for Kevin Ablett's future home are up a tree. But he's ecstatic by the prospect of having such colourful neighbours as howler and spider monkeys, toucans and scarlet macaws squawking on his rooftop.

"This is what living in a rain forest in Costa Rica is about," smiles Mr. Ablett, 29, a former Toronto realtor who moved to Calgary to tap into the oil patch's gushing housing market, and is now the proud owner of a tree house above the jungle floor. "When the opportunity came to be a part of this unique community, I took it. This is the ultimate in green development."

Examining the branches of the 150-foot-high trees that will carry the weight of their 1,000-square-foot wood-sided home, Mr. Ablett and his 28-year-old fiancé, Anne Stefanyk, are among the first title holders to a slice of the tropical Eden called Finca Bellavista, the world's only tree house subdivision.

Foot power is the main mode of transportation to enter this earthly paradise, which is fine with Mr. Ablett. "We'll be growing our own crops in the organic garden. And if we want to stay connected with the outside, there's easy access to a Wi-Fi signal and a high-speed direct link satellite dish. We have everything needed within walking distance."

Located at the base of a 6,000-foot mountain on the South Pacific coast of Costa Rica, a region that boasts the highest percentage of land devoted to National Parks and Forest Reserves in the country, Finca Bellavista (translated as "estate with a beautiful view") offers panoramas of the Pacific Ocean and breathtaking vistas of the surrounding — and pristine — landscape of this ecologically lush 310-acre property.

Currently in the first phase of a planned three-stage development, the 72-lot Finca Bellavista is the brainchild of co-founders Matt Hogan, a sports marketing consultant from Maryland and his wife, Erica, a former newspaper editor from Colorado.

"We came to Costa Rica two years ago on a surfing trip to Pavones [a hot spot with large waves] with no intention of buying a property," Ms. Hogan says. "On arrival, we fell in love with the place. Our first thought: We have to build a vacation home here."

They became so passionate about the project that it wasn't long before the decision was made to share it with others. "We want to bring something totally different and adventurous into peoples' lives," Mr. Hogan says.

Inspired by the *Star Wars* Ewok village they fantasized about as kids, with its interconnected suspended bridges linking the trees and adjoining huts, the Hogans wanted to recreate that story-book experience at Finca.

"We're astonished no one has done this before," Mr. Hogan says. "For many, the idea of living in a tree house is root-

ed in our childhood imagination. Whatever the age, six or 60, the thought of being in a tree house never fails to elicit a smile."

Finca Bellavista's lots vary in size from about two to five acres. The initial 30 parcels in Phase 1, priced at US\$40,000, are almost sold out. The two- and three-acre lots of Phase 2, are available ranging from US\$50,000 to US\$65,000 (higher for riverfront and ocean-view parcels). The details of Phase 3 are still to come.

Housing construction costs are extra, of course, but no need to worry — there's no rush hour, no contractor's schedule to meet and no pressure to build until you're ready.

There's plenty of privacy for Fina Bellavista homeowners. "Especially considering the dense foliage of the rain forest," Ms. Hogan says.

But building a community nestled within the canopy of tall tropical trees has its design and engineering challenges.

To untangle the lofty logistics, the Hogans sought world-renowned tree house designer Roderick Romero.

We wanted to bring something different and adventurous to peoples' lives

Among his eco-friendly creations, which he describes as more sculptural than architectural, are treetop hideaways for the kids of celebrities such as Sting's in Tuscany, Val Kilmer's Pacos, Tex., rear-yard retreat and Julianne Moore's New York City getaway aerie. Finca Bellavista is his first jungle job, one he calls a landmark project.

"This is a fantastic experience," says Mr. Romero, whose work studio is in New York City. "One of the main hurdles in building a tree house is building a structure that's lightweight as to not overburden the trees, but heavy enough to carry the weight of kitchen appliances, beds, balconies and the other creature comforts people want."

To do that, Mr. Romero and his crew of bough-abode builders, the Seattle-based Treehouse Workshop, are using all reclaimed, salvaged wood from the region, manoeuvring each 24-foot beam, which weigh about 700 pounds, through the rain forest along narrow paths.

Each tree must be inspected and analyzed inside and out to ensure there is no decay to weaken a tree and its branches. "I've seen these trees and they are ideal for this development," Mr. Romero says.

Since the design of each tree house will be different, he must scale every tree to assess its strengths and weaknesses. "Once I'm up there, I can devise the house plan, the best staircase or ladder access points, where to situate bal-

conies for optimal lookouts and ensure everything works to harmonize with the environment."

The Sky Trail network is an interconnected system of ziplines and platforms that allow users to access different portions of the community. Since you can't drive a car into the interior of the property and to your house, the Sky Trails are another option — besides hiking — to get to your property. It makes for a quicker, more invigorating commute. There is also an element of recreation involved because 80% of the wildlife and biodiversity in the rain forest is in the canopy, the platforms and ziplines allow a better view of what's really going on up there.

"Since the terrain is [rocky], the cable system can help avoid descending and climbing up the many small valleys that are on the way to different sectors of the property," Mr. Hogan says. "The best route in the trees does not necessarily coincide with the best route that an access trail or road would take. Sometimes the right trees are not where we would want them to be."

As for plumbing and electricity, Finca Bellavista is teaming with nature to provide utilities. Rainwater, which there is no shortage of in a rain forest, will be funnelled into the home from a catchment system on a home's roof and distributed to sinks and bathrooms via pipes.

Rather than tying into the existing municipal power grid, which has frequent rolling black- and brown-outs, the Hogans opted to create their own hydroelectric power grid for the community.

The system uses the water flowing through the mountain-fed Rio Bellavista to power a turbine attached to an electric generator. The water will be diverted into the turbine from the river through piping. After passing through the turbine, the water is returned to the river as pure and natural as when it entered the pipeline.

Finca Bellavista homeowners can tie into this grid through transformers and buried power cables. "The power system will produce sustainable and reliable power while nearly eliminating any monthly electricity costs for residents," Mr. Hogan says.

Not only have the Costa Rican authorities given their blessing to the Finca Bellavista project, they are using it as a model of eco-friendly housing for future developments.

"Preserving this delicate ecosystem and the myriad plants and animals, most of which are indigenous and many endangered, has been our prime focus," Ms. Hogan says. "The Finca Bellavista concept is driven to protect the rain forest."

Ms. Stefanyk agrees, saying that blending their new home into the rhythm of nature is an aspiration that the couple shares. "We now live a natural and connected life, and building our tree house is one more piece in the puzzle on our path to living the dream."

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