

ECO DESTINATION OF THE YEAR

28. Star Island, Bahamas

Paradise Without Guilt

By BARBARA IRELAND

A STIFF breeze was roughing up the ocean, and spray shot up into David Sklar's small boat with every bump across a wave. The Bahamian sun beat down through patchy clouds, baking unprotected skin. A quick turn into a protected cove and the wind was gone, but the big Yamaha outboard still had work to do, idling against a tidal current ruffling up the aquamarine sea.

A baby loggerhead turtle swam by, its graceful flippers and foot-wide shell just below the surface in clear water. "Did you know the turtles can move as fast as birds?" Mr. Sklar asked.

Trade winds, sun and current — Mr. Sklar, 41, a Savannah, Ga., developer, and his partners plan to harness all of them to generate electricity on Star Island (www.starislandbahamas.com), a 35-acre cay near the Bahamian island of Eleuthera. The goal is to turn the island, now home to nothing but sand, coral rock and trees, into the world's first truly carbon-neutral resort island — uncompromisingly luxurious, but without any reliance on fossil fuels that add carbon dioxide to the atmosphere.

Even the turtle, swimming about 30 yards off Star Island, represents an opportunity — not for soup or biomass, but as a symbol of the stakes of environmental preservation that Mr. Sklar hopes buyers will find compelling when sales of vacation homes begin early this year. A 68-room hotel is to follow, and some condos will be available for short-term rentals.

This project isn't alone — Richard Branson and Leonardo DiCaprio are involved in carbon-neutral resort proposals in the Virgin Islands and Belize, and a resort in the Maldives is undergoing a kind of carbon-neutral retrofit. But Star Island is running ahead of the trend. Design (by Mr. Sklar, who has a degree in architecture) and government approvals are complete, and the first building is expected to go up this year.



PATRICK JUDE WILSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Developers plan to make Star Island the world's first carbon-neutral resort island.

The heart of Star Island's carbon neutrality will be a photovoltaic roof and a small wind turbine on every building, generating enough power to supply its own needs and send a surplus to banks of storage batteries. Other green features include wastewater treatment using technology developed for ships by the United States Coast Guard, a lagoon for collecting runoff, and even a rooftop herb garden. Garbage will be converted into fertilizer as well as fuel for extra electrical watt-

age, some of which may one day power electric boats plugging in at the island dock.

It all sounded a bit fanciful last October, as Mr. Sklar gestured toward a phantom reception center, bungalows and hotel while standing on a ridge of barren rock (cabbage farmers cleared Star Island's native vegetation long ago; on many maps, it still appears as Cabbage Cay). But with travelers uneasy about contributing to climate change while they play, the market for a guilt-free vacation appears ready to tap.

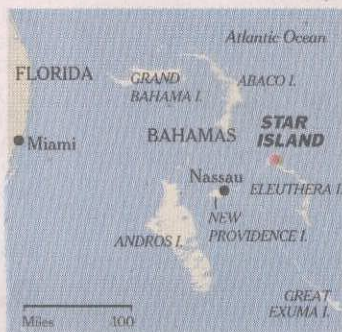
The dream of a carbon-neutral Bali Hai also captivated Richard Branson, who bought Mosquito Island, a speck of land off Virgin Gorda, with plans to develop "a showcase for sustainability and eco-living," according to a statement from his Virgin Elite resort group. For now, the project is still "very much in the planning and development stages," a spokeswoman said. The idea also captured the attention of Leonardo DiCaprio. Or rather, his purchase

of Blackadore Caye in Belize a few years ago captured the public's attention, with a flurry of news reports about his plans to build a carbon-free vacation spot. But "nothing has progressed on this for some time," said his publicist, Ken Sunshine.

Across the world in the Maldives, Six Senses Resorts & Spas is adapting its plush Soneva Fushi resort to go carbon-neutral by 2010. Among other things, it is adding solar-powered steam turbines that will power everything from the air-conditioning to a desalination plant.

Neither Soneva Fushi nor Star Island pretends to be inventing anything new, although both hope other builders will use their ideas as prototypes.

"I use the analogy of the Prius," said Scott Sklar (no relation to David Sklar), a Washington environmental consultant who is advising Star Island. "An elegant integration of technology that was out there — made seamless and very user-friendly." ■



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