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Getting away from it all in Gananoque

Luxury condo developers have discovered this gem of a town known as the Gateway to the Thousand Islands



There's plenty of green space and water in and around Gananoque, Ont.

Lars Hagberg for Postmedia

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Special to National Post

If you're looking for Doug and Suzan Kendall, they're likely on the water around the stunning Thousand Islands. The avid boaters run an international boarding school near their four-bedroom Brockville, Ont. home, but spend much of their downtime with the wind in their hair on nearby rivers and lakes.

So when the empty nesters stumbled upon the sales office of a new condominium project called Island Harbour Club in Gananoque — a town known as the gateway to the Thousand Islands, which is about 60 kilometres south of Brockville — they were intrigued. They weren't planning to move, but their two kids had left home and retirement was beckoning.

With a marina on the condo's doorstep and a price tag that was half of what a waterfront condo in Kingston (the biggest city in the area) would cost, it just felt right. Even they were surprised when they signed for a new three-bedroom, 1,750-sq.-ft., open-concept unit complete with a 45×12-ft. back porch, plus enormous windows and a balcony overlooking the St. Lawrence River. Now they can't wait to make the move.



Doug and Suzan Kendall Lars Hagberg for Postmedia

“We love it,” says Suzan Kendall, 62, who grew up in Kingston, which is about a 20-minute drive away. “Being in Gananoque gives us that affordability to be able to get a really nice, beautiful, large condo that’s affordable and right on the water... It’s like a little bedroom community of Kingston.”

No doubt, there’s something special about this town with the funny name and a population of 5,200. Tourists from all over the world have been flocking to Gananoque — or “Gan” as the locals call it — for generations. It’s a particularly popular spot in the summer when boats weave leisurely along the St. Lawrence River to take in the picturesque Thousand Islands (there are actually 1,864, to be precise).

The town has come a long way from its early days as an industrial centre best known for lumbering, mining and milling, though remnants of the 19th-century factories once lining the banks of the Gananoque River (a tributary of the St. Lawrence River, the latter stretching 1,200 km from Lake Ontario towards Quebec City and the Atlantic Ocean) are still visible today.

A stroll along the tree-lined streets displays all the trappings of small-town charm: a gazebo in the town square, a clock tower, striking old homes with wrap-around porches, steepled churches, quaint ice cream shops and pubs, a musical theatre and a boat museum that brings the river's nautical heritage to life.

Relaxed Lifestyle

Cyclists, rollerbladers and walkers flock to the the 37-km Thousand Islands Parkway trail that runs along the river. With fairs, festivals and farmers' markets throughout the summer and fall, the B&Bs and hotels do brisk business, as do the golf courses and nearby casino. Even Via Rail has a stop in Gan.

But lately, something else has been brewing in the heart of Gananoque that has townspeople and outsiders buzzing: luxury condo developers have discovered this gem of a town, too, and they're eagerly spreading the love with three brand new high-end, low-rise projects on the go.



Island Harbour Club rendering Courtesy of Island Harbour Club

Island Harbour Club by Cornwall, Ont.-based RMP Construction and Development Ltd. — a 67-unit U-shaped building with five storeys at the front and four on the side — is currently under construction across the street from the riverbank and beside the town's main marina.

Riverstone, by development partners Toronto-based Brennan Custom Homes Inc. and Joe Pal, will transform some century-old factory buildings and a newly constructed condo building into a compound of up to 100 condos, eight to 10 townhouses, office space, 100 boat slips, plus a public park with a waterfront walk.

And Stone & South by CaraCo Development Corporation — the only project smack-dab on the shoreline — will offer up two six-storey buildings with 70 units, plus 41 boat slips and a public park with waterfront trail.



Riverstone rendering

Courtesy of Riverstone

All three builders promise at least two bedrooms, high-end finishes and amenities, large balconies and spectacular views. And once the trio is complete, there will be another 237 homes in the community.

Shelley Hirstwood, economic development manager at the Town of Gananoque, says Gan offers an affordable alternative to living in a city.

“You can hop on a train and be in Toronto or Montreal or Ottawa for a weekend or for a business meeting and still reside in a place where you can still afford a house, waterfront and a boat for less than you’d get for a place in Toronto,” Hirstwood says, noting the lifestyle is appealing. “I’ll be the poster child for that — before I had a child, I kayaked every day after work! It was lovely.”

Considering the prices, it’s not surprising that this eye-catching locale with one million visitors a year is gaining eyeballs for those longing to live on the water. According to Mariah Hamilton, the regional director for the sales and consulting agency Milborne Group, who is also a salesperson for Stone & South, many buyers are snowbirds who hail from Toronto and Ottawa, or people who have “an emotional connection” to the area, having grown up in Kingston or vacationed in Gananoque as children.

Community Ties

Even the developers have strong ties to the land. CaraCo is run by four siblings from Kingston who have been building high-rises and single-family homes in the area and in Deerfield Beach, Florida, (where one sibling lives) for 30 years and are happy to be adding Gananoque to their roster.

RMP Construction owner Robert Pelda owns a small island where his cottage sits and only develops along the St. Lawrence River. Riverstone’s Joe Brennan has a cottage nearby and owns a marina called Brennan Marine. And Joe Pal owns the town’s popular Riva restaurant, as well as the private Ivy Lea Club marina a short drive away.

“It’s the first time in 20 years that [almost] all the commercial space in Gananoque is leased,” enthuses Brennan Custom Homes partner Daniel Greenglass. “So it’s not a sleepy little town. It’s a town that’s really ready to be discovered.”

Island Harbour Club, which is well under construction, and Stone & South, which will begin construction later this year, still have enough units left for those yet to discover the town. The Riverstone folks plan to build first and sell later. Meanwhile, they’re finishing construction on an 8,300-sq.-ft. commercial building whose major tenant will be tech-start-up Big River Technologies. Founder, John Free, believes the condo projects will help him attract new talent since his 35 millennial-age employees — most of whom commute from Kingston and the surrounding area — will have more housing options near work.

“Selling a pre-sale condo in Gan is not typical,” explains Hamilton, whose family has lived in Kingston for six generations. “People aren’t used to buying something before it’s

built because it's not a large urban centre. But we've had tremendous support. There's great depth to this market."

As for the Kendalls, they've managed to persuade two other couples to join them as neighbours in Gan, making this new stage of their lives even more enjoyable. "That's the new theme of retirement — retire with your friends," Suzan Kendall says, laughing. "Our move-in date is June 2019. I've already got it on my phone app to count down the days!"

Island Harbour Club

Builder: RMP Construction and Development Ltd.

Status: Under construction

No. units: 67 residential

Size: 1,041 to 1,990 sq. ft.

Price: \$299,000 to \$645,000

Availability: 70 per cent sold

Occupancy: Summer 2019

Info: <http://www.islandharbourclub.ca>

Riverstone

Builder: Brennan Custom Homes Inc. and Joe Pal

Status: Anticipated construction 2019

No. units: up to 100 two-bedroom condos, eight to 10 townhomes

Size: Homes: 1,100 to 1,300 sq. ft.; townhomes 3,000 sq. ft.

Price: Homes: \$550,000 to \$695,000; townhomes: \$1.5 million

Availability: Developer not pre-selling, condos will be sold after construction

Occupancy: Late 2019/2020

Info: <http://www.riverstonegananoque.ca>

Stone & South

Builder: CaraCO Development Corporation

Status: Pre-sales, construction to start late 2018

No. units: 70 total – 41 in Phase 1 on sale now and 29 in Phase 2

Size: 913 to 1,570 sq. ft.

Price: \$488,900 to \$854,000

Availability: Phase 1 – 50 per cent sold

Occupancy: Spring 2020

Info: <http://www.stoneandsouthcondos.ca>