

ST. JOHN TRADEWINDS

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Maho Bay Campground Land Officially Sold for \$13.95 Million

Written by Jaime Elliott



The End of an Era: The Maho Bay Campground property sold for \$13.95 million last week, spelling the end for the popular and long-running eco-resort on the North Shore of St. John.



Maho Bay Campground's wooden walkways, will remain on the Property at least for now — but reports are the property will become a family compound.

"The end of Eden," is how one Maho Bay Campground fan explained the news which spread across St. John last week. After more than 36 years in operation, Maho Bay Campground will officially close this year. The 13.8-acre North Shore Road property upon which the campground sits was sold on December 27, 2012, for \$13.95 million to Maho Bay Camps LLC. Campground officials emailed a notice to Maho Bay Newsletter subscribers on Tuesday, January 1, sharing the sad news.

"We have just discovered that the property which Maho Bay Camps sits upon has officially been sold," the newsletter read. "The only information that has been released, is that a direct sale to an unknown buyer took place on 12/27/2012 for \$13,950,000. No one is releasing any more details."

"We do not know who they are or their intentions," according to last week's Maho Bay Campground newsletter. "All we know is that we are only taking reservations until we close on May 15, 2013. We will continue to update you as we find out more."

And details about the new property owner remained unclear last week with hopeful rumors circulating that the buyer was an "environmentally-oriented" rich individual who planned to build a single family compound, according to Maho Bay Campground owner Stanley Selengut. "We haven't really the vaguest idea of who the buyer is," Selengut said last week from his Florida home.

"The rumor is that it is a wealthy, environmentally-oriented person who is going to build a single family estate. What we know is that my lease is over; that Maho is closing."

Selengut signed the lease for the 13.8-acre property located on a hillside between Francis and Maho Bay beaches in 1974. He opened the first 18 tents, of what would eventually become a 114-unit Pioneering eco-resort, in 1976. The concept was basic - provide simple accommodations while keeping people close to stunningly beautiful nature - but just about unheard of at the time.



Stanley Selengut, center, with island architects Glen Speer, left, and Rob Crane, right.

The idea proved popular, however, and today Selengut is widely considered the grandfather of eco-tourism. “Maho has been phenomenal,” said Selengut. “It’s almost been like a miracle. It started with like 18 units and the concept was to keep people off the ground in accommodations that were simple, but comfortable and close to nature. It was successful from the minute it opened and it grew so successfully.”

“It really stimulated a lot of change in how people address building on sensitive land,” he said. “It’s been a great run for me.” Maho Bay Campground’s successful growth also impacted St. John. With 114 units and an additional 12 studio accommodations at Harmony Studios, the loss of Maho Bay Campground’s estimated 12,000 annual visitors will surely be felt throughout the island.

“The economic ramifications on the island will be huge,” said Selengut. “We handle about 12,000 guests a year. That’s 12,000 round-trip ferry rides and taxi rides, restaurant guests and more. Also consider the things that we buy on island and all of our employees and this is really going to have a major, major impact.”

With Maho Bay Campground being one of the few affordable accommodations to be found on St. John, the loss of those rooms will not necessarily be filled elsewhere on Love City, explained Selengut. “Someone estimated that we add as much as \$20 million to the island of St. John and there is no other place to put these guests,” he said. “No one else can pick up the slack. Caneel and the Westin are too expensive for our middle class guests who save up all year long for their trip to Maho.”

“The only other place is Cinnamon Bay Campground and they can’t expand without all the approvals and stuff,” Selengut said. Selengut does own the land under Harmony Studios and plans to continue renting those units as affordable short-term accommodations. He also owns the 51-acre Estate Concordia Preserve, half of which is an eco-resort with 42 units, with the other half being divided into lots for environmentally-sound construction.

The eco-resort owner plans to expand Concordia, but does not have definite plans in place at this time, he explained. “Eventually Concordia will be bigger than Maho, but I’m almost 84 years old so I’m not so sure what I’ll be able to do,” said Selengut. Maho Bay Campground’s closing also threatens the future of the popular Trash to Treasures program, which included glass blowing using recycled glass bottles and batik textiles. Selengut was unsure last week about what would happen to the program, he explained.

"I'm fairly old and I'm legally blind and the idea of closing Maho is a sadness," he said. "The idea of closing the Trash to Treasure program is really devastating to me. It's been so successful and the last time I was down there I got to see what amazing pieces they are turning out". They seem to solve more and more problems," Selengut said. "It's really amazing and it's a win-win for everyone; it's good for the environment, the guests love it and there are great classes for kids. I'd really like to see the program continue."

With only 42 units at Concordia currently, however, Selengut doubted that the program would find a new home there.

"You need about eight staff to run the program and you're dealing with glass and waste paper and textiles and it's a real production," he said. "Also supporting the salaries and the insurance; we don't have enough customers at Concordia for it."

The future of Maho Bay Clayworks, owned by ceramic artist Gail Van de Bogurt, is also in question. Campground officials also have to decide what to do with the hundreds of mattresses, thousands of chairs and tables, kitchen, laundry and office equipment which must be removed from the land before the lease expires at the end of June.

Maho Bay Campground is not accepting any reservations after May 15 to allow time to clear the equipment. The buildings, however, will remain on the property, explained Selengut. "The lease says that I have to leave all improvements to the land and I think the definition of that is everything that is attached to the land; all the buildings," he said. "But we will be getting rid of all the furnishings and tables and laundry and kitchen and office equipment." Selengut was still unsure of what to do with all of the equipment last week, but was hoping to be able to donate most of it to families in need. "I'm really thinking of donating this stuff locally between St. John, St. Thomas and St. Croix," he said. "I'd like to try to find people in need and get some volunteers to help."

When reached at his Florida home last week, Selengut was still processing the news of the imminent closure of Maho Bay Campground.

"I haven't gotten to the point of making all the decisions that have to be made yet," he said. "The deal just closed last week and until then I was hoping the sale would fall through or something. It isn't a happy time for me unfortunately."

Selengut wasn't the only one saddened by the news of the campground's upcoming closure. Many Maho Bay Campground fans expressed their sadness on the company's Facebook page last week. "I can't express how sad this makes me. I am really glad that I got to experience it. What a loss, makes me want to cry."

"Very sad. I'm glad I got to spend a few weeks there over the past 25 years. I was hoping for another visit, but I guess it's not to be."

"Can't believe it..my heart is breaking..thought someone would save us in the end...oh, well...guess we can keep our fingers crossed that maybe the buyer is a former Maho guest or worker who hit it big and will continue a campground there."

"I will miss you Maho Bay Camps. Will come by one more time before you close since its because of you I fell in love with these islands and still call it my home.You were my first real island home."

"Sad day." Before the sad day in May arrives when Maho Bay Campground stops welcoming guests, however, Selengut is looking forward to one more great season at the campground, he added. "It's going to be a great last season," he said. "And loads and loads of people are coming over to check out Concordia, so that's good."

For more information about Maho Bay Campground, check out www.maho.org or call 776-6226.

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