

The History of South Seas Resort

An aerial photograph of the South Seas Resort, showing a large green island with a golf course, several large resort buildings, and a long sandy beach along the coast. The island is surrounded by clear blue water, and a boat is visible in the lower right corner.

*How a fisherman's homestead became
a world-renowned destination*

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Mariner Group principals Allen Ten Broek (seated) and Bob Taylor bought South Seas Plantation in 1972 and turned it into a world-class resort.

Hanging on the wall in Allen Ten Broek's Mariner Group office in Ft. Myers is a framed cover of the February 1981 *Sports Illustrated* featuring "Christie Brinkley on Captiva." The A-list model came to South Seas Plantation to be photographed for the magazine's famous annual swimsuit issue.

"You can't believe what that did for us," says Ten Broek, who lobbied the magazine's editors for two years to get them to shoot at the Captiva resort. The travel industry notices what *Sports Illustrated* puts on its cover, says Ten Broek. "That put us on the map."

Ten Broek and Bob Taylor, principals in Mariner, which owned South Seas from 1972 to 1998, were responsible for turning a sleepy island getaway into an internationally known full-service resort that dominates the northern half of Captiva Island. The 300 or so acres that encompass South Seas today tell a fascinating tale of devel-

opment on a once-remote and isolated mangrove island. The resort sits on land first occupied by Calusa Indians thousands of years ago, perhaps followed by a pirate or two (as legend has it), and at the turn of the century by hardy homesteaders who planted crops and citrus groves. Its history as a resort property began, humbly enough, as a small hideaway in the 1930s.

The *Sports Illustrated* cover was symbolic of just how far Captiva—and South Seas—had come. The area was now in a league with the likes of Maui, Cancún, and Baja, all featured locations for previous swimsuit issues.

Ironically, the same issue of *Sports Illustrated* that celebrated the natural beauty of Captiva with a bikini-clad model also included an article called "There's Trouble in Paradise," detailing the dangers of Florida development. According to authors Robert Boyle and Rose Mary Mechem, only "38 percent of Florida estuarine habitat is still in a near pristine condition. Miles of mangrove stands have been ripped up



PHOTO COURTESY OF LEN CLEMENTS

The Captiva property, pictured here around 1975, was zoned for 3,900 units until Mariner petitioned Lee County for a reduction to 912 units.



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Storms in recent decades have taken their toll on Captiva and erosion is a continuing challenge, but none come close to the hurricane of 1921, which wiped out the crops and sent many homesteaders packing.

and smothered, and fish populations have dropped alarmingly.”

This was the dilemma that confronted the developers of South Seas from the beginning. “We were developers, and on the islands that was a controversial thing to do,” says Taylor. Mariner worked to create an image of being an environmentally sensitive developer. The company’s projects, such as Periwinkle Place shopping center on Sanibel, were designed to blend with their surroundings. This was not the dredge-and-fill, high-density approach typical of many developers.

In fact, one of Mariner’s first actions after purchasing South Seas was to down-zone the acreage, certainly a surprising request from any developer at the time. Lee County had zoned the property for 3,900 units, which Taylor and Ten Broek felt would overwhelm the property. They requested a zoning of three units per acre, a total of 912 units, in exchange for mixing commercial and residential uses. No one could argue with that. In the end, says Taylor, the company was known as the

“best of the bad guys.”

No matter what it did, however, its development projects created tension with island residents. The newspapers often ran letters critical of Mariner’s South Seas ambitions. One of its strongest critics was artist Robert Rauschenberg, whose adjoining Captiva property effectively put a brake on any efforts the resort might have had to expand its boundaries. “I have watched the mangrove along the South Seas Road destroyed,” Rauschenberg wrote in a letter printed in a local paper in 1977, “and 24-hour landfill trucks speeding, tearing up the roads, all to overpopulate and strain an already-delicate balance, and, I think, for no noble reason.”

Days of Limes and Coconuts

Indeed, Mariner initiated a lot of construction in a few short years, completely transforming South Seas, but the transformation of the land actually began many years earlier. (Historical accounts of the development of Captiva and South Seas vary slightly depending on the source.

What follows is as close to an accurate picture as we can draw.)

The first homesteader of the property that is now South Seas arrived in 1898. He was George Washington Carter, a Civil War veteran from Traders Hill, Georgia. He and his wife had three sons and two daughters. The family primarily fished for a living, but planted vegetables and a grapefruit grove on their 160 acres at the north end of Captiva. After Carter died in 1914, his family continued to work the land. Carter descendants still live in the area.

A year after Carter arrived on Captiva, William Langley “Tobe” Bryant homesteaded 160 acres just south of the Carter property. He married one of Carter’s daughters and grew sugar cane, avocados, vegetables, and citrus.

A hurricane hit in 1921, destroying the agricultural operations of the Carters and Bryant. Many people left the islands after that.

In 1923, Clarence Chadwick and his wife, Rosamond, visited Captiva.

Chadwick's plantation became the largest producer of key limes in the world.

Rosamond encouraged her husband to buy property there in the hope that the climate would ease his crippling arthritis. Chadwick had made a lot of money by coming up with the idea of overprinting check paper with a pattern to discourage forgery. He parlayed his idea into a successful business, Bankers Supply Company, which he sold in 1925.

Chadwick purchased both the Carter and Bryant properties and retired to Captiva. He soon became a force in shaping the future of Captiva. With the help of Tobe Bryant, he established a key lime plantation growing his own strain of salt-resistant fruit, known as the Chad lime. He also planted a grove of coconut palms. He built a home on the beach, called the Manor House, which included a glass-enclosed, heated, saltwater pool to ease his arthritis. He built a warehouse and dock for shipping his fruit. He constructed cottages for his employees and turned the former Carter house into a commissary. He later purchased acreage on Pine Island and the Wulfert area of Sanibel, where he planted more key lime trees. His plantation became the largest producer of key limes in the world.

After a few years, the wheelchair-bound Chadwick apparently tired of running the plantation. By some accounts, he turned the property over to members of his wife's family, the Rouses, who began to rent out the former employee cottages to vacationers. This was the property's first foray into the tourist trade.

By this time Chadwick was quite ill and he and Rosamond moved to downtown Ft. Myers. In 1942 two men from Connecticut, Wesley Kincaid and Bill Hunt, happened upon Chadwick's property during a fishing trip. In the name of the American Hotel Company, they purchased the property and turned it into a small fishing camp. They called it South Seas Plantation.

They converted the old warehouse into a restaurant and front office. They renovated the cottages for guests and created several guestrooms in Chadwick's manor house for a total of about fifteen units.

One of the visitors to South Seas was

Wally Watts, an RCA executive. He fell in love with the property and formed the Captiva Island Company to purchase it in 1961 for \$225,000.

Captiva resident Paul Stahlin joined the company and was put in charge of upgrading the property. Stahlin hired Sanibel resident Ralph Woodring to help with the ambitious project. This is when South Seas began to resemble the resort it is today. They added the golf course, built the marina, and dredged a channel out to the Intracoastal Waterway. They built a twenty-room antebellum-style hotel called the Plantation House, as well as a twenty-four-unit employee housing complex.

Woodring, who worked at South Seas from 1965 to 1969, recalls that the property "looked like hell" when they started. "A lot of sweat, blood, and tears went into that place," he says.

During the 1960s, South Seas became a popular island resort—made even more popular by the opening of the Sanibel Causeway in 1963. It was now easily accessible and offered about forty guestrooms, a nice restaurant, a couple of tennis

courts, and the golf course. In December 1966, the new and improved South Seas Plantation offered a special golf package, including two nights in the new Plantation House, unlimited golf, and golf cart—all for twenty-nine dollars per person.

"It changed immensely in the time I was there," says Woodring, who became general manager of the resort. It had about 75 employees, 110 during season. "The main theme we instituted was to have everything in-house on the property so guests could eat, swim, fish, play golf, and raise hell without leaving the property," he explains. "What you see today is what we pioneered back then."

Mariner Steps In

When Watts became ill and moved to a nursing home in West Palm Beach, his family opted to put the property on the market in 1972—just as Mariner Properties was establishing itself on Sanibel. In 1970 Bob Taylor, vacationing on Sanibel, saw the island as an area on the verge of growth that offered a great opportunity for a new company to get started.



Around 1977, intense growth was under way at South Seas with the construction of time-share units, additional tennis courts, and other facilities.



Previous owner Wally Watts built the twenty-room Plantation House in the 1960s. Shown here about 1977, it was later torn down under Mariner's watch.

Driving back to Cleveland, Taylor, just twenty-eight years old at the time, decided to leave his job as a management consultant and form his new company. He contacted friends and potential investors, including Ten Broek, for financial backing, formed Mariner Properties, and soon moved to Sanibel.

The company's first project was Gulf Pines, a residential development in the central part of Sanibel, followed quickly by the Sanibel Moorings condominium development on the east end. "Both of these projects were instant hits," says Ten Broek,

selling "way beyond our expectations."

In the midst of all of this, Taylor and Ten Broek learned South Seas was for sale. "It was a huge stretch for us to even consider, but we decided to go for it," Ten Broek says. Mariner was among thirty-nine companies that submitted bids—"most were bigger and better capitalized than us," notes Ten Broek. Taylor says he is not sure what Mariner had to offer that gave it the edge. "I guess we worked harder at it than anyone else."

They closed the \$3 million to \$3.5 million deal on South Seas with the help of a

Cleveland-based real estate investment group in September 1972.

"Neither Bob nor I had experience in the hotel business," explains Ten Broek. "I knew I needed help." They quickly hired Scott Siler, fresh out of Cornell University's School of Hotel Management, and Ray Pavelka, a mechanical engineering graduate, and set to work. "The property was pretty rundown when we bought it," recalls Ten Broek. "It consisted of a motley collection of buildings. First and foremost, we had to renovate and expand."

From September 18 to December 20—



well as a vacation destination, despite long lines at the gas pumps. Mariner had received a permit to have a gas station on the property and began offering a free tank of gas to lure people from Miami and Ft. Lauderdale. “It worked like a charm,” says Ten Broek.

South Seas needed more guestrooms, so Mariner created Marina Villas on the north end of the property and offered a guarantee of rentals to cover the owners’ costs. These units came on the market in 1976; all forty were sold within three

aggressively entered the marketplace and were placing values on resort properties that were beyond Mariner’s reach. “The resorts required strong marketing and a lot of capital in amounts larger than we could provide,” explains Taylor. So Mariner hired an investment banker and put all of its resorts up for sale. The package was purchased by MeriStar, a Washington, D.C.-based real estate investment trust, in 1998. MeriStar immediately spent \$15 million enhancing South Seas. It also dropped “Plantation” from the resort name to

The resort was among those purchased in 1998 by MeriStar, a real estate investment trust.

months, according to Ten Broek.

This began a period of intense growth at South Seas, including many time-share units and whole unit ownerships. Mariner built Chadwick’s restaurant in 1977, added meeting rooms and tennis courts, expanded the marina, and built employee housing. “By 1985, we had a really nice package,” says Ten Broek. The resort was profitable, and Mariner was looking for ways to improve it further.

The next step was a \$16 million expansion and refurbishment that would increase the resort’s ability to compete with some of the newer properties coming into the market, such as Sanibel Harbour just across Pine Island Sound and the Ritz Carlton in Naples. Mariner built Chadwick’s Square, a \$2 million shopping complex; it built 115 new hotel rooms at Harborside. It tore down the Plantation House built during the Watts/Stahlin era and replaced it with twelve time-share units. It built Land’s End condos at the very tip of Captiva, its high-end product to date.

By the early 1990s, South Seas had 884 units. “We had what you see there today,” says Ten Broek. “We became strictly hotel operators.” By that time, Mariner had accumulated nine other resort properties, including Sundial, The Dunes Golf and Tennis Club, Sanibel Inn, and Song of the Sea. All were operated under the umbrella company of South Seas Resorts.

The company was looking to add more properties in the mid-1990s, but the industry had changed. Public companies had

“modernize” it. In August 2002 MeriStar merged with Interstate Hotels, making South Seas a part of Interstate Hotels and Resorts, the nation’s largest independent hotel management company.

As part of the deal with MeriStar, Mariner held on to two parcels and retained development rights for twenty-eight remaining units, which will take the property to its build-out of 912 units. This year, Mariner will introduce a new high-end development, to be called Harbor View Villas, that will consist of ten units at the north end of the property on what is now a parking lot, notes Ten Broek. An earlier proposal by Mariner in 1999 to transfer the development rights of thirty-four units from Buck Key to a mangrove area of South Seas failed amid an outcry from local residents and environmentalists.

By the time Mariner sold South Seas, says Ten Broek, “We had gone from a bunch of rookies not knowing what we had or what to do with it in 1972 to a world-known resort. We had thirty or forty employees in 1972. By the time we sold it we had eight hundred at South Seas alone.” Mariner had five thousand at its peak and was the largest private employer in Lee County.

“South Seas was just a piece of Mariner, not even the biggest piece, but it symbolized the whole company,” says Ten Broek. “We called it our crown jewel.”

Susan Holly is a freelance writer and editor on Sanibel.

Ten Broek still remembers the exact dates—the new crew built thirty guestrooms, added a swimming pool, expanded the restaurant, and renovated everything else. “It was amazing, all in ninety days,” says Ten Broek. The new upgraded South Seas opened in time for Christmas 1972.

Mariner’s first major project at South Seas was the Beach Homes development, thirty-three single-family or duplex units that were offered for sale in January 1974, just as the energy crisis hit. “We were dead in the water,” recalls Ten Broek.

The resort, however, continued to do

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