



Carmel Beach Private Lodges, Shuswap Lake, BC



## Bellstar Hotels & Resorts Delivering Exceptional Resort Experiences

by Susan M Boyce

**There is an elegance to simplicity, an inherent ability to resonate with the artistry and traditional values that make life wondrous. When combined with a passion to excel, the expertise of experience, and sheer 21st Century techno sophistication, the result is electrifying, a force to be reckoned with.**

It is this marriage between cutting-edge business acumen and Old World graciousness that has propelled Bellstar Hotels & Resorts to the forefront of Western Canada's burgeoning luxury resort industry. Named one of Hotelier Magazine's Top 40 companies in 2008, Bellstar is quietly, meticulously carving a niche as one of the country's premiere resort developers/managers. In just five, short years their portfolio has grown from two properties to 20, properties spanning every type of vacation experience – from skiing and golf to cultural and historical – each one totally unique yet united by a common theme of luxury and impeccable service.

### On the Leading Edge

"Our mandate is to position ourselves as the leading resort developer and manager in Western Canada by delivering a consistently exceptional resort experience," says Ed Romanowski, Bellstar's President and founding partner, adding the company has expanded almost 70 percent in the last year and expects to grow by another 35 to 40 percent next year.

Key to this outstanding success, he stresses, is hiring "great people" who are committed to learning and developing themselves professionally plus having the right systems in place to facilitate smooth daily operations. "We have a saying: routine will set you free. If you design the correct system, train your people how to use it, then enforce that system, it will mean your staff can spend more time helping guests enjoy the resort experience – which is what good service is all about. For example, all our back office functions are centralized in Calgary rather than onsite – it is a very saleable, very efficient model and can easily be adapted to the unique characteristics of each location."

However Romanowski is quick to point out Bellstar is also fundamentally different from most other players in this highly competitive industry. "There are only a few companies who focus on condominium-style resorts," he explains. "Most small developers simply don't have the management expertise required to successfully operate this type of resort. Bellstar was created when we identified there was a significant, unmet need for management of smaller, boutique-style resorts operating outside the major flags."

Filling this market void soon expanded beyond stepping in where existing properties needed skilled management services tailored to their individual character, and Bellstar also began

Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa, Osoyoos, BC



President & CEO, Ed Romanowski (left) and Executive Vice President, Jon Zwickel



Kokanee Springs Resort Club, East Kootenays, BC

searching out undeveloped properties with potential. The result is a three-point marketing strategy: properties Bellstar develops from scratch and then sells on a fractional ownership basis while retaining their position as operations managers at the finished resort, properties where they provide technical expertise to a third party developer on a consulting basis, and existing properties that are reinvented and then assimilated into the Bellstar portfolio.

Like the three points that define a plane, this diversity provides a solid foundation to weather changing economic climates. When the real estate market is hot, that's where Bellstar places the bulk of their attention, selling luxury-oriented, fractional owner units in locations across Western Canada. During a downturn, new development may be scaled back to allow greater emphasis on working with existing hotels and resorts.

Not just any resort will attract Bellstar's attention though. "We look for four star plus locations with a unique sense of story and place that will make each resort highly appealing to a specific target demographic," says Jon Zwickel, Bellstar's Executive Vice President.

Zwickel is clear that when such a property does present itself, the expression of individual story must be revealed in a short time. "Our first step is to bring together a team of real estate professionals encompassing everything from sales and marketing to architecture and interior design. We spend a day and a half locked in a room 'visioning' the project – who will stay there, what activities they will engage in, how the architecture will interact with the existing landscape. If we're lucky, perhaps a name will emerge. But if the vision doesn't express itself relatively quickly, it probably isn't there." He doesn't need to add the logical corollary: and then we move on.

When a site does have the magical combination of story, place, and viability, Zwickel says it's as if the land itself dictates how it can best be developed. "A good building should look as if it was a seed that grew on the site as opposed to being an object that was picked up and placed there. If you want a contrived experience, go to Disneyland. There's nothing right or wrong about the desire for either experience – they are simply different – however, we have chosen to work exclusively with experiential resorts."

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### Phased Development

"Given current economic conditions, our approach for the future is to take our new resort developments slowly, concentrating on a phased method of development," Romanowski says. "This development model builds consumer confidence in the marketplace because they can actually see and experience each building as it opens."

And there's a strong financial consideration. "Phased development allows us to mitigate our risk since we can adjust swiftly to changes and cycles within the resort business and within the development community," Zwickel says. "Building in smaller segments, we can also be more fluid in our pricing."

The bottom line, however, remains Bellstar's commitment to provide value to owners and investors. "Our developments are moderately priced within the resort real estate market for fractional and full-share opportunities," Romanowski says. "In a bull market, the tendency is often to make units bigger. We

take the opposite view, keeping our units more efficient and thus better value. We have many whole-ownership units available in our portfolio still selling in the \$400,000 to \$450,000 range – some are under \$400,000."

### From Desert to Mountain

Bellstar's three most significant development projects currently underway are Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa Phase 2 (scheduled for completion in 2009), Spirit Ridge Residence Club (2010), and Kokanee Springs Resort Club (2010).

A unique collaboration between the Osoyoos Indian Band and Bellstar, Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa launched in 2005, becoming an instant hit with guests and visitors with its adobe-style desert architecture, on-site winery and cultural interpretive centre, adjacent golf course, and the powerful sense of magic and spirituality that those who have walked this land say is omnipresent. "For our newest release, Spirit Ridge Residence Club, the base resort amenities are already in place with

Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa and the greater destination of NK'MIP," Romanowski says. "We plan to proceed with 14 to 15 units initially, slowly leading up to reach build out with 37 units over the course of the development. Given the response to date even in today's economic climate, we are confident the project will be fully sold out within 12 months." When complete, Spirit Ridge will offer 237 villas and suites.

Both sides stress the partnership is founded on mutual respect, both indirectly suggest Spirit Ridge could not have come to be without the other. "The key was the people," Romanowski says. "When Chief Clarence Louis and COO Chris Scott showed us the Band's commitment to investing in the NK'MIP Cellars Winery and NK'MIP Desert Cultural Centre, it gave us the confidence to think much larger than the original vision, to find ways we could offer a total desert experience that's in tune with the environment and local heritage." Today, the Band remains a 25 percent shareholder in the resort.



Mystic Springs Chalets & Hot Pools, Canmore, Alberta



Further east, Kokanee Springs is set against a spectacular mountain backdrop on Kootenay Lake in British Columbia's Kootenay Rockies. The existing course celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2008, the same year it was named Canada's Most Under-Rated Golf Course by Travel + Leisure Golf Magazine. "For this project, we are fortunate to have accommodation already on-site at the golf course," Romanowski says. "We have reengineered design and operations to make the phased development viable and to ensure it will not impact golf course visitation prior to completion." Ultimately, Kokanee Springs Resort Club will become a master planned development of up to 1,500 cottages, homes, and suites evolving over the next 10 to 20 years. A new clubhouse and amenities will follow in 2009.

**Stay Somewhere Special**

In 2007, Bellstar introduced a new branding strategy. Once again, the concept boasts the allure of timeless simplicity. A single word: Stay.

"When you consider the resort experience, what do people do? They stay," Romanowski explains. "Whether they prefer to stay pampered, healthy, comfortable, active – it's all about staying."

Already pioneer in the development of Private Residences Clubs, Bellstar continues to take the lead in innovative new ways to ensure guests will choose to stay with Bellstar. "Our

*"In the end, life isn't about the money. It's about how you've been of service to others – to your family, friends, customers, and stakeholders. That's what keeps us all motivated and keeps our company strong"*

"Working with Carmel Beach Private Lodges, one of our newest resorts on Shuswap Lake in British Columbia, Bellstar is gaining recognition through RCI's luxury brand, The Registry Collection," he continues. "In addition, Spirit Ridge Residence Club is about to become the first property in Canada to hold Preferred Residence status with Interval International."

Still it's Bellstar's just announced Reserve Collection that's currently causing the biggest wave of excitement among consumers and industry insiders alike. This exclusive collection of ultra-luxurious residences will be located in vineyard locations around the world and will premier in Canada's renowned wine region, the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia. Offered on a one-eighth share, fractional basis, these properties will provide only the highest level of service and amenities.

"Wine country has an exclusivity and timeless appeal," says sommelier David Scholefield who joins the team as a consultant helping to choose suitable locations and design the myriad wine-related benefits owners will have access to. "When you are in wine country, most people simply don't want to leave. There is a symbolism no other agritourism has – let's

views and the wineries must be premium brands. Anticipated owner benefits will include access to exclusive vintages, private culinary events, and educational opportunities, in addition to the option of learning about winemaking process through active participation.

Ross Perlmutter, Executive Director of Canadian Resort Development Association (CRDA), is delighted by this new product. "Everything Bellstar offers dovetails together to create a broad range of experiences," he says. "If you crave the cottage experience, there is BC's Shuswap Lake. For golf experience there is Kokanee Springs. Now people can visit a working vineyard, experience it, and when they return they can be involved in something they started a year earlier."

**Looking Ahead**

For the immediate future Romanowski says Bellstar will remain focused primarily on Western Canada – although he adds that the company is approached regularly with new development and management opportunities, is actively looking to expand into other area of North America, and is currently eyeing properties in Ontario, the Pacific Northwest, and Napa Valley.

Like all who are involved with this dynamic company, he seems to exude an irrepressible enthusiasm and joie de vivre. "When I get up in the morning, I'm always excited about the day that's coming up," he says. "We are in a business that's all about being of service and helping people enjoy themselves. In the end, life isn't about the money. It's about how you've been of service to others – to your family, friends, customers, and stakeholders. That's what keeps us all motivated and keeps our company strong."

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owners value exchange privileges in the resort real estate environment, so we have developed strong partnerships with Interval International and Resort Club International (RCI) and we are in the process of expanding our offering into the premium exchange networks," Romanowski says.

face it, you don't get teary-eyed about a Yukon Gold potato. And when you look at all the top destinations worldwide, the one thing that cuts across every type of vacation – golf, skiing, water, mountains, spa – is a love of wine."

To qualify, vineyards must offer exceptional