

OVERSEAS

Fantasy islands

Delivering a straight six for development in the Caribbean, the Cricket World Cup looks set to leave an equally crowd-pleasing real estate legacy, writes Laura Henderson

While the number of Scottish fans who watched their team bat this week against South Africa on the island of St Kitts may not have been huge, an estimated 2.2 billion viewers overall are set to watch the Cricket World Cup, which is now the third largest sporting event in the world. The host venues can look forward to fantastic exposure with which to promote themselves and it is not just tourism that is expected to benefit from such an event. Real estate agents and developers are banking on a fillip to sales with a dizzying array of residential projects "going live" to coincide with the opening festivities in the Caribbean.

"The event is a shop window for the region," says William Thompson VP sales at Newfoundland Property International. "Cities like Barcelona and Sydney saw significant increases in tourism receipts in the years following the Olympic Games, but these events also touched a wider range of economic indicators including real-estate gains, and islands are expecting similar dividends from the World Cup." By the same token, past experiences have shown that where there is latent tourism appeal and a regeneration of facilities and infrastructure, the potential for real-estate price hikes is strong.

Investors have cottoned on to this, so keeping an eye on the sporting calendar can pay dividends. Simon Ellis is a good case in point, having bought his £450,000 five-bed villa off St Mullins beach in Barbados in 2005. He is now renting it out for £3,500 per week during the event. "Cricket fever has saturated the vacation accommodation market," he says, "but a protracted growth period is what investors really want. Like a lot of owners we're charging realistic but not excessive rental premiums. We'd rather take a long-term view and work up repeat business than cash in on a one-off windfall."

An island that embraced tourism as its main economic driver year ago, Barbados is seen as a safe pair of hands in the growing sea of paradise islands. The community's upmarket status and high real-estate prices are supported by social capital, political stability, and a developed infrastructure. A pre-World Cup building boom has also led to market diversification. Bridgetown's historic St Lawrence Gap has had a slick makeover with prices one-third less expensive than the west coast. "Beach-front properties are holding their value better than those inland," says Richard James of Island Villas, "but the cricket has certainly supported the construction boom."

For tiny Grenada, having just dusted it-

self off from Hurricane Ivan in 2004, the World Cup represents a chance to re-establish itself as a viable luxury brand. "The double whammy of co-hosting the event at the height of the tourist season is an added bonus, or pressure, depending on how you look at it," says Sarah Hovest of Premier Resorts. Enormous sums invested have raised eyebrows amid concerns that Grenada might be overstretching itself, something Property Frontiers' client Paul Clark refutes: "A shortage of high-quality property and residential tourism thriving on neighbouring islands has given Grenada back its fighting spirit and highlighted its upside potential. My investment in Bacolet Bay is set to double in value over the build period, with alternate revamped products such as Cinnamon Hill giving the island a much needed edge."

Ambitious master-planned developments such as Le Paradis are also making a positive impact on St Lucia's economy, with top-of-the-range property prices up by 20 per cent in less than two years. "Entry-level prices are steep in exclusive resorts, from around £385,000 for a two-

bed apartment," confirms property consultant Oliver Gobat, "but rewards for those who can afford to buy into this market could be significant in the short and medium-term, with attractive tax concessions such as a waiver on stamp duty for those buying on selected developments." Head to the

north-eastern side of the island, just a short drive from Beausejour Cricket Ground – the venue for England's opening game – and palm-fringed resort The Gardens will no doubt catch your eye. Set around a magnificent 100-hectare marina, prices currently start at £300,000 for a one-bedroom. "The resort has a flexible managed rental programme guaranteeing 5 per cent return for the first two years," says Colin Legg who paid £670,000 for his two-bed apartment back in April. "The development is also built on reclaimed land, so it's a rare opportunity to secure a beach-front property before prices escalate."

Small-scale developers, meanwhile, on Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) are homing in on boutique projects rather than big-name resorts as a means of achieving higher levels of density where land is scarcest. "The property market is still relatively undeveloped with fledgling expat communities compared to surrounding islands," confirms Lara Cowan of Grenadine Escapes. "The cricket will certainly put the island chain in the investor spotlight, but it will remain self-selecting," adds Cowan. "It's not your classic turn-key island chain." Property values



on Bequia are tipped to rocket following government release of land. Frontline property is currently selling for around £150,000, with bijou residential projects such as Friendship Bay and Crown Point selling half-acre plots for £77,500.

With a strong focus on upmarket residential tourism and low-density development, the twin islands of St Kitts and Nevis in the eastern Caribbean are heading into a good growth pattern with a 50 per cent rise in tourist numbers since 2004. Direct flights from London with charter operator Excel has put the destination firmly on the UK investor map, land prices having doubled in five years to £5-£10 per square foot. An island loaded with offbeat charms, the unspoilt southern peninsula is the frontline location for a select handful of upmarket projects, including Ocean's Edge in Frigate Bay. Just a ten-minute drive from the airport and adjacent to the Royal St Kitts Golf Club, the £50m resort will offer a range of accommodation with beach-front apartments starting from £162,000, garden cottages from £245,000 and executive villas from £285,000, with on-site facilities including a clubhouse, health and fitness centre, restaurant and tennis courts.

Stephen Thompson, marketing director at Dundee United Football Club and the first client to reserve a plot in January 2006, is now having a hillside apartment built. "I was lucky enough to meet Richard Skerritt, the minister for tourism and sport on my first visit," he explains. "We talked about sporting opportunities and facilities on the island, in particular finding a way forward to encourage football at grass-roots level, by possibly getting some



One of Grenadine Escapes' properties on Bequia, going for £1.4m, main; the upmarket Ocean Edge project in Frigate Bay, St Kitts, below left

of the Dundee United players over to do some coaching."

Thompson has no doubt that the island's laid-back charms will win over visiting cricket fans. "The place has a homely feel to it, the locals are welcoming, and the beaches unspoilt. Buyers won't find the same 'gold rush' mentality endemic on some of the other islands. Land values are appreciating nicely and long-term yields are also healthy."

Tapping into the US timeshare market will also stand the island in good stead suggests Paul Fox of Caribbean Realty: "Amenity-rich vacation club options like the Marriott St Kitts hit the spot just nicely," he adds, "with attractive early-bird offers for a two-bed villa starting from £7,500 in the low season."

Head over the straits to neighbouring Nevis by contrast and buyers will find a luxury re-sale market in full swing, many established properties changing hands as a new generation of residents and soon-to-be-retirees discover the island. Backed by a tangle of tall palms on Pinney's Beach, Four Seasons Resort Estates has seen brisk sales of properties and construction of luxury villas, near the award-winning luxury hotel, which enjoyed a \$10m renovation in 2005. Arranged in distinctive neighbourhoods with private gardens, property types range from two and three-bedroom duplex-style villas with wrap-around balconies to larger, elegant, free-standing Estate Homes with private pools, pergolas, petunias and fuchsias and views of Mount Nevis. Owners enjoy a bespoke five-star concierge service from pre-arrival villa preparation through to 24-hour laundry and valet services, with

access to hotel facilities including fitness centre, sanctuary spa and Robert Trent Jones II championship golf course. Villas start from a cool £3m, with monthly facility and service fees from £900.

Meanwhile, investors who bought recently in Antigua during a well-publicised period of political glasnost have every right to be feeling a little smug. A "sunshine government" has delivered an upgraded airport and regenerated capital St Johns, with five-star developments such as Galley Bay and Sugar Ridge lifting this former British colony upmarket. Cricket lover Jani Saeed bought his two-bed apartment in La Perla resort, Non Such Bay for £215,000 last year. "Antigua is probably behind Barbados by about ten years, which was part of the attraction of investing here," he explains. "Resort property values have doubled in the last 18 months, but the island still has huge potential, with or without the cachet of a show-stopping sports event. That said the atmosphere here takes some beating, even if you can't stand the game."

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Stephen Thompson, above, Dundee United's marketing director and owner of a plot on St Kitts, left