

Home Design and Lifestyle Story



Four Life Partners and One Big Caribbean Dream



Guillermo Paz, digital ad owner; Pedro Collazo, radiologist; Juan Herrans, UBS wealth portfolio manager; Sergio Gomes, real estate broker

[Aquamare](#), a luxury villa enclave set along a half-mile of pristine beach frontage on Virgin Gorda, is based on the vision of four discerning men from San Juan, Puerto Rico, partners both in business and in life.

Guillermo Paz is a San Juan entrepreneur and owner of a successful digital advertising agency while his partner of 17 years, Pedro Collazo, is a radiologist who was born in New York City and raised in San Juan. Their friends, Juan Herrans, an investment consultant in the Wealth Management division of Merrill Lynch, and Sergio Gomes, a real estate broker originally from Venezuela, have been partners for 15 years.

When the four friends set out to create Aquamare in 2002, they did not have a villa resort in mind. Instead, they wanted a gathering place for themselves, their family, and their friends.

“We got along great,” recalls Guillermo Paz, “and we thought, ‘Why don’t we share a vacation home?’” They decided to build a house together – a big house – and the process proved to be very lengthy.

“Juan, the wealth management investor in the group, created a 12-page questionnaire and then we all went searching for the perfect island to build on,” recalls Guillermo. “We looked at the population of various islands and the towns on the islands. There could be no dense city, no cruise ships and no big airport. It had to be low density and well-off, and there had to be good restaurants and wine shops. We wanted to know if it was safe and who was buying property there. We even had what we called the ‘*Croissant Factor*.’ In other words, was there a place to get a great croissant?”

Their search took them all over the Caribbean but Virgin Gorda, an island of white sand beaches and rolling mountains a mere 40 minutes by plane from San Juan, came out on top. Ranked the Best Island in the Caribbean, Bermuda, and the Bahamas by *Condé Nast Traveler* in their 2007 World’s Best Awards, Virgin Gorda is the third largest island in the BVI archipelago. It’s tiny, eight and a half square miles with a population of 2,500 people. Cruise ships don’t dock here and the airport can only handle the smallest of aircraft. This suited the partners, as did the island’s air of exclusivity. They liked its quiet coves, safe anchorages and handful of luxury resorts.



“Virgin Gorda was quiet, appealing, and protected,” Guillermo states, “even if the Croissant Factor didn’t make the charts.” Once they had narrowed down their island search, they began to comb Virgin Gorda for the right place to build on the water.

“Much of the land we saw was crown land that could only be leased for 99 years,” Guillermo recalls. “That was a foreign concept to us. But we managed to find the last bit of beachfront property that could be bought outright.”

That property was an acre of land that was overgrown but had unobstructed views of the islets in Drake Channel and some of the most breathtaking sunsets in the Caribbean. It had, unfortunately, been divided into four lots. To ensure that they would have plenty of space to build their dream house and guarantee their privacy, they made the radical decision to buy all four lots.

“Are we crazy?” we asked ourselves. “‘We don’t need four properties.’ But it was the only way to protect the parcel. We bought it over a weekend but getting the permits to build took 15 months.”

In short order, they decided not to build a single house. The process and cost of preparing the property involved water catchments, road work, cisterns, and a power plant. It was too much for one home.

“So we thought, why don’t we build some little villas,” Guillermo says. “We would use them as vacation homes but also rent them out. Suddenly the idea of a vacation home had turned into a business. We wanted a place where everything was taken care of before you arrived: the grocery shopping, the on site concierge, a private chef and massage treatments. It had to be a place that you did not have to leave. The only thing you had to do when you arrived was indulge.”

The “little villas” they ended up building were three, 8,000 square-foot villas, each one accommodating up to 12 guests and featuring cook’s kitchens outfitted in stainless steel professional-grade equipment. The interiors are furnished with comfortable yet elegant communal sitting areas, and each one has a formal dining area and a private waterfront infinity pool.



But getting to Aquamare’s elegantly finished look took ingenuity, determination and a terrific architect who understood what they wanted. The four friends had impeccable taste and good design instincts honed from renting villas all over the world, yet they had no background in the hospitality business. “But we had all traveled everywhere. We’d sampled and used the best that there is,” Guillermo says. “We are Power Users. That was our real expertise. We know what the best is and we know what we want.”

They chose Liselott Johnson, a Swedish architect based in New York, to build their dream villas. She said, ‘Let’s talk, let’s think of what gave you a lot of joy when you were a little kid,’ says Guillermo. “She drew out of us what would make us happy and took us through the whole experience. She asked us how we liked to meet as a group, how many got together at once, what we liked in a bathroom. We were able to touch every piece of marble and wood before we decided upon them. We tested three different types of marble to see how it reacted to the climate. That was important, since we were buying 8,000 square feet of marble for each villa. She brought us samples of Brazilian îpe hardwoods and extra-large rain shower heads that enveloped you in a waterfall. All of the materials that she chose were very appealing to a primal human sense.”

When they had decide upon a design, each of the partners took on a task and split the responsibilities. Guillermo spent his time overseeing the interior design elements, choosing Frette and Bulgari products, --- “we wanted luxurious towels and bed sheets, we didn’t want anything less” – and focused on the experience that each of the bathrooms would offer. Pedro handled the accounting process, while Juan and Sergio worked with the contractor.

“We wanted to respect the vernacular architecture of Virgin Gorda that was established by Lawrence Rockefeller at Little Dix in 1964,” Guillermo says. “But it also had to have European appeal. We wanted tall ceilings, shingles and cut stones because we wanted to respect the natural vocabulary of the islands. We sought a more theatrical look for the public areas but also private, so we asked for balconies. If I’m going to be there for a whole week, I need my privacy, and the balconies are meant to be as comfortable as the inside of a

room,. That’s also why each bedroom is nearly 1,000 square feet. If you want to be by yourself in your bedroom, you should not be forced to stay in a 15 x 15 room.”

They engineered the experience as well. Aquamare guests are pampered by an on-site concierge, private chefs, beach attendants and nightly turn down service. The suites are worlds unto themselves, with sitting areas, ensuite marble bathrooms, and private balconies. The three Master Suites and the Junior Suite in each villa have their own 9-by-12 foot outdoor shower rooms with large, 12-inch diameter Newport Brass Rain Shower™ heads, making the space ideal for private spa treatments.

That attention to detail extends to the private beach, with its Floating Bed, and the lush ornamental gardens filled with banana trees, coconut palms and lilies.

On an island that lacks even a hardware store, the construction process took them two years. Today the four amigos still socialize together and move in the same social circles in San Juan. “It started as a friendship,” laughs Guillermo, “but now we talk business when we are together.” All of them live in San Juan’s Condado area, in large homes that reflect their differing personalities.

What they discovered in the process of creating Aquamare was that the villa rental industry needed to streamline the experience and to make it easy and foolproof. “We want to take away the fear of a terrible villa rental experience,” Guillermo says. “When you stay at a Marriott or a Four Seasons, you know what you will get. We thought it was time that someone created a brand in the villa business. Villa rentals are not typically considered a business, they are typically someone’s second home that’s rented when it’s not in use. We were trying to introduce a new mentality. So we decided to structure it according to our experience of what we like and what we didn’t like.”

Guillermo and his partners have plans to extend the Aquamare brand, based on their experience with their Virgin Gorda paradise.

“The idea behind our villa brand is that it would be of the same quality every time that you rented one of our villas, no matter where it is,” Guillermo says. “It’s not about the same architecture. It all about the experience and the quality, which is what Aquamare is really all about.”

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High-res interior and exterior images available upon request.

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