

A Hamptons-Maldives Mashup Is Coming to the Caribbean

Luxe hotelier Banyan Group is teaming up with developer RAV Bahamas Ltd. to create a lavish playground on the isle of Bimini, 30 minutes from Miami.

By [Nikki Ekstein](#)

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A rendering of Banyan Tree's Bimini project. *Source: Recent Spaces*

Wall Street South is getting its Hamptons, and it's not West Palm Beach.

Developer Rafael Reyes, owner of Rockwell Island Development Group, is building an oasis on the Bahamian island of Bimini just 48 nautical miles off the Florida coast to serve the increasing number of moneyed professionals that call Miami home. The South Florida hub now ranks 33rd worldwide in its number of millionaire residents.

If you are among the estimated 4 million Miamians that have boats, you could make the crossing in as little as 40 minutes. A high-speed ferry should take about that long, too; commonly available ferries take 90 minutes. Hop a helicopter with a local charter company like HeliFlite, and you'll be there in 25 minutes, quicker than driving almost anywhere on Miami's traffic-clogged I-95.

The catch is that not much exists yet in Bimini, not by five-star standards. Reyes is changing this as quickly as possible.



An aerial view of Bimini, rotated about 90-degrees clockwise from north, with a rendering of the master resort plan. Source: *Recent Spaces*

First, he's building a series of dining and beach clubs, including an outpost of Bonito, which runs the renowned spot by the same name in St. Barts and its sister restaurant Betula in Aspen, Colorado. Next will come a series of 54 waterfront mansions with prices to list upward of \$3.5 million, each with a pool, 90-foot-plus dock and garages custom-built to fit Moke jeeps; the first are to be completed in early 2025. A beach club by Richard Branson to cater to guests of his Virgin cruise line joins the party nearby.

The pièce de résistance is due in 2026: a Banyan Tree resort with the country's first overwater villas, priced from \$3,000 per night, on a series of four man-made islands facing a giant lagoon.

All this will be part of a new master-planned community called Rockwell Island. Including all infrastructural investment, it will cost roughly \$245 million, including \$80 million in public-private funding to help expand Bimini's airport and make it directly accessible via major US airlines.

Putting Bimini on the Yachting Map

"Bimini used to be a very popular place in the old days," Reyes explains, harking back to Ernest Hemingway and Prohibition, when the island was the closest land mass off the East Coast for Americans to escape alcohol restrictions. "Those were the glory days of Bimini," he continues. "I'm trying to reestablish that now."

The island is small—five square miles surrounded by shallow and clear waters. Since the 1990s, Reyes' company, a subsidiary of RAV Bahamas Ltd., has bought up more than half of it. In that time he's built a seaplane port, helipads and the ferry terminal through which the island gets twice-weekly produce deliveries and supplies from the mainland US. In addition, he's built the largest marina in the Bahamian "Family Islands"—basically, the entire archipelago minus New Providence Island, where the capital Nassau sits—with 242 slips. (The marina within the ultra-luxury Albany resort community on New Providence offers only 71.)

"You have all these people bringing their ships and mega yachts from the Med each year," Reyes says. "So how do we attract them?" The answer, he believes, is all about ease. "You attract them by creating an extravagant food and beverage experience—and then sending a tender to pick them up from wherever they dock offshore."



A rendering of a mansion's indoor-outdoor living room. *Source: Recent Spaces*



A primary bedroom rendering. *Source: Recent Spaces*

In addition to Bonito, which will open this summer, he intends to build an additional two or three restaurants down the line, with details still being finalized. “They will be similarly familiar names,” he says, adding that one will be a toes-in-the-sand beach bar with high-end Italian food. While Banyan Tree won’t be fully finished for a few years, it will open in phases, prioritizing an overwater spa and restaurants that can service residents and the yacht crowd.

A World-Class Resort

The Banyan Tree resort will comprise 50 rooms and villas, mostly fashioned to look like floating ivory jewel boxes with outdoor living areas and private plunge pools. The main pool and restaurant will also be built on stilts, its entire length jutting out over the ocean.



Rockwell Island's villas will be landscaped. *Source: Recent Spaces*

Gabriel Gn, Banyan Group’s head of business development, says the Bimini resort is to be a flagship, a cornerstone of the brand’s push into the Americas. Banyan Tree rebranded in January as Banyan Group in order to better compete with such behemoths as Marriott and Hilton. It counts a dozen hotel brands and with Banyan, a new loyalty program, plus an expansion pipeline of 19 hotels and residences set for this year.

“Bimini is going to be one of the most beautiful properties in our entire portfolio—a mini Maldives,” Gn continues, adding that the brand was such an early developer in the Maldives that its resort there predated the trend toward overwater accommodations. “This is actually Banyan Tree’s first resort with overwater bungalows,” he adds.



A rendering of a mansion kitchen. *Source: Recent Spaces*

Accomplishing this in the Caribbean is a tall order. In terms of big brands, only Sandals, the all-inclusive stalwart, has managed to persuade Caribbean governments to allow the construction of these types of rooms—in Jamaica and St. Vincent. A tiny handful of small, independent resorts pursue this style in Mexico, Antigua and Belize; none offer the lavishness of those in the Maldives, and it’s debatable as to whether they are truly “overwater.”

“We actually took a delegation of the Bahamian tourism officials to the Maldives to try to convince them many, many years ago to do this,” Reyes says. The reason so few overwater bungalows exist in the region, he says, is because governments fear that the excavation and structural support required to build them will endanger delicate coastlines.



A rendering of an open-air tub in the primary bathroom of a mansion. *Source: Recent Spaces*

For their parts, Gn and Reyes say overwater construction is being handled as sensitively as possible. Any coral removed has been transplanted onto coral frames; they hope to move these artificial reefs so that they'll be visible from the bungalows' glass floors. Lighting is being designed to avoid disturbing the wildlife, and Reyes is leaving a portion of land undeveloped as a buffer zone for a mangrove forest that helps sustain the island's marine life and fishing industry.

Reyes says that he's worked hard to build infrastructure that will benefit local communities, including water treatment and electrical power plants to supply the entire island. Some 200 jobs will be created at the Banyan Tree resort and the surrounding restaurants. Still, it's hard to believe that much of what Reyes envisions will cater to Bahamian locals.

"When New Yorkers take off in a seaplane or helicopter," he says, "they go to the Hamptons. I'm trying to create that same concept in a Caribbean fashion, OK?" With some Maldivian style to boot.