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# news

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By Gary Metz

## Minnesota native Nancy Anderson builds her own Caribbean niche: Luxury villa rentals

Nancy Anderson's name is synonymous with luxury villa rentals in the Caribbean. Now president of McLaughlin Anderson Luxury Villas, she literally wrote the book on the subject – a glossy annual catalog. Its final printed edition, in 2008, featured 160 pages of gorgeous photographs and lush descriptions promoting properties represented by the St. Thomas-based company she has run since 1985.

Now the Internet has supplanted the catalog. But that hasn't fazed Anderson, who had just started managing rental properties for long-time St. Thomas realtor Frank McLaughlin when she detected an untapped demand for what would become a thriving market.

A native of Rochester, Minn., Anderson's introduction to



*Nancy Anderson literally wrote the book on luxury villa rentals.*

the Caribbean dates to 1969 when she moved to Grenada with her first husband. They had been living in Mexico City, he working on a stalled United Nations project.

"One day he came home and he said 'You know what, let's move to Grenada,'" Anderson said. "And I'm so young, and I'm up for any adventure so I said, 'OK. Where is it?'"

They went to the Caribbean in August 1969 and never looked back.

"The minute I stepped onto that island it felt like home ... It was just wonderful," she said.

In five years on Grenada the couple had a son and ran an air charter and cargo business before serious political unrest spoiled paradise.

"We got in the plane with the baby and the dog and flew up to the Grenadines, where we stayed with friends," she said.

When prospects of ever returning faded, they decided to leave. They ended up in St. Thomas in late 1974 because the threat of a hurricane meant they couldn't fly any further.

"We looked around and said

"Wow, this is great.' ... That was 37 years ago," Anderson said.

She still loves the island and said she can't imagine being anywhere else," she said.

Anderson took a succession of jobs, helping with her husband's business flying in fresh fish in from Anegada, and then filling office posts with doctors and, finally, lawyers, who were in the forefront of using computers.

"One day I got a call from Frank McLaughlin," she said. "He said 'I'm looking for somebody to run my rental department.'"

She recalls McLaughlin as a charismatic and inspirational employer with one of the largest real estate operations in the region.

"He really guided me and taught me well," she said. "So I took over his rental department in 1985."

She found herself renting mini-warehouse storage units by the month to Main Street stores with a lot of apartments, condos and houses in between.

Often, Anderson

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## Minnesota native

said, clients who had just closed on a home with McLaughlin would come by her desk to ask if she could rent it for them when they couldn't use it. She quickly compiled a page-full of properties.

"I went to Frank and said 'You know, I think this could be an incredible industry. I'd like you to let me concentrate on developing villas.'" McLaughlin agreed.

Anderson drew on experience she and a partner had gained in the early 1980s promoting the stunningly successful Johnnie

Walker Hi Ho (Hook-in and Hang-on) sailboard race, a summer-season event in the British Virgin Islands. Sailboarders raced island-to-island, living on yachts that followed to each day's finish line.

"I knew windsurfing dudes didn't do a lot of research and there was no Internet," said Anderson. "It was a matter of creating a huge mailing list and doing direct mail, all the time, to get them interested in the event. I also wrote magazine articles and sent photos for free ... That's how I got inspired by direct mail. It really worked. It was so personal."

Anderson used the model to build her villa business, accumulating villa photos and

information sheets and mailing them to potential guests. This was at a time when, she said people would call the Chamber of Commerce looking for rentals. She began producing an annual catalog in 1988. The approach worked well. There was a huge demand and she was able to buy the company from McLaughlin in 1991.

"I had my first web site in 1995. It was a static page with our name and phone

number," Anderson said. "As time went on we started adding pages with villas, and pretty soon the Internet started to boom. In the late '90s we were cranking."

By 2008, McLaughlin Anderson villa owners voted unanimously to suspend catalog production and redirect funding to web marketing.

Anderson credits her company's continuing success to the solid core of professional staff she has developed and scores of dedicated villa workers on seven different islands. The office staff includes a full-time concierge – managing provisioning, excursions and special requirements – a head of reservations who keeps villa workers coordinated and a full-time information technology person.

Today Anderson says she also works with agents around the world.

"They trust us, and know we'll take care of their clients. We've always prided ourselves on providing excellence where it's hard to provide it," she said.

The recent recession hasn't spared her industry.

"The entire Caribbean went on sale in 2009," she said.

And while it's still a mixed bag, she said people are tired of staying home.

"They're not as frightened as they were in 2009. That was a very scary year for everybody," she said.

She said Anderson McLaughlin Luxury Villas has been able to move past a brief period of short-lived discounting – a book-seven-nights and get one-night free promotion – to reestablish rate integrity.

Anderson describes herself as a homebody who likes to read and loves to dance – any sort of dancing.

These days she concentrates on working with owners, helping them understand that operating a villa is a good way to offset the considerable expense of a second home, but that they must keep their properties in prime condition, which costs money.

"And I don't feel very much like retiring," she said. "I can't think of any thing else I'd rather do." ■



*Anderson  
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