



LUXURY PROPERTY

**Common Ground** River Dunes is a pleasant stop along the ICW, but you may not want to leave.

By Jason Y. Wood

**H**ow does one approach the daunting task of building a boating community from scratch? Here's a hint: It doesn't start with dredging a harbor, or building a stunning clubhouse, or adding amenities as early as is feasible. All of those things certainly help. But when your goal is more than a marina, more than a resort, more than a collection of house lots, then those things could be more window dressing than actual progress.

Remember, the boating part is important, but it's the *community* that's both the ultimate goal and the most formidable challenge. And on a 1,300-acre peninsula located where Pamlico Sound meets the Neuse River in Pamlico County, North Carolina, River Dunes has made strides in two years that some coastal towns will never reach. The property encompasses 630 homesites, and, while the developers have definite ideas on architecture, they don't build to spec. Six model homes dot the property, though, helping to firm up the vision with

actual structures, and handsome ones at that. Who are they hoping to attract?

"We knew right away that we had to focus on boating—it's obvious," says Susan Venters, who handles operations and marketing for River Dunes. "We have 14 miles of shoreline and a 400-slip inland-basin harbor that's very protected. All of that is definitely at the heart of our community. And so it is important to us to have people here who are of like mind and want to be part of the community. And when they all come together, the fabric gets really strong."

To attract boaters and make them feel at home, the centerpiece of the development has been Grace Harbor, with its marina, spacious slips and T-heads, fuel dock, and, last but not least, the Harbor Club. The club was designed to bring people together with its comfortable porch, swimming pool, and fitness room. And don't forget the cozy bar, the billiard table, and the delightful restaurant, where the chef accents a well-rounded menu with shrimp, oysters, and grits, as a respectful nod to the local cookery.

So there's more than just a vision here—there are things to see and do—and more all the time. They've started running ecotours on the many winding creeks that sneak across the property, or visitors can explore on their own by canoe or kayak. Pamlico Sound is a great spot to target redfish and seatrout. And a tennis club is in the plans. But the protected harbor is so protected, passersby may not venture in for a look on their own. To get the word out to boaters and share the vision, River Dunes sent Venters to the boat shows.

"To see all the people that we've met at the boat shows now coming down to see the harbor is really bringing it full circle," said Venters. "To see 30- to 90-foot boats toolin' in here four and five at a time every

**SAY GRACE:**  
The Harbor Club on Grace Harbor is the hub of a burgeoning boating community at River Dunes.

COURTESY RIVER DUNES



**FRIENDSHIP AND FINE DINING:** Visiting cruisers can sit by the fire and enjoy the temperate evening before retiring to their cottages (above). The food at the Harbor Club is as dramatic as the setting (below).

night now is pretty exciting.”

Word of mouth has begun to spread through the southbound yachts on the ICW, and the crews making the transit have clued in the friends they know are following, steering them into Grace Harbor. But something is providing that motivation, and it’s more than a marina and clubhouse, lovely as they are.

First of all, there’s the sweetest village of guest cottages you’ll ever see. They’re as charming inside as they are outside, and they form a friendly little hamlet right near the center of the property. So if you’re looking to spend the night ashore, these tiny houses tucked right in by the marina will certainly tempt you.

“The cottages are doing really well,” says J.C. Cappelmann, harbor manager at River Dunes. “They’ve kind of taken off popularity-wise with the property owners [whose houses aren’t completed yet]. But we’ve had quite a few yacht [crews] come in and use them. And usually the ones that stayed one night say, ‘That’s too good, we’re staying a second night.’ And then they don’t want to leave at all.”

Don’t forget about the lake house, an out-of-the-way little cottage with a screen house, a fire pit, an oyster table, and canoes and kayaks, all the better to enjoy the well-stocked lake—one of many brimming with bass and bream—and the company of new friends.

“More and more, we’re getting more folks who have bought that are four to five



hours away, and they’re finding that the trip is becoming shorter and shorter and their stays are becoming longer,” says Cappelmann. “More and more they’re starting to use it and getting to know their neighbors, and striking up their own sort of bonds with them.”

Creating bonds with neighbors? Imagine that: It sounds like a community is springing up at River Dunes. ■

*River Dunes, (800) 975-9565; [www.riverdunes.com](http://www.riverdunes.com)*