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On the waterfront: the rise of lagoon living

Developers are increasingly looking to turn inland residential projects into waterside ones with artificial lagoons and lakes. What was once a trickle is now becoming a steady stream. But not everyone has the same approach

Aqua by the Bay, in Florida, was developed by Crystal Lagoons, which has pioneered low-cost, low-energy desalination technology © Carver Mostardi

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Blue Mind Theory is a term coined by marine biologist Dr Wallace J Nichols in his 2014 book, *Blue Mind*. It reaffirms the idea that proximity to water brings positive emotional, cognitive, social and psychological wellbeing by increasing feel-good hormones.

It's by no means a revolutionary theory, but with rising temperatures, more of us are buying into it — literally. As a result, developers are looking for opportunities to turn inland residential projects into waterside ones. Enter new approaches to the artificial lagoon.

"We are seeing lagoons coming in more and more in master planning, often as an alternative to golf courses," says Rob Sykes, associate vice-president and director of strategy at architectural firm WATG, which has been commissioned to design several, including two recreational lagoons at La Reserva Sotogrande, in Andalucia. "Everyone can enjoy being next to a beautiful body of water" where residents can swim, paddleboard and kayak. But with this enthusiasm for artificial lagoons comes a variety of approaches and aesthetics.

Kayaking on the lagoon at La Reserva Sotogrande, in Andalucia © Mariki Miranda

Crystal Lagoons has 1,000 projects in the works with a number of developers globally, says Benjamin Fischmann, the company's US West regional director; more than 80 are in operation, 13 of which are in the US. Its flagship is a 20-acre lagoon in the San Alfonso del Mar resort in Chile, while one of the largest under construction is the 27.9-acre lagoon at Citystars in Sharm-el-Sheikh, Egypt, in the Sinai desert, which uses saltwater from subterranean water tables.

The company was founded in 2009 by Chilean biochemist-turned-real estate entrepreneur Fernando Fischmann, Benjamin's father, who developed and patented a low-cost, low-energy desalination technology for keeping large volumes of water clean — meaning each lagoon is filled once (what's lost to evaporation is topped up), and kept free of algal blooms and mosquitoes. Filtration systems use ultrasound pulses, robotic cleaners, alongside proprietary chemicals, says Benjamin, adding that measures of chlorine are 1 per cent of those used in swimming pools.

The company claims that a molecular film additive, which acts as a liquid barrier, reduces evaporation by up to 50 per cent, meaning the lagoons "consume up to 33 times less water than an 18-hole golf course", continues Benjamin, while the filtration system consumes up to 50 times less energy than a swimming pool the same size. The water can be fresh, saltwater or brackish (a mix of both fresh and saltwater). Most distinctively, Crystal Lagoons have a bright, Maldivian hue — from the plastic white lining, designed to minimise UV damage.

Apartments in One Park Tower, part of the SoLé Mia development in Miami, start from $900,000 © SoLe Mia

Perhaps the most talked-about of Crystal Lagoons' projects is the $4bn SoLé Mia, in Miami, a 184-acre, mixed-use community from developers LeFrak and Turnberry. Centred around a 7-acre freshwater lagoon with a volume equivalent to 21 Olympic swimming pools, 4,390 residential units are in the works; 800 rental units are complete and available from $2,403 to $4,045 per month. Homes are for sale from $900,000 at One Park Tower, the forthcoming condo building by Turnberry; 80 per cent have sold.

Senior managing director at LeFrak and structural engineer David Thom and his team were inspired by the Diamante Cabo San Lucas resort in Mexico, which has a 10-acre artificial lagoon. "Residents are able to kayak before work, or take their children paddleboarding after school," says Thom.

> **I'll often take work calls with my headphones in, while walking round the water**
>
> **Rene Ayala, resident of SoLé Mia, in Miami**

This sense of a lagoon being a community hub is often central to the master planning. Andrew Cummings, head of residential, Savills Middle East, says the trend is particularly pronounced in Dubai. District One, in Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum City, with its near 100-acre lagoon, completed in 2019, "pioneered this approach", Thom says. He also cites Tilal al Ghaf, in the Dubai Hills Estate, where villas on the lagoon sell for more than AED 100mn ($27mn). Meanwhile, DAMAC Properties is a 49mn sq ft development of lagoon-front townhouses, villas and apartments. "Lagoons can bind a community into a more waterfront lifestyle," says Cummings.

Solanas, in Uruguay, developed by Crystal Lagoons

At SoLé Mia, "the lagoon has been one of the main enticements", says Thom. With depths from 3ft to 8ft, surrounded by sand sourced from local quarries, palm trees and dunes, it has proved particularly popular with families.

Wholesale trade broker Rene Ayala has been a tenant since 2022. Previously based in Indiana, he lives on the 11th floor of The Shoreline, the development's first tower, in a two-bed apartment with a balcony overlooking the lagoon. "Laguna SoLé was the biggest draw in renting here," he says. "I'll often take work calls with my headphones in, while walking round the water." Ayala's 17-year-old son, meanwhile, has an after-school job as a lagoon lifeguard.

> **It's calm, peaceful and cooler,**

While lagoons may tick the Blue Mind box, green credentials can be lower down

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and — from a developer's point of view — living by water will normally command a price premium

Chris Graham, Graham Associates

the agenda. "Lagoon building can be extremely carbon-intensive, particularly through the release of soil organic carbon and the disruption of carbon sinks," says Gilbert Lennox-King, founder and CEO of Construction Carbon, a UK-based carbon performance verification company. "The emissions from the concrete liners can also be significant."

He estimates that the carbon footprint for lagoon excavation is between 200kg and 400kg of embodied carbon per square metre, for its entire lifecycle. The shallower the lagoon, the less harmful for the environment; drier soil also has a lower carbon footprint than wetland. "Deeper excavation brings long-buried organic layers into aerobic conditions, increasing emissions," says Lennox-King. There are also significant emissions associated with running the lagoon, he adds, taking into account energy for pumps, filters and chemicals.

Aesthetically, glowing turquoise expanse is not for everyone. Artificial lagoons can appear stark and engineered. Some can be conspicuously devoid of nature or at odds with the environment.

But Christian de Boer, a United Nations adviser on sustainable tourism, who runs Jaya House River Park hotel in Siem Reap, Cambodia, believes artificial lagoons *can* have the potential to have a positive impact on flora and fauna. "Artificial lagoons can be a force for good and increase biodiversity if planned properly," he says. "The key is balance and thoughtful ecological design, using natural eco-friendly materials which ideally are locally sourced."

However, he also raises concerns about the construction process: both disturbing the existing natural wildlife habitats and also the use of single-use plastics. "Plastics can be embedded in everything from lining materials to temporary infrastructure," he says.

The Lakes by Yoo, in the Cotswolds, were developed in a disused gravel pit © M. Smallcombe

Huge demand has meant the site has expanded from 240ha to 350ha, and from three to 11 artificial lakes © Ola O Smit

In an unusual fillip for sustainability, green energy engineers are pioneering a novel method of heat reuse in lagoons. At the palm tree-fringed 4.2-acre Angel Lagoon, built by Crystal Lagoons in Dayton, Texas, the water is heated by being pumped around a 6-Megawatt data centre operated by Deep Green Energy, a subsidiary of the UK-based Octopus Energy. The water, in turn, cools the energy centre. Similar systems are being considered in Michigan, Illinois, Ohio and Indiana.

In the UK, an alternative vision is being played out. Last year, Cotswolds Waters launched a 110-acre residential development around four artificial freshwater lakes and meadow; 10 per cent is given to the 77 residential plots and 63 apartments (from £930,000).

The concept builds upon the success of Lakes by YOO, the pioneering waterside residential development 30 minutes away. Launched 17 years ago by John Hitchcox, its initial three man-made lakes have grown to 11 — and some 160 homes. The lakes, created from old gravel pits, are lined with clay and all are swimmable (and used for fishing). They naturally refill with rain and water from the Cotswolds' shallow water table and flow between each other via small brooks and run into the River Coln, which leads to the river Thames on the eastern side of the estate. A number of rewilding practices include "no intervention" approaches to some bodies of water, to nurture wildlife.

In Mauritius, another approach is taking shape. Mont Choisy La Réserve is a second-home resort in the Grand Baie area, with homes priced from $120,000 to $2.4mn, where WATG is working with EcoPools on freshwater lagoon-pool hybrids that don't require chemical treatment but instead keep water clean by "circulating it through a living system of water plants".

With an organic shape, and surrounded by lush plantings, the lagoon is sterilised not with chlorine but with UV-C light, ozone (to oxidise), and ionisation (which uses low-voltage electricity to release copper and silver ions into the water, killing bacteria and algae) alongside mechanical and biological filtration. WATG says the water will be clean enough to drink. Lake floors are tiled in a natural hue and made from basalt rock or natural stone, rather than a plastic liner.

Mont Choisy La Réserve, in Mauritius, uses plants to keep the water clean

"With lagoons, there is so much scope for innovation in the design and engineering side — and on the ecological impact and biodiversity side," says WATG's Sykes. "It all ties in with the ESG agenda, which investors and buyers are increasingly interested in."

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Living by water "is calm, peaceful and cooler, and will normally command a premium", says Chris Graham, of marketing agency Graham Associates, in London. "Supply is often limited, so the opportunity to replicate this in an inland location can offer benefits. People love looking at water, and yes, it gives you that Blue Mind energy."

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