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New Caribbean destination Banana Coast is ripe for first calls

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PHOTO: ANNE KALOSH

Banana Coast planning - From left, Greve, Jorgensen, McKee

Jorgensen.

Located at the town of Trujillo, 32 nautical miles south of the island of Roatán, Banana Coast provides an exotic new option in the western Caribbean.

'This location [on Trujillo Bay] is wonderful. The port fits into this area very well,' said Giora Israel, svp global port and destination development for Carnival Corp. & plc, who fathered nearby Roatán's Mahogany Bay.

'I think it has potential,' said Norwegian Cruise Line's Sven Sleipnes, svp marine operations. 'It looks like a very interesting project.'

Passengers step ashore at Banana Coast Landing, themed on the area's glory days at the heart of the thriving banana trade. Duty-free shops, a restaurant and bar, an artisans area and ample space for excursion dispatch are laid out over a landscaped area. The adjacent beach stretches for miles and miles.

'Some ports have history or culture or natural assets. Trujillo really has it all,' said Jorgensen, a Canadian entrepreneur who first vacationed in Honduras in 1991. He made the country his home five years ago when local business and community leaders asked him to help foster sustainable tourism development.

Trujillo has colonial architecture, cobblestone streets, a Spanish fort and a church fronting a tree-filled plaza. Christopher Columbus landed in 1502 and the town was settled by conquistadors under Hernán Cortés. Local cultures include the Pech and Miskito Indians and the Afro-Caribbean Garifuna.

Nearby Guaimoreto Lagoon has a pristine mangrove ecosystem teeming with birds and fishes, and crossed by a zipline. The vast Campo del Mar park system encompasses rainforest, waterfalls, rivers, a 15th-century Spanish road, a historical park and a wildlife park. One zone showcases a botanical garden and the agricultural heritage of Honduras. At a wildlife rehabilitation center, current residents include spider monkeys, capuchins and a sloth, and jaguars are expected. Once rehabilitated, the animals will be released into the wildlife park.

Developer Jorgensen and Miami-based Banana Coast partners Mike Greve of Global Destinations Development and Shannon McKee of Access Cruise were at the Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association Conference and Trade Show in Curaçao last week to update lines on progress at the destination.

Mountains, reefs, rainforest, an immense sweep of sandy beach, culture, history, wildlife, adventure—all are available at Banana Coast. Cruisers can snorkel with starfish, zipline over a mangrove-ringed lagoon, nibble chocolate made from local cacao, explore a Spanish fort and hike to hidden waterfalls.

This emerging mainland Honduras destination, 'Where the Rainforest Meets the Sea' as the motto describes it, will be ready to receive its first cruise ships this winter, according to developer Randy

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The \$40m port is on schedule for completion in December, with three docks in place to receive tenders from a deepwater anchorage within 500 meters of shore and geotubes installed as a breakwater. (Banana Coast principals are also talking with lines and private equity investors about partnering to build a finger pier that could handle two post-Panamax vessels.)

'It will be a great experience for the guests,' said McKee, a veteran cruise line excursions executive who developed a range of Banana Coast tours. These include Trujillo by trolley; a taste of Trujillo's cuisine, wine, bitters and chocolate; adventures by zipline, ATV or snorkeling at a bank rife with starfish, kayaking, a waterfall and lagoon trek, and a combination nature park/beach break.

Global Destinations Development's Greve cited 'a fantastic level of interest from all the cruise lines. They're interested in the way we've gone about it as a purpose-built cruise destination. We're not converting a cargo ship port.'

Norwegian's Sleipnes said Banana Coast could fit into seven-day cruises from South Florida but cautioned that due to high fuel costs, it may work better in longer itineraries. His line has ships that operate 10- and 11-day cruises to southern Caribbean ports like Aruba, Curaçao and Cartagena, and Sleipnes said Banana Coast might also spice up Panama Canal transits.

Though he hasn't visited Trujillo, Sleipnes welcomed the development of new destinations that can ease congestion in established Caribbean ports.

Holland America Line views Banana Coast as an alternative in case of congestion at Roatán's Mahogany Bay, according to Simon Douwes, director of deployment and itinerary planning. He added that HAL would need to study and determine the approaches and anchorages from a nautical perspective and make a site inspection to see if the destination fulfills the company's needs.

Jorgensen identified Banana Coast's single biggest challenge as the lack of a dock. Adding another tender port to itineraries that already have a tender call can be an issue, he said. The destination has all the permitting for a dock and, provided the right financial deal can be made, building could begin this autumn with an 18-month construction time.

It's also possible that the SeaWalk floating pier could be a near-term solution, Jorgensen added.

Meanwhile, he hopes lines will give Banana Coast a try, and said the port will be ready this winter to receive cruise ships within 24 hours' notice if they're unable to call at Roatán or Belize City.

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