A Jewel Among the “Islands of Pearls”
LUSTERED OFF the south coast of Panama lie a group of more than 100 islands that during the next decade are expected to give a bit of competition to the sun and fun islands of the Caribbean.

Well-known to the boating and fishing crowd of Panama and the Canal Zone, the Pearl Island Archipelago in the Gulf of Panama is stepping into the limelight thanks to a group of Panama businessmen and the Panama Government, all bent on putting the island jewels on every island hopping tourist's itinerary.

Gabriel Lewis, president of the Pearl Island Development Corp., is the leading force behind the project and this month will officially open Contadora Island to tourism.

Already more than $1 million has been spent to develop the island into a luxury resort, and approximately $800,000 more will go into the construction of a 50-room modern hotel and 16 two-bedroom cottages to be ready in January 1972. Now available are 10, two-bedroom, centrally air-conditioned trailers; a restaurant and cocktail lounge; and a small rental store for sporting goods and the usual beach and water necessities.

13 Beaches

Although the island is only 2 miles long and ¼ of a mile wide, it has 13 beaches and plenty of room for privacy. An airfield nearly 3,000 feet long serves the island, and the corporation owns three twin-engine planes for shuttle service from Paitilla Airport. The fee is $10 per person round trip, but property owners are given a discount.

It's a 15-minute trip by air and approximately 1 to 2 hours by powerboat. The island lies at the northern end of the archipelago approximately 35 miles from Panama City. There are numerous anchorages for deep-draft vessels and the island has a gas/diesel fueling pier.

Once the island gets into full swing, Contadora will be a paradise for the outdoor types, as well as for the naturalist.

Mr. and Mrs. Robert Peterson who operated a sailing school at Fort Lauderdale, Fla., are resident managers of the operation and offer skindiving and sailing classes. Natives from the surrounding islands will conduct pearl diving expeditions for the more adventurous visitors. Pearling was a lucrative business around the Pearl Islands until the
A paradise for beachcombers and skindivers, the Pearl Island Archipelago gives up treasures from its past to sharp-eyed visitors. Here Mr. and Mrs. Lewis display some of the items found among the islands. Clustered in the foreground and in photo below are pearls found just off Contadora this year.

1930's when apparently a combination of over-fishing and disease decimated the beds. But pearl oysters may be making a comeback. Lewis has collected nearly 100 pearls of various sizes off Contadora in 10 feet of water at low tide. (Pacific tides average approximately 14 feet.)

Golf Course

Tennis courts, a 9-hole golf course, and volleyball courts will be added to round out the sporting activities.

Lewis has preserved much of the island forest of guayacan trees, thorny cedars, oaks, and typical island growth, and has let it be known that a good way not to be invited back to the island is to kill one of the black iguanas that inhabit the island. This species grows to about 5 feet and like the rest of the family are harmless to humans.

Indian pottery and 19th Century bottles have been found on Contadora during the construction and clearing. And on a nearby island Lewis found two large diving helmets abandoned or lost by pearl divers.

Lewis plans to retain the natural beauty of the island and not crowd any of the residents or visitors. Actually there is no need to pack Contadora with people. He owns seven other islands in the archipelago which he plans eventually to develop. "It all depends on how well the public accepts Contadora," he said.

Part of the island has been subdivided for homesites and additional building sites will be set aside after the hotel is completed. "The reaction has been fantastic," said Lewis. "Already the entire subdivided section has been sold."

If Lewis' own reaction to Contadora when he first saw it is any indication of how others will feel, then the island is bound to be a favorite.

Like a Dream

Just 2 years ago in November Lewis was fishing alone in a small boat when he had engine trouble. He put into Contadora for help. "I found the island to be like a dream," he said. After repairing the engine, Lewis returned to Panama City. "Immediately I started asking questions and found that it was owned by the Pinel family who had been in the pearl business years before." Fortunately, the owners were willing to sell. Lewis set-up a 5-year program and in February 1969 the first bulldozer started to clear an area for the airstrip. Since then a work force of about 70 men has been kept busy. The Panama National Guard provided some heavy equipment to widen the runway.

During the next dry season the airfield and all the roads including one that circles the island will be blacktopped. That project is expected to be finished in February 1971 along with a water system supplied by three artesian wells, and an electrical plant with three generators supplying 1,000 kw. Comunicaciones, S.A., will install 80 telephone lines for island communications and 6 lines to Panama City by March 1971, Lewis said.

No Crazy Ideas

Original building sites sold for $6 a square meter for waterfront lots and $4 for inland property. The only building restriction is that plans be approved by the management and that the houses "fit in" with the community. "No crazy ideas," Lewis said. LOT owners, he explained, can purchase two-bedroom, air-conditioned mobile homes from the Panama Tourist Bureau for nothing down and $128 a month for 8 years. Trailer lots, however, must be landscaped.

To Lewis, the archipelago will become the next major tourist area. "These islands will be booming soon. The Government is backing their development and is giving a lot of cooperation. There's a great potential here. "Panama has an excellent opportunity to develop a strong tourist industry. We have what everybody wants—sun, good beaches, some of the best fishing in the world, and clean, clear water," he said.

Sales Rights

Lewis is not alone in this venture. Frank Morrice III, a partner of Ford, Sosa, Morrice, S.A., insurance and real estate, has the exclusive sales rights to island property. And like Lewis, Morrice first went to Contadora for a reason other than business.

"I heard about the island and went there to see about buying a lot. I fell in love with it right away," he said. Lewis and Morrice became good friends and Lewis offered him the sales part of the business.

Lewis is a family man, the father of five boys and one daughter, and has a close relationship with his business associates. He is general manager of the successful family-owned enterprise of Corrugado Panama, S.A., which manufactures banana packing boxes.

He has the easygoing manner of a man who is sure of himself and knows exactly where he is going. Morrice feels much the same way about the future of the Pearl Islands as Lewis, but admits that it takes someone like Lewis to make it work. "Gabriel is the pioneer; he's the Robinson Crusoe of the Pearl Islands."
LITTLE IS KNOWN and less is recorded of the Pearl Islands except that they were once the center of important and lucrative pearl fishing, an industry which to various degrees continued for more than 400 years.

The first known written reference to the islands occurs in a letter to the King of Spain from Vasco Núñez de Balboa, dated January 20, 1513. Balboa had not discovered the Pacific Ocean—that was to be in September—but had heard many stories from the Indians about the great “South Sea” that stretched to the horizon from across the Isthmus of Panama.

He told the King: “The Indians state there is another ocean 3 days journey from here . . . they say the other ocean is very suitable for canoe traveling as it is always calm . . . I believe there are many islands in that sea . . . they tell me that there are pearls in abundance of great size, and that the native chiefs possess baskets filled with them, as do even common Indian men and women.”

Since then these islands with their graceful white sand beaches, craggy cliffs, good natural harbors, and a wide and abundant variety of wildlife have led untroubled lives while their tropical cousins in the Caribbean were groomed for the tourist trade.

Sun and Rum
As the Caribbean islands boomed with pleasure seekers by the hundreds of thousands soaking up the sun and rum, the “Islands of Pearls,” as Balboa called them, patiently waited for the limelight. From 1901 until 1968, when Gabriel Lewis, president of the Pearl Island Development Corp., bought Contadora Island, it was owned by the Pinel family who used the island for its pearl fishing fleet. The Pinel’s bought it from great-grandchildren of Félix Moreno who took title to the island and several others in the late 18th Century. Moreno’s daughter inherited it on his death in 1836 when the island was called San Francisco de Asís de Contadora.

José Pinel of Panama City, who is engaged in the real estate business, was a child during the pearl fishing days of his family. He said Contadora and several other islands had fresh water necessary for the fleet. Pinel believes that Contadora may have been the island that was used as the counting-house for pearls and mother-of-pearl shell during the Spanish occupation. The Spanish word contador means counter; accountant; or auditor, and contaduría is translated as accountant's office, accountancy, and auditorship.

The Pinel family remained in the pearl fishing industry—both for mother-of-pearl and pearls—until 1931 when the demand for mother-of-pearl diminished. Most of it was sent to Germany while the pearls were sold mainly in Paris, London, and a few other European capitals. Only a few pearls were ever sold in the United States, Pinel said.

Pearl Fishing
Although the Colombian Government had established conservation practices on pearl fishing prior to the turn of the century (Panama became independent from Colombia in 1903), the production of pearl oysters diminished markedly in the 1930’s.

According to Dr. Paul S. Galtsoff of the U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, who conducted a survey of the pearl oyster resources of Panama in 1950, the years of forced inactivity from 1939 through 1943 had no beneficial effect on the oyster population.

“In 1944-45, when the fishery was officially resumed, the divers found the pearl oysters extremely scarce. They also reported seeing, on several formerly productive grounds, many dead or dying oysters,” said Dr. Galtsoff.

There are no records available of the number of pearls and their value taken from Panama Bay during the Spanish occupation, but it probably was considerable. Modern-day records on pearls and mother-of-pearl shells were not maintained until 1908, and even then the records were only sketchy.

According to the Panama Bureau of Statistics and Census, the best year was 1924 when pearls and shell valued at $75,524 were taken from the bay. The last year of record keeping was 1938 when it was reported that only 3 carats of pearls valued at $275 were collected. But the year before, 339 carats with a value of $10,818 were taken.

At top of page is an aerial photograph of Contadora Island taken earlier this year. It shows the runway, half a dozen beaches and some of the roads. A 50-room hotel and 16 modern cottages will be constructed near the beach at right center. The U.S. Navy Hydrographic Office chart shows some of the northern islands in the archipelago including Isla Contadora, below Isla Pacheca and to the right of Isla Saboga. The islands are approximately 35 miles from Panama City.