

Purchasing Hawaiian isle fits with mogul's persona

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In this Oct. 5, 2011 photo, Oracle CEO Larry Ellison speaks during the Oracle OpenWorld Keynote in San Francisco. Ellison has reached a deal to buy 98 percent of the island of Lanai from its current owner, Hawaii Gov. Neil Abercrombie said Wednesday, June 20, 2012. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)

(AP) — Buying an inhabited Hawaiian island may sound extreme, even for a guy known for flaunting his fortune like a playboy — driving fancy cars, wooing beautiful women, flying his own jet and spending \$200 million (€157.85 million) to build a Japanese-themed compound in California's Silicon Valley.

Larry Ellison won an America's Cup sailing in 2010, and then wrestled with San Francisco city leaders over his big plans for two waterfront piers. He owns a mansion atop a San Francisco hill with a sweeping view

of the Golden Gate Bridge to the left and Alcatraz to the right. He has spent a fortune snapping up some of Southern California's most prized beachfront property in Malibu.

For [Oracle CEO Ellison an island in the middle of the Pacific](#) is right up his alley.

He built Oracle Corp. with \$1,200 in 1977 and is the world's sixth richest billionaire. He inked a deal announced this week by the governor to buy 98 percent of the island's 141 square miles.

While detailed plans for the island have yet to be revealed, he's likely to do something "epic and grand," said Mike Wilson, who wrote the first biography of Ellison, "The Difference Between God and Larry Ellison: God Doesn't Think He's Larry Ellison."

"He could build the world's largest rare butterfly sanctuary, a medical research facility to help him live forever or a really cool go-cart track," Wilson said Thursday — but only half-jokingly, because those are the kinds of outlandish interests Ellison has.

As a man who feels cheated by a limited life-span, he's like a kid who never grew up but yet is a great visionary, Wilson said.

Wilson said the high-tech maverick won't be concerned with how his lifestyle will jibe with a laid-back island where longtime residents are grappling with the loss of their pineapple fields to make way for luxury development: "I don't think his primary concern is fitting in with what Hawaiians want."



In this Nov. 18, 2008 file photo courtesy of the The Lanai Times, a brush fire burns on the island of Lanai, Hawaii. Oracle Corp. CEO Larry Ellison has reached a deal to buy 98 percent of the island of Lanai from its current owner, Hawaii Gov. Neil Abercrombie said Wednesday, June 20, 2012. (AP Photo/The Lanai Times, Sharon Owens, File)

Yet, Ellison isn't planning any radical changes for the island he has agreed to buy, a Hawaii state lawmaker said.

State Sen. J. Kalani English told The Associated Press he got a call from the billionaire's personal representatives, and they said Ellison sees Lanai as "much more than an asset."

Ellison's reps expressed sensitivity to the "culture and conservation stewardship of the island," which is home to 3,200 residents, said English, a Democrat whose district includes Lanai.

They also assured English that union contracts will be honored and Ellison has no plans for a wind farm, even though the land's current owner, billionaire David Murdock, is retaining the right to build one. The contentious project would deliver power to Oahu through an undersea cable.

Meanwhile, Murdock's Castle & Cooke Inc. delivered letters to Lanai employees, informing them of the sale and that they'll all be retained by Ellison, with all contracts being transferred, English said.

That's comforting to English and Lanaians who wonder what the ostentatious and eclectic software magnate has in store for the island and its tourism-driven economy.

"I'm getting a nice feeling that they're coming into it with sensitivity," English said. "It's much more than just an investment."

The conversation left English with a different view of Ellison, known for doing everything in a big way.

While Lanaians are eager for someone who might restore agriculture to the island's economy or someone who appreciates the unique culture of Hawaii, residents also are familiar with living on what Castle & Cooke calls the largest privately held island in the United States.



In this Feb. 23, 2006 file photo David Murdock speaks during a groundbreaking ceremony for the North Carolina Research Campus in Kannapolis, N.C. Murdock who is selling 98 percent of the Hawaiian island of Lanai to Oracle CEO Larry Ellison says he plans to keep rights to complete a wind farm project that has caused controversy among the island's 3,200 residents. (AP Photo/Ross

Taylor, File)

"Lanai folks have always been sort of under this benevolent ownership, which goes back to the Dole days," University of Hawaii historian Warren Nishimoto said of Lanai's ownership in the 1920s by the founder of Dole Foods Co. "They never felt comfortable about what the future is for the island. It's at the whims of an owner."

But in end, what truly matters is how Lanai will be able to sustain itself under Ellison.

"Hopefully Mr. Ellison is a little more sensitive to the needs of Lanai and maintaining the lifestyle of the people," said Dennis Hokama, who was born and raised on the island. "But the bottom line will always be economic sustainability."

Ellison is "not a human bulldozer" and appreciates the beauty of nature, Wilson said.

The magnate has a love for the ocean, evidenced by his successful quest for the sailing prize America's Cup, his numerous yachts and his thrill-seeking attraction to the power of the sea.

In 1991, he broke his neck and punctured his right lung while bodysurfing in Hawaii. In an interview recalling the accident, Ellison said the beach was closed that day because of waves as high as 15 feet, but he attempted to catch one anyway.

In 1998, he won a 725-mile yacht race in the South Pacific, but only after overcoming a ferocious storm that killed six sailors.

Ellison reached the pinnacle of competitive sailing in 2010 when his yacht captured the America's Cup three years after his team failed to make it to the finals of sailing's Super Bowl. Because he's the reigning champion, Ellison got to pick the location of the next challenge for the cup, and he chose San Francisco.

The software mogul proved to be a bare-knuckles negotiator with San Francisco officials, at one point dangling the possibility of moving the competition to another locale when talks stalled. Ellison also scaled back an ambitious proposal to refurbish two dilapidated waterfront piers after opposition to his America's Cup development plans mounted on the Board of Supervisors and in the community.

Ellison talked of turning the piers into a "sailing village" and building an apartment building on the lot but eventually gave up on rights to the piers.

But beyond boating or jetting into Lanai, his ties to the island aren't clear, and his forays into tourism — the economic engine that has driven the island under Murdock's ownership — are limited, if nonexistent.

"He's capable of anything," Wilson said. "Lanai may be in store for the grandest preservation effort Hawaii has ever seen. Or it may be in line for the most grotesque development effort it has ever seen."

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