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COMPLIMENTARY



Cotton Tree: laidback luxury at the edge of our world

words by Elphina Magona
photos by Mark Narsansky and Caroline Ryan

Far from the madding world of work deadlines and soulless hotels is Cotton Tree: a vegetation-fringed haven of casual, easy-going luxury.

Owned by Caymanian entrepreneur Heather Lockington, the boutique rental beach properties sit on a sandy coast of West Bay near warm oceanic waters.

The four Cayman-inspired beach cottages, with a contemporary twist, boast 24-hour concierge services and took three years to complete. The upscale venture is Heather's first foray as a developer and was something her family's globetrotting lifestyle led her to.

"I've seen and stayed at some unique places that provided alternatives to traditional accommodation," she says.

"However, in my experience, hotels, no matter how high-end, tend to have the same feel and approach to guests, which is fine up to a point, but doesn't always provide you with a real sense of place. It made me think about doing something very different to what we already have here [in Cayman]."

What Heather has created on the tranquil one-acre site are four 1,600 sq. ft. beach cottages for travellers wanting "an escape from it all holiday" - with all of the trimmings.

"Cotton Tree has been designed to meet the needs of the affluent vacationer who wants a more authentic and homelike experience than what typical traditional hotel rooms offer," says Pilar Bush of AtWater Consulting Ltd., the development's marketing and business strategist.

"The key thing is to provide a unique experience which references the location," Heather adds. "Cotton Tree is probably unique in Cayman in providing a different vacation that suits families and people who

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want to do what they want when they want without feeling governed by timetables and routines, but at the same time they have the facilities and support to find the best places to go and things to do.

“I was also keen that the visitors should get some kind of feel for Caymanian heritage, its architecture, and leave having learnt a few things about the island,” she says.

It’s anticipated that visitors might also appreciate the property’s studio apartment, ideal for a nanny or a bodyguard.

Pilar, Cayman’s former director of tourism, instantly connected with Heather’s vision and came on board to develop strategies to make the place a commercial success.

The properties

The beach cottages, which make up the low-rise, low-impact development, are loosely arranged. Set back from the handsome reception lodge, and staggered for informality, the luxury properties are near enough to each other for socialising but far enough apart to afford seclusion and privacy.

Once she’d committed herself to the idea, Heather didn’t have far to look to find a design team with the creativity to breathe life into the project.

Enter the husband-and-wife duo of MJM Design Studio.

No strangers to Heather, architects Michael and Joelle Meghoo, fitted the client’s profile.

“To us, this was a dream project,” Joelle comments. “We’ve enjoyed every step of the process from the architectural design right through to the selection of cutlery and linen.”

Connecting with Heather’s vision, they have ensured Cotton Tree has a truly local feel.

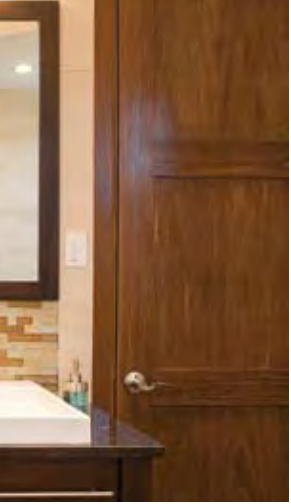
“We were careful to retain those design elements which are inherently Caymanian but would easily translate into our need to create modern beach cottages,” Joelle explains.

Painted in sea-inspired colours, the cottages have traditional zinc roofs over a concrete slab roof, which adds height rarely found in hotel rooms.”

“And, talking of referencing local culture, you should hear the sound of rain on those roofs, it’s magical,” Heather mentions.

“We wanted a modern interpretation of Caribbean architecture that gives Cotton Tree a sense of belonging,” says Michael.

Devoid of pastiche, only the most practical aspects of local architecture were used and, where necessary, refined.



Take for example the crawl space under the cottages. Instead of breeze blocks, the plans called for much deeper spaces. Partially screened using indigenous plants, the areas provide ample space for storing kayaks and bikes.

Probably the most significant contemporary aspects of the cottages are the amount of discreetly placed gadgetry.

“Guests can enjoy DVDs, iPods, CDs or cable in high-definition TV in any, or all, areas of the cottages,” Michael explains.

Energy-saving features include automatically monitored air conditioning, and security systems designed to shut off if windows or doors are left open for more than 10 minutes.

Ensuring that all these elements were brought together to marry beach and boutique influences meant the team had to be detail-oriented.

“We chose materials that are easy to maintain and live with, like porcelain tiles that look like stone and wooden planks, without compromising on luxury,” Joelle says. Beach and ocean hues were also used to complement the natural surroundings.

Local artisans were employed where possible and Joelle accompanied Heather on off-island buying trips to source many of the property’s high-end furniture, fittings and accessories.

In the living spaces, most of the furniture is by award-winning Ecuadorian designer Adriana Hoyos.

The kitchens have custom-made maple cabinets and walnut shelves and are kitted out for fine dining or preparing a quick snack. Welcome amenities like mango jam, Cayman peppered jelly and local peppermints are indicative of the bespoke touches found throughout the properties.

In the bathrooms, the design team used porcelain

flooring and wall tiles from an Italian manufacturer, whilst adding glass tile accents from Walker Zanger.

Aside from the design and layout of Cotton Tree, guests have unrestricted use of the on-site gym, swimming pool and open-air massage area.

The property even has a carefully selected list of relaxation therapists, traditional arts teachers and fitness coaches who can instruct and deliver their services on-site.

Heather, although away in England for 18 months during construction, was kept fully up-to-date.

“I visited Cayman every three months to check on progress and I always looked forward to Joelle’s email pictures of how it was all coming along... and we exchanged a huge number of FedEx packages. Joelle and, I had fun choosing furniture and after a few false starts, finally found exactly what we were looking for,” she recalls.

Key markets

Planned as a unique vacation colony, Ms Bush says research shows that the cottages will have a particular appeal for European visitors.

Heather adds: “We see families at the forefront of this trend, couples travelling with their school-aged children, and multi-generational family groups celebrating occasions such as weddings and anniversaries,”

“As well as growing interest from the local staycation market, the property is attracting attention from international business travellers, on-island for a few weeks who want something more homelike than a hotel.”

Named after a local plant with deep roots, Cotton Tree is branching off into a dynamic niche sector and looks set to bear fruit for years to come. 