

Upscale Phoenix resort draws new type of traveler to Ambergris Caye

Posh and sophisticated, The Phoenix caters to plenty of Texans

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I'm used to sleeping in tents and eating trail mix when I'm on vacation, so my jaw drops when I open my room door at the Phoenix.

Bright pink bougainvillea blossoms have been sprinkled liberally around the suite — on pillows in the bedroom, on towels in the bathroom, on marble countertops in the kitchen.

Then there's the view, a sweeping panorama that takes in not just the pool and gardens of this sleek resort, but the beach, as well. It's best seen from the porch, which I've been told is the largest on Ambergris Caye.

The Phoenix sprouted on the site of one of the first hotels on this Caribbean island. Jerry McDermott, an Irish immigrant, turned a retreat for Catholic nuns into the original Paradise House Hotel back in 1970. It attracted adventurers who stayed in its rustic palapa huts while they explored what was then a mostly unseen (at least by Americans) slice of Central America.

McDermott, who died a few years ago, was a pioneer in the tourism industry here, and from the beginning his hotel drew visitors from Houston.

A few years ago, his daughter Kelly razed the original property and built the Phoenix, an entirely different kind of lodge to serve a new kind of clientele.

The Phoenix still attracts a lot of Texans, who jump direct flights from Dallas or Houston to

Belize City before hopping over to Ambergris Caye, but more of those visitors want to be pampered these days.

The Phoenix is posh and sophisticated, with Jacuzzi tubs and flat-screen televisions, complimentary iPads and Kindles for guests, an on-site spa and an upscale restaurant called Red Ginger. A two-tiered saline pool sparkles in the courtyard, and a fitness center offers yoga classes.

The 30 condominium suites are sleek and airy, furnished with chairs and sofas made of Belizean wood.

There's another Texas tie, too. Kelly grew up mostly on Ambergris Caye but attended high school in Houston.

She met Mukul Kanabar there, and the two eventually moved back to Belize and married. Today they run the Phoenix, plus three restaurants, and a wine and specialty foods store called Wine de Vine.

We tried Blue Water Grill, which Kelly opened in 2001, when she was just 23. If they're serving snook, cooked up with plantains, order it.

Wandering the bustling streets of San Pedro, you get the feeling the whole island is on the brink of a transition from a sleepy hideaway to a destination dotted with hotels worthy of an appearance in Architectural Digest.

Already, the handful of rental huts from the '70s has grown into about 40 hotels and resorts today.

My advice? Come quickly.

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