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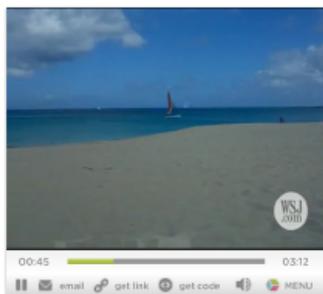
Paradise in Progress

Retreat on Turks and Caicos Ranks at Top on Service, Lower on Insects, Smells

By LAURA LANDRO
February 29, 2008; Page W3

On miles of bumpy, unpaved road to the Amanyara resort in the Turks and Caicos islands, we pass a parade of construction vehicles and workmen-filled buses. The tires kick up clouds of heavy dust that blankets the low scrub brush and cactus on either side in a thick, chalky powder.

Fortunately, the dust settles when we arrive at our oceanfront destination: a tableau of Asian-inspired mahogany, teak and stone buildings, open to the sea breezes, around a reflecting pond decorated with trees and lined with black volcanic rock. A few guests loll around three towering pagodas with sunbathing beds by a 50-meter swimming pool with an infinity edge and ocean views.



WSJ's Laura Landro reports from Turks and Caicos, a group of 40 islands south of the Bahamas. She gives a tour her villa-style room at the Amanyara Resort.

Once inside Amanyara, it's easy to forget that this serene paradise, surrounded by a 5,000-acre national park, is still something of a work in progress. The food is good, the service impeccable. Though the Edenic feel is somewhat undercut by the impressive insect life and the occasional smell of burning waste at a nearby landfill, neither is bad enough to spoil the fun.

My husband and I visited the Turks and Caicos in 2001 and had been disappointed by the Parrot Cay resort, a 40-minute boat ride from Amanyara's island, Providenciales, or "Provo." But we had better expectations from Amanresorts, best known for luxurious but minimalist hotels with good service in places such as Bali and Thailand.

The Singapore-based company opened Amanyara on a 99-acre site, honeycombed with cart paths and man-made ponds, in 2006. It has 40 rooms and 20 privately owned villas, including an oceanfront spread recently sold for \$17 million. Next year, Amanyara will start to build a spa and about a dozen more pond-front villas, and its developers are in final talks with the government to develop a Tom Fazio-designed golf course.

These days, construction is

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just as much a part of the landscape as sea and sand in the Turks and Caicos, 40 islands and cays, many uninhabited, just south of the Bahamas. The country is undergoing one of the biggest development booms in the Caribbean region, with a new cruise terminal on Grand Turk island, and homes, time-share resorts and condo-hotel combinations popping up a few miles from Amanyara in the Grace Bay section of Provo, the most densely populated island, and site of the main airport.



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Villas, Suites and an Airstrip

On the high end, a company associated with West Virginia's Greenbrier Resort is building up to 500 homes in its Turks & Caicos Sporting Club on the 1,100-acre Ambergris Cay, which includes the longest private airstrip in the Caribbean. The Ritz-Carlton will open its Molasses Reef resort later this year with 125 suites and 75 private villas, and the Mandarin Oriental plans a 122-room hotel with 18 villas and 79 apartments on Dellis Cay. Near Amanyara, General Hotel Management, the operator of Miami's Setai, next year will open the Tanai, with 60 hotel rooms and 30 residences.

Amanyara had an inauspicious start: An American couple was robbed and assaulted in one of its rooms shortly after its March 2006 opening. John Vasatka, who manages the hotel with his wife, says it was an isolated event and adds that local government has increased security.



A view of the resort from the rocky coastline near some of its rooms.

The resort also has to contend with one environmental factor beyond its control, an acrid odor from garbage being incinerated at the landfill, which was placed there before the current wave of development. Wayne Garland, executive director of the Turks and Caicos government tourism board, says bids are due this month for a new waste-treatment contract to mitigate the problem, and there will be "no smoke" within nine months. In the meantime, the fumes wafting in on the breeze are unpleasant, but fortunately only intermittent.

Run by an Aman staff largely from the Philippines and Southeast Asia as well as local employees, Amanyara caters to Americans and Europeans willing to shell out \$1,450 for a room facing one of the ponds and \$1,850 for an ocean view through May, after which rates drop. Guests can also rent the villas, which come with a chef and other staff, for between \$5,200 and \$12,000 a night. (Hotel rates don't include any meals, which are pricey.)

Those seeking action should go elsewhere. The nightlife consists of a nightly movie shown in a small screening room, or a nightcap at the lovely circular bar. Organized activities are few. But guests will find the water sports plentiful (kayaks, Hobie cats and sailboats), the swimming beach wide and calm, and the snorkeling by a coral reef excellent. Some of the world's most highly rated diving is just offshore, with instruction on many skill levels. Just as we were leaving, world-champion free-diver Tanya Streeter arrived to give a week of snorkeling and scuba lessons and lectures.

Hotel staffers picked us up at the airport, welcomed us at the stone porte cochère of Amanyara with a tropical cooler, gave us a brief tour and whisked us in a golf cart to our room, a free-standing glass and timber pavilion on a rocky bluff overlooking the sea. My husband found its tranquility Zenlike, with the bed in the middle of the room against a desk and chair, a soaring ceiling with a fan, and automatic blackout shades. For entertainment, there was a flat screen TV, DVD/CD player, Wi-Fi and a minibar with snacks and nonalcoholic beverages, included in the room rate.



A guest room overlooking the pond

I would have preferred a closed-off bathroom -- only some wooden slats separated it from the room -- though I liked the two sinks on opposite sides and toiletries scented with sage, kelp, hemp and wheat. The resort provided a can of Raid and insect repellent and says it also has an environmentally friendly pest-control program, but there were still plenty of critters to contend with. While I was washing my face, I looked in the mirror to see a big black one crawling up my robe. As for the giant palmetto bug I pointed out to my husband as he was reading, he successfully dropped his book on it. The flies, too, got a little annoying at the beach in the afternoon.

Fortunately, we weren't able to hear or see any construction activity; Mr. Vasatka says that work is winding down for now and that new projects will be far enough away and deep enough in the brush to muffle sound. Our room felt private with its little thatch of foliage -- some of which, though, blocked part of our ocean view. An overhanging roofline shaded terraces on three sides. Our main terrace facing the water had lounging mats and a sunken table with cushions and bolsters for dining, but I avoided sitting there because they put me at ground level with anything that crawled by.

PAGODAS OF THE CARIBBEAN

The architecture of the 2006 Turks and Caicos resort Amanaya has an Asian theme.



Three pool pagodas with sunbathing beds are available on a first-come, first-served basis. (Grab one early.)



At the center of the resort, the circular bar's an ideal spot to catch the sunset with an Aman mojito.



The beach has a reef for snorkeling, a 40,000-foot offshore drop for diving and occasional whale sightings.

I ventured out past our terrace over some loose stones to climb down onto a rocky promontory perched over the ocean. I noticed a little private sandy cove with beach chairs off to my right, which turned out to belong to the only room with direct beach access (and a \$2,050 nightly tariff). During the day we ended up spending little time at our pavilion -- a long way from the center of the resort -- packing enough gear and books to spend the day at the beach and pool.

Same Lunch Every Day

After a swim and lounge on the beach, we ordered the same lunch every day at the casual beachfront restaurant -- shredded chicken salad with Vietnamese dressing and peanuts. I worked it off with long laps at the pool, while my husband tried the decently equipped fitness center. (There are Pilates, yoga and personal training instructors and three tennis pros at the clay courts.) We had excellent in-room massages but sorely missed a spa. Mr. Vasatka says the original plan for a spa is being redesigned and relocated, and an unsold villa will be used for treatment rooms for now.

We had a nightly Mojito at the bar while the sun set, and we dined three of four evenings at the hotel's main restaurant with its Asian and Mediterranean menu. Our waiter, Rey, had a special conch salad prepared for us one evening, and told us the kitchen could prepare anything we wanted. We liked simple grilled fish and a beet, fig and goat- cheese salad best. For dessert, don't miss the black sticky rice pudding with coconut milk and mango.

We dined once at the more casual beachfront restaurant, open five nights a week, with a musician. It was also the night of the recent lunar eclipse. From our table under the open sky, we watched the Earth's shadow cover the moon, while a bonfire on the beach sent up sparks, with a three-masted schooner anchored just offshore. Walking back to our room along the winding path, we didn't need the flashlight provided by the room. The stars were enough.

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