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A butler at the Grace Bay Club, in Turks and Caicos.

TURKS + CAICOS

At Your Service

In Turks and Caicos, an ambitious, nationwide effort is under way to improve service standards.

JEFF WISE takes a look at how it's working. *Photographed by TARA DONNE*

THE FAINTEST OF SALTY BREEZES is wafting over the blue-green sea, with sunshine peeking out from behind a procession of fair-weather clouds—a perfect day in the Caribbean. A waitress stands idly at the entrance to a seaside resort restaurant, and she barely looks up as a guest approaches. “Wherever you want to sit,” she mutters indifferently, gesturing vaguely at an empty table. Is there a note of hostility in her voice? She walks away abruptly.

The guest hesitates, frowning. “Actually,” she calls after the waitress, “I think I’m going to go sit on the beach.” The waitress shrugs. The guest turns to leave.

“Hold on,” interrupts a third woman, addressing the guest. “And tell me how you feel right now.” This is Trem Quinlan, a Canadian with short-cropped blond hair, and this is a training session meant to teach hotel and restaurant workers at the Grace Bay Club in Turks and Caicos how to deliver better service. The role-playing game for these dozen or so staff members is designed to elicit empathy: What does bad service *feel* like? Earlier in the session, Quinlan had her students pin pieces of paper to the backs of their shirts and then write compliments on them. After they took turns reading the comments, she asked, “What does it



feel like to say nice things and share them with other people?” No one responded. “It feels good, doesn’t it?” The class nodded. “That’s what the service experience is about.”

It’s common enough in the luxury travel business for people to ruminate about what constitutes the essence of excellent service. You hear a lot about empathy and intuition, discretion, a knack for improvisation, and the importance of warmth without overfamiliarity. In the Caribbean, meanwhile, you tend to hear a lot about how the service is lacking: it’s brusque, it’s unreliable, it’s not happening at the snap of a finger, it’s happening on “island time.” But recently, in an attempt to turn their reputations around, individual hotels have started ramping up internal training programs, while broad initiatives are under way at both the national and regional levels. »



Parrot Cay Hospitality

Clockwise from top right: Reka, a concierge at Parrot Cay; a whirlpool at the resort; the pool bar; spiced seafood stew at the restaurant.



Indeed, a telling microcosm of the region's evolution can be found in Turks and Caicos, a tiny archipelago of 32,000 people southeast of the Bahamas. Fifteen years ago, these islands had virtually no tourism industry and no expertise in hospitality. Today, 200,000 visitors reach the archipelago every year, and hotels are popping up all over. With jobs plentiful, many locals see no need to take a position they consider beneath them. Those who do take the jobs often aren't particularly committed to them.

"To be honest, most of us servers, we just want to chat with our friends," Stephanie, a waitress at Grace Bay, told me, laughing.

And thus the stage is set for a culture clash. Hotel managers complain that Caribbean staff are forgetful, overly sensitive, and lack the ability to maintain a professional attitude. To local ears, such complaints sound condescending, colonialist, even racist: training people to conform to foreign standards seems a betrayal of authenticity. "What must come through is the true nature of the Caribbean people," says Vincent Vanderpool Wallace, secretary general of the Caribbean Tourist Office. "That's the whole reason you go on vacation in the first place. We don't want to have a level of efficiency that's devoid of the charismatic appeal of the people of the Caribbean. It would be the worst thing that could happen to us."



At Grace Bay Club
Clockwise from top right: A chef prepares dinner in a private suite; a view of the Caribbean Sea from the hotel; one of the concierge training sessions; folding a napkin just so.

Nevertheless, the issue of service is pressing enough in Turks and Caicos that the government has hired Texas-based hospitality consultant Bill Freeman to implement a national action plan. Freeman has worked with numerous Caribbean governments, and says the impact of his program is real. "Aruba has invested a lot of money in both training and in measuring the training," Freeman says. "And they have one of the highest return ratios in the region."

Step one—which is currently under way—involves "mystery shoppers," who fan out across the island and record their impressions not only of service in hotels, but also of government officials and even people on the street. Freeman's undercover observers file detailed reports on about 25 interactions per day, rating the degree to which each islander met such standards as "Appearance creates a positive impression" and »



"Customers are greeted with a smile, eye contact, and positive body language." These reports are then grist for step two: Armed with the knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, the islands will kick off a national service improvement program. Freeman's team trains teachers who then fan out and conduct classes for hotel staff throughout the country. Simultaneously, an aggressive marketing campaign spreads the word about how important tourism is for the economy and what citizens can do to help. Among other things, the ministry of tourism plans to produce an informational video to be broadcast on TV and shown in schools before class each day.

Teaching *kids* service? There is something either ludicrous or terrifying about all this. Or both.

In any event, convincing islanders to renounce "island time," to look customers in the eye and smile, and all the rest will be a significant challenge, but success won't be nearly enough. What Turks and Caicos is experiencing is not just a boom in tourism, but in tourism of the super-over-the-top, we're-going-to-blow-your-mind-with-luxury variety. Amanresorts opened its property here in 2006; later this year the country's first Ritz-Carlton makes its debut. In 2009, it's Mandarin Oriental's turn, with a property it promises will provide "one of the most comprehensive luxury living experiences anywhere on earth."

5-STAR SERVICE IN TURKS AND CAICOS



Amanyara On the undeveloped western shore of Providenciales. Northwest Point. 800/477-9180 or 65/6887-3337; amanresorts.com; doubles from \$1,450.

Grace Bay Club This 59-room hotel sets the bar as the first true luxury property in Turks and Caicos. Grace Bay Beach, Providenciales; 800/946-5757 or 649/946-5050; gracebayclub.com; suites from \$864.

Parrot Cay Hidden on a private island, a 35-minute boat ride from Providenciales. 877/754-0726 or 649/946-7788; parrotcay.com.bz; doubles from \$760.

Molasses Reef, A Ritz-Carlton Reserve This resort is set to open later this year on the northern tip of West Caicos. 888/680-8879; molassesreef.com; doubles from \$699.

Mandarin Oriental Dellis Cay Situated on a private island, this small property will open in 2009. 800/644-0533 or 649/332-3229; delliscay.com.

Eliminating rudeness will be a good start, but these resorts' guests are going to expect more. If Freeman's efforts are like a grassroots literacy program, serving these people will require a Ph.D. So island hotels are looking for their own solutions. Grace Bay has ramped up its training program. Parrot Cay, an exclusive hideaway founded by Christina Ong, has bypassed the issue by importing large numbers of staff from Asia. We live in a global service economy, after all. Still, as Bill Freeman says: "I think it's really weird to go to a place like Turks and Caicos and have an Asian butler."

Not surprisingly, importing foreign workers is not a particularly popular practice with many locals. Nor is the idea that foreigners need to come in to teach the islanders a new style of behavior. "It's patently silly," says Vanderpool Wallace. "For a long time now, we've been trying to out-Swiss the Swiss. We can't do that. We cannot bring that kind of service into a cultural environment that's completely different."

As part of his agency's own service-standards project, Vanderpool Wallace wants not only to train islanders, but also to educate visitors about the cultural norms of the countries they're coming to see, perhaps through leaflets distributed in airport arrival halls. If travelers to the region understand the mind-set of the people serving them, he reasons, perhaps they'll enjoy the experience more.

Most of us who go to the Caribbean confront what seems to be a pretty simple picture. We want good service, and we don't get it. But maybe things are more complicated than that. Maybe part of the problem is that we're looking at things the wrong way. "In America, we're all results driven," points out Grace Bay's general manager Nikheel Advani. "You pay a little bit more, people work harder. In Turks and Caicos, that system doesn't work at all. What matters here is relationships. And if you connect with the staff on a relationship basis, they will do anything for you—not because a manager is telling them to do it, but because they bonded with you."

To some, he admits, that kind of personal connection might seem like an invasion of privacy. "But that's what the Caribbean is about. I don't know whether it's good or bad; it's just typical. My staff is very friendly, and they mean well. Some guests don't like it. But can you change that?" Advani shrugs. "To be honest, I don't know." +

Jeff Wise is a *T+L* contributing editor.