



Great Service at Great Value



An Interview with Nikheel Advani,
Chief Operating Officer and Principal, Grace Bay Resorts

EDITORS' NOTE Nikheel Advani joined Grace Bay Resorts in 2004 as General Manager. He now serves as COO and Principal, responsible for a variety of guest- and owner-related services plus resort development. Advani was most recently Hotel Manager at Raffles Hotel in Singapore. Prior to joining Raffles in 2002, he navigated the hotel as well as food and beverage with Ritz-Carlton for eight years. Advani began his career at The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Millenia Singapore as a banquet operations manager. Born in Nigeria, raised in Singapore, and educated in the United States, Advani's work experience in more than 10 cities in three continents has given him a rich cultural background. Advani graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst with an honors degree in Hotel, Restaurant and Travel Administration. He also successfully completed the General Manager Program at Harvard Business School.



Nikheel Advani

COMPANY BRIEF Grace Bay Resorts is a boutique developer and operator of high-end, luxury resorts and branded residences, founded from its flagship property Grace Bay Club in Turks and Caicos, which opened in 1993. Grace Bay Club (www.gracebayclub.com) was the first luxury all-suite resort in Turks and Caicos, situated on 11 acres of immaculate beachfront property. The Veranda is a luxury, fully inclusive resort set alongside the pristine white sands of the world renowned Grace Bay Beach, a setting perfect for couples and families alike. As the Caribbean's only beachfront residential resort community of its kind, The Veranda features a wide variety of accommodations, including the island's only private beachfront homes, each enjoying their own private pool.

How has Grace Bay Club developed and what are your plans moving forward?

I joined the property about eight years ago, when we were 21 suites and a \$15-million property. We had the bones of new development called The Villas, the family-friendly section, which was phase two. We launched that product around 2006.

As the villas were being built, demand grew on the island, so we acquired a piece of land on the flip side of the hotel, which made the whole property just under 11 acres. We conceptualized phase three, which is The Estate at Grace Bay Club. We

launched that around 2007/2008 when we had sold most of the product and just before the markets crashed. One of the oceanfront penthouses (each one is 7,000 square feet) sold for the highest dollar-per-square-foot in terms of condominium real estate beachfront in all of the Caribbean. Grace Bay Club is now 82 suites and a \$250-million property.

To match that, from 2004, we were starting to bring aboard people from Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons, Raffles, and Mandarin Oriental to build the service culture. When I got here, it was not as

developed as it is today and we also didn't have competition.

In 2008, we succeeded in having a positive net break-even year and value became very important. So we didn't take down the rates but carried on with the value-adds.

My partner Mark Durliat and investors in the hotel felt that for 2009/2010, we should continue the investment in the property. So in 2009, there were smaller investments, but in 2010, we were one of the few resorts that invested back roughly about \$1 million into the property in terms of redoing the infinity-edge pool; we expanded the spa from six to eight rooms; and we also re-did the boutique. We're now looking at addressing our food and beverage areas.

So every year our guests visit there are improvements made to the property that are reasonably significant.

Is the target market for the property strictly that high-end niche or is it broader?

It's a niche – the top 10 percent. Because we're seasonal, those in the top 5 percent come from December through April when the rates are much higher. An average guest over Christmas will spend \$30,000 to \$40,000; it can go up to \$100,000 for the rooms alone. In the summer, our rates are about 60 percent of that. So you get a lot more aspirational customers.

We get most of our guests from the New York/New Jersey/Connecticut tri-state area for the high season, but over the summer, it changes – we get people from other markets.

How important has it been to work closely with the Turks and Caicos tourism agencies to build the level of interest?

Airlift is one of the top three things that build a market. We just got two new flights out of New York and Newark with JetBlue and Continental.

Grace Bay Club saw around 90 percent occupancy over June, July, and August 2011, and

we attribute a lot of that to the increase in airlift. We work closely with the tourism board and the hotel association. It's a young country, so we are trying to take that knowledge that we have picked up elsewhere and assist in the country's marketing efforts. The private sector's involvement in the public sector here is a partnership and without that, it would not be as successful.

How do you offer the technology that guests expect while also making sure you don't lose the personal touch?

High touch is important, but it has to be efficient. We are more focused on creating handmade experiences and emotional attachments to the resort and the island than we are on being 'up' with the latest technology. However, we do have the latest systems that make sure that all the processes in the heart of the house work well. We introduced the first 'personal concierge' service, so that our guests can reach a member of staff at any time. We give each guest a personal cell phone and a specific team member that is on call to assist with all pre-visit arrangements and needs during the guest's visit with us. We also provide complimentary wireless Internet to all of our guests, which is a must.

But at the resort, most guests don't want a lot of technology – they want the beach, a great cocktail, and to chat with our staff.

Where we can utilize technology is via social media – using Facebook and Twitter to reach our guests. Web bookings have gone to 16 percent of our bookings this year via use of SEO.

We have an e-brochure and current newsletters; we also send videos to our guests.

We're developing a new program where you'll be able to see the view and floor plan of our room types so a guest will know exactly what his view will be.

On property, we will have iPads available, but we're still focused on high touch.

Are there opportunities for expansion for this brand?

The first goal is having a major presence in the Caribbean. We deliver great service at great value, but we have an owner-operated mentality and that is attractive in the Caribbean, and in Central and South America.

Our goal in evaluating other properties is to ensure it falls into the same five-star uber-luxe category and to see if we can add value to it over the long term. ●

Grace Bay Club Penthouse Living Room (left); Poolside Bed at The Estate at Grace Bay Club (right)