



Rebuild AND Recruit



■ Scrub Island Resort (left) was one of five properties on the British Virgin Islands working with Saira Hospitality to train BVI residents for careers at the hotels.



BVI resorts partner with Saira Hospitality to lift local staffing.

BY MICHAEL COSTA

One of the hardest hit areas during the catastrophic 2017 hurricane season was the British Virgin Islands (BVI), which was pummeled by two Category 5 hurricanes (Irma and Maria) causing deep damage that the BVI is still recovering from today. Many resorts on the islands—a major contributor to the BVI's economy—were leveled by the storms, with some not scheduled to reopen until later this year.

Since the hurricanes, a handful of BVI resorts have focused their efforts not just on rebuilding but also recruiting more local talent to fill staffing needs. One of those properties, Scrub Island Resort, Spa & Marina, led the way last fall by partnering with Saira Hospitality for an eight-week pop-up hospitality school (four hours a day,

four days a week) covering all aspects of hotel employment, as well as holistic education about health, wellness, entrepreneurship, and managing personal finances.

“Many guests today aren’t looking to stay at a Caribbean hotel where the staff is from abroad—they want to immerse themselves in the culture and interact with locals. So our training is not just about hiring locals for entry-level positions but those who see this as a career and want to grow into management positions,” says Harsha Chanrai, CEO, Saira Hospitality. “The whole process of flying in ex-pats to fill positions isn’t sustainable, and it’s expensive. It doesn’t really enhance the guest experience either, so why not look at the local community and invest in them?”

While Scrub Island Resort hosted nearly all of the hands-on classes (such as kitchen, restaurant, and beverage



■ F&B training during the eight-week Saira program included fine-dining plating techniques like those used at Scrub Island's signature restaurant, Cardamom & Co.



■ About 80% of the F&B staff at Scrub Island are BVI locals, and those at the resort say they'd like that number to be higher, with less reliance on expats.

courses), four other BVI properties helped pay for the program, contributing several thousand dollars each to cover costs: Rosewood Little Dix Bay, Bitter End Resort, and two Virgin Limited Edition properties: Moskito, and Necker Island, plus a non-resort, private entity called Perceptio.

"Some of the nicest resorts in the world are here," says Scott McArdle, GM at Scrub Island Resort. "But there's no formal hospitality school, so when we're hiring, there's a good chance local candidates have never worked in a hotel before."

McArdle adds that expats are imported when the hotel doesn't have applications relevant to open job positions and can cost anywhere from

\$5,000 to \$10,000 each in relocation expenses, and then eight to 12 weeks for those expats to become familiar with the BVI and their job at the resort.

"Lots of resorts on the BVI are hiring, but it's not one or two positions at each property, it's multiple positions. There's such demand for labor that when the possibility came up to partner with Saira, Scrub Island and the other resorts were really on board together, because it's similar to an apprenticeship program," McArdle says.

HANDS-ON HOSPITALITY

The Saira class size was limited to 92, after more than 200 BVI residents signed up for the training (which was free) and were vetted through four



■ Participants in the Saira program received hours of kitchen training, which included knife skills, sauté basics, and how to use the fryer efficiently.

Some students had breakthroughs during the course where they realized they felt helpless and alone for months after the hurricanes.

rounds of interviews, including a short selfie video introducing themselves and why they're interested in the program. Of those 92 students, 75 graduated with Saira certificates and can apply at any of the BVI's resorts for employment.

Chanrai says F&B was one of the top hospitality interests listed by students, with front-of-house F&B and back-of-house F&B coming in second and third, respectively, after front office work. Housekeeping, HR, events, maintenance, and retail round out the list.

Scrub Island Director of F&B Jason Jones and his managers oversaw the F&B training for Saira students, which lasted multiple days, starting with "the back of the house, where they saw how

food is prepared on the line, how it's garnished, and how it's expedited to the guest," says Jones. "Then we teach them basic knife skills, and they learn about hygiene and sanitation from our chefs. After that, they learn how to sauté vegetables, use the fryer, and try some basic plating techniques.

"Then we move to the front of the house, where they learn core service techniques like serving from the left and clearing from the right, as well as what a proper table setting looks like. We finish with an intensive wine education class, and see what a great wine list looks like at a five-star resort," Jones says, adding that about 20% of Scrub Island's current F&B staff are expats.

Training for F&B is done while the restaurant is open, because "when the restaurant is empty, they're not going to learn much," notes Jones. "After the first four weeks, we can see who's passionate about F&B. Those are the ones who really want to work as a server, a bartender, a sommelier, a line cook, or have aspirations to be an executive chef someday. We can teach them skills, but we can't teach them passion for their job."

HIRE EDUCATION

In addition to the BVI, Saira has executed similar hospitality training programs in Los Angeles and Mexico, with another tentatively scheduled for the Dominican Republic this year and a possible second session in the BVI as well.

As for the current 75 BVI graduates, they've already started applying for jobs, supported by Saira's education and recommendations. "We've had a first round of interviews, and we're in the final stages of offers to them, so I can confidently say we'll be recruiting from the program in almost all departments," says McArdle. "My ultimate goal is to increase the number of locals in senior positions here."

The classes come at a time when the BVI is still rebuilding after hurricanes Irma and Maria, so for many participants, they offer a chance to start over.

"The BVI has a strong certificate culture as it relates to personal qualifications, and a lot of our students lost their certificates in the hurricanes and didn't have soft copies online, so they were left with nothing," says Chanrai. "They also lost homes, businesses, their finances, and their jobs, and a lot of them lost hope. Some had breakthroughs during our course where they realized they felt helpless and alone for months, and nobody had talked about it. There were no PTSD sessions to cope with the fallout from two hurricanes, so they kind of felt without purpose before our program started." 🍷

Michael Costa is editorial director at Hotel F&B.