



Sustaining Paradise: SOUTHERN CROSS CLUB AND CENTRAL CARIBBEAN MARINE INSTITUTE

Written by Celeste Taylor · Photography provided by Southern Cross Club

“I am the luckiest man in the world,” says Peter Hillenbrand, owner of Southern Cross Club, a pristine scuba resort located on Little Cayman, one of the Cayman Islands. Hillenbrand describes the tropical oasis as “a high end ocean adventure club” operating on a premise of “barefoot luxury.”

Hillenbrand acquired the club in 1995 and has since worked to provide an exemplary environment for those seeking to experience the Caribbean the way it was meant to be.

Founded in 1958, Southern Cross Club originally existed as a secluded, low-key beach resort. “My idea was to take this little, beautiful beach bum resort and try not to change that beach bum feel but offer a higher degree of service, food quality, et cetera,” says Hillenbrand. “If you want to see the Caribbean the way it was meant to be seen, Little Cayman is probably the most accessible island in the Western Hemisphere for you to do that.”

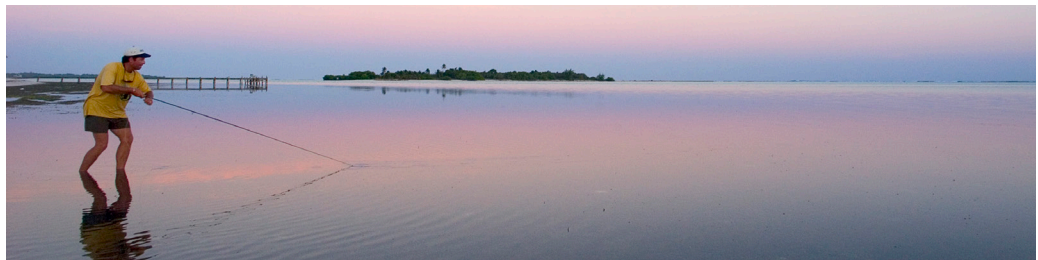
Indeed, Southern Cross Club offers its own brand of barefoot luxury to its guests, many of whom return year after year to enjoy the pristine sands, gorgeous ocean, beachfront bungalows, delicious food, and one of the healthiest and most beautiful ocean reefs left in the world. According to Hillenbrand, the unspoiled beauty of the resort is

one of the features that make Southern Cross Club so unique. “I would love for the grandchildren of my guests to still be coming to Little Cayman and be seeing exactly what it is that their grandparents saw.”

One of the ways Hillenbrand is working to make this dream a reality is by ensuring that the resort operates sustainably. “We do a whole bunch of things that mean we lessen our impact on the environment,” he says. “We are not an eco-lodge and have never tried to bill ourselves as one, but we do a lot of things that help maintain the sustainability of the resort so we can have the smallest footprint possible.” Almost all of the Southern Cross Club’s hot water is solar heated and the Club is Green Globe Certified.

“Keeping things smaller, more sustainable is maybe not the best for the bottom line but it’s definitely best for the experience of the way that environment is supposed to be.”

Before he took over Southern Cross Club, Hillenbrand earned a bachelor’s in biology and was looking into graduate marine biology programs. “I’ve always had a very keen interest in marine science and marine issues. I’m a lover of everything in, on and under the ocean,” says Hillenbrand. “That gene that makes some Indiana farm boy like all things ocean I got from my dad.”



Buying the Southern Cross Club was only the beginning however. In 1997, Hillenbrand was introduced to Dr. Carrie Manfrino, a marine geologist, and together they began work on the Central Caribbean Marine Institute (CCMI). “We met by chance in 1997 and started talking about bringing her marine ecology classes to Little Cayman and that’s when we slowly started to get involved,” says Hillenbrand. Though Hillenbrand credits Manfrino for starting CCMI, he says “I’ve been involved since day one and helped raise money to build the institute and I’ve been the chairman since it was formed.”

CCMI performs important work in the field of marine research as well as marine education in Little Cayman. The Institute boasts Prince Edward of England as its official Royal Patron. “He’s actually very well versed in ocean issues. He’ll sit there and talk to you about the issues affecting the ocean right now. His interest is genuine. The ocean, and what she means to this planet, is just an issue he’s had an interest in for a long time,” says Hillenbrand.

“He does an event with us once a year. For the past five years the event has been a dinner at either Windsor Castle or Buckingham Palace in London. It’s a fundraising event where we ask people to come

and help support the Institute. It’s always a hugely fun dinner. You’re eating dinner in a museum that people happen to live in.”

CCMI is a 501-c3 not for profit business in the US, and also a registered not for profit in the Cayman Islands and the United Kingdom. CCMI has recently undertaken an ambitious development program to improve the facilities, classrooms, and research equipment available to the scientists who study Little Cayman’s thriving reef. Hillenbrand sees both Southern Cross Club and CCMI as essential components of maintaining this ecological wonder. “Hopefully Little Cayman, between CCMI and the Southern Cross Club, we’re going to be able to sustain the coral reef to the best possible degree so that our grandchildren can experience what we’re experiencing,” Hillenbrand says.

For now though, “Southern Cross Club allows you to enjoy the pristine environment of Little Cayman and really experience just how amazing living the barefoot luxury lifestyle can be.” ❖

Southern Cross Club can be reached at 1.800.899.2582 or visit their website at www.southerncrossclub.com.