

There was no sense of place quite like Coco Palms. Nothing short of a historical legacy with celebrity status, this resort hotel sentimentally dwells in the hearts of many. Symbolizing a magical era that intermingled fantasy, fun and Hawaiian cultural awe, Coco Palms is finally celebrating the advent of a new phase.

Dilapidated ruins now occupy the once lively grounds of the Coco Palms Resort. With the strike of hurricane Iniki in 1992, this Polynesian paradise underwent a disastrous loss. Ever since, hopes to restore the hotel back to its renowned character have been proposed in numerous development plans through the years, but all attempts have failed.

Until now, that is. Coco Palms Hui, LLC, has taken the reigns to preserve this cultural cornerstone. Managing partners of the company, Chad Waters and Tyler Greene, have intentions of upholding the iconic tradition of Coco Palms that marked a distinct phase in Kaua'i history.

“With its historical significance, our hope is to restore Coco Palms to its original glory, and offer a true place of aloha,” Greene explains.

COCO PALMS HOTEL

Reviving a Legendary Classic

Reigning over the resort as a queen would, Grace's workhorse spirit paired with authentic love and care for people (both staff and visitors), emanated a magnetic atmosphere.

Bob Jasper, storytelling tour guide of Coco Palms for 18 years, as well as the current property manager, describes "People just loved Grace—her employees were like family. She was brilliant, and knew exactly what the guests wanted."

Besides remembering everyone's name, Grace was committed to enlivening a Hawaiian experience at the resort. She wanted her guests to see and honor the local culture, which she was personally devoted to. Grace employed all local people, including singers and musicians, to create this raw ambiance.

Torch lighting ceremonies became a Coco Palms novelty—coveted by other competing hotels at the time. As a 'call to feast,' the conch shell was blown, the drums pounded and the torch runners lit up the lagoon while sprinting their route. People gathered, lining up in wonder, as Grace's voice chanted a self-authored legend in the background.

Before torch lighting ceremonies, intimate cocktail parties, water buffaloes, endless weddings and Elvis were the norm, the land known as Coco Palms was long ago governed by Hawaiian royalty. Queen Deborah Kapule, alone after her husband Kaumuali'i (the last king of Kaua'i) was kidnapped to O'ahu, ran a classy hotel near the present day resort, and built the famed lagoon on the property. Myth has it that the queen's spirit meanders at night, still protecting her home.

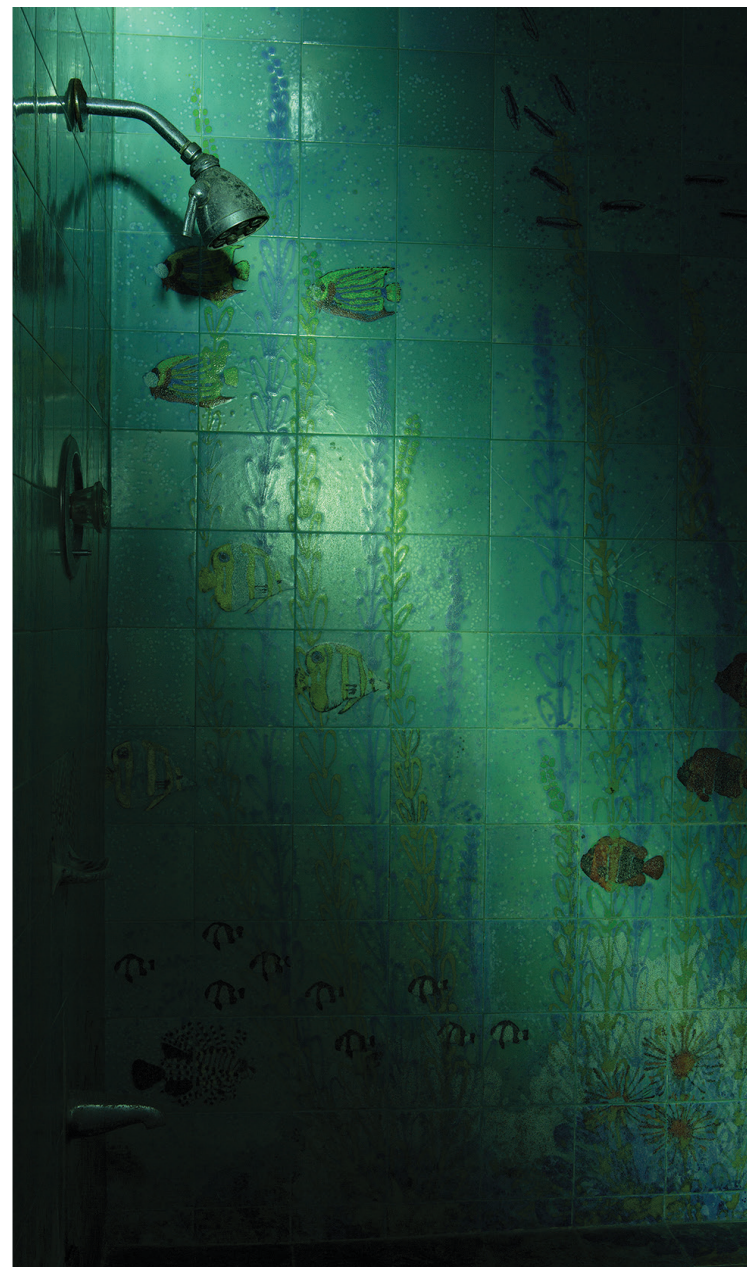
Subsequent to Queen Kapule's death, the Coco Palms site became the largest coconut grove in the entire state of Hawai'i. Still upholding this reputation, the grove contains 2,000 palms. Planted in 1896 by a German fellow, Mr. Lindemann, these coconut trees became the focal point of a noteworthy Coco Palms tradition.

Throughout the property, coconut trees were planted by celebrities, musicians and even Japanese royalty. Plaques denoted these personalized plantings, some of which survived the hurricane.

The true picturesque Coco Palms began to evolve in 1953, when the famous Grace Buscher arrived to manage the hotel. Conveying the story of Coco Palms is impossible without emphasizing Grace's idolized notoriety. Many people describe her as "she was Grace," to depict her distinct, and somewhat quirky, personality.

Grace was hired by Cornell-educated Lyle, or "Gus," Guslander, who found Coco Palms listed for leasing (with the option to buy) in the Honolulu Advertiser. Formerly a modest hotel maintained by the widowed Veda Hills, Gus intuitively knew the potential for the future success of the hotel, despite its location on a desolate, outer island.

Impressed by Grace's charisma, intelligence, work ethic and previous experience as a hotel manager, Gus formed a significant relationship with her. This relationship, which later evolved into marriage, allowed the foundation of Coco Palms to fully emerge.



A nightly ritual, this led to a resort-wide dispersal for dinner. Guests had their choice of seven different restaurants, including the Lagoon Terrace Lounge, the Flame Room, the House in The Palms, the Coconut Palace, the Seashell, the Earl of Sandwich in the lobby or the outdoor bar and grill at the Queen's Pool.

Hosted by Grace, exclusive cocktail parties were a usual occurrence at the House in The Palms. Personally selected guests would find invitations tucked away in their rooms—reserved for VIP's like honeymooners, travel agents and returning guests. For dinner, Grace would further select her favorite patrons to join her, on the house, at the Coconut Palace. Her prearranged seating arrangements ensured that her favorite people sat the closest while dining.

At Coco Palms, the preferred view was not the ocean—it was the lagoon. Thatched-roof bungalows traced the waters edge, while outrigger canoes and bamboo fishing poles were optional accessories.

Guests with rooms were assigned to either the Shell, Fish or Frog wing of the resort. Lamps made of coconut, and the quintessential giant clam shell sinks—three hundred of which still remain—accompanied theme-specific tile work and decorations, like frog wallpaper. A stuffed leopard, found in one of the suites, was not out of the question.

There was even a water buffalo. A gift from Gus, the buffalo was Grace's favorite animal, and a prominent lagoon-side attraction. When the buffalo died in Grace's absence, her fearful employees wired the dead carcass to a tree until she returned to dispose of it. Howler monkeys, gibbons, ducks, peacocks and more created a zoo that added to the unrivaled, distinctive ambiance of Coco Palms.

This festive lifestyle gained worldwide exposure and fame in Elvis Presley's, *Blue Hawaii*. When the film debuted in 1961, Coco Palms became a sought after and internationally acclaimed destination. The filming took place throughout the property grounds. Elvis's romantic wedding scene with Joan Blackman spawned a bursting demand for wedding ceremonies at the resort. Prior to 1992, over 500 weddings were performed annually.

As the island's social center, Coco Palms continued to achieve stardom, as visiting celebrities and rock stars like



Frank Sinatra, Jim Morrison and Larry Rivera (still a celebrated Kaua'i musician) became commonplace occurrences. In addition to Blue Hawai'i, numerous films were produced at the resort over the years, including the 1970s ABC series *Fantasy Island* and the more recent *Pirates of the Caribbean*, released in 2011.

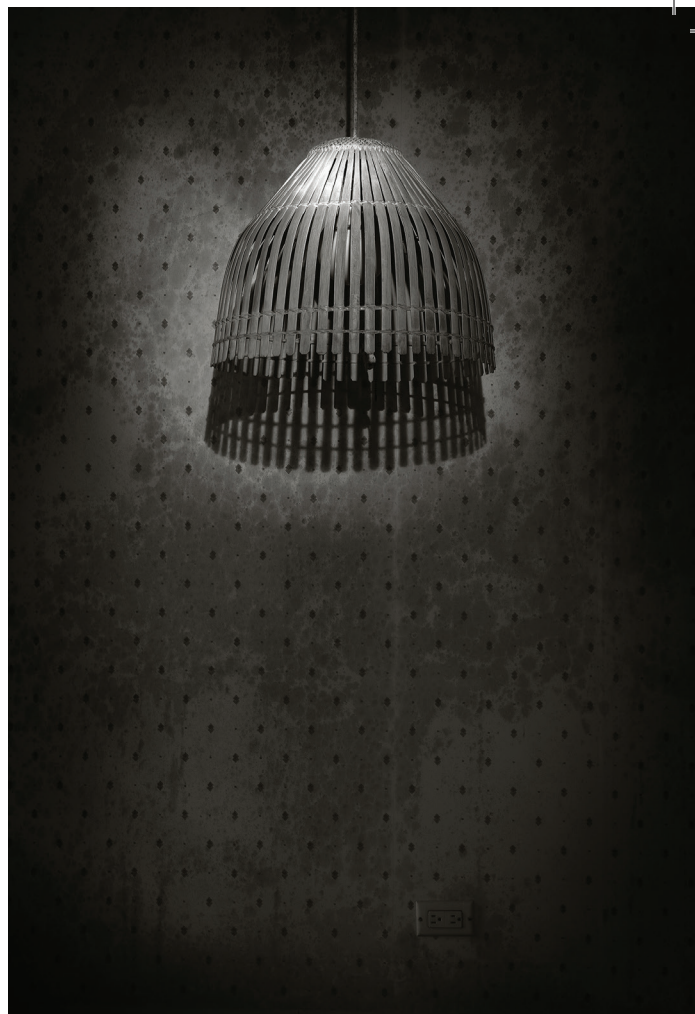
At the root of this prestige, Coco Palms embodied a message of greater proportion. It was about the spirit of aloha, and the people that you met—sharing and savoring life's moments as they passed.

Bob Jasper expresses, "On my tours, I see a lot of people come in here with tears. As past guests say, 'the Coco Palms wasn't the building...it was the people.'" That's the goal for the new owners—the right people. I'm hoping that can be rediscovered."

Coco Palms Hui has a promising vision for the modern revival of Coco Palms. That vision acknowledges its cultural legacy, and there are renovation plans to rebuild the resort to be a near replica of the original.

Scheduled to begin construction in the beginning of 2014, the company plans to renovate all of the buildings that exist on site. With 300 plus guest rooms, they have hopes of offering a fresh, contemporary rendition of Coco Palms—a stylistic cross between 'tropical retro' and 'surfer chic.'

Plans call for the Seashell Restaurant to be completely restored, and also include the possibility of two to four additional restaurants on site—scaled down from the resort's original seven. To signal dinner time, the honored torch lighting ceremony is also envisioned to be reenacted.



Oh, and what about the zoo?

Laughing, Greene playfully says, "That might be a little too much work for us..."

A wide range of clientele will enjoy the classic atmosphere. Coco Palms Hui hopes to attract a myriad of guests like "hipsters from LA to golden age Elvis fans, and everyone in between." The company envisions these diverse guests coming together on a starry night to enjoy umbrella garnished cocktails in a Tiki-lit bar.

"Everything we've heard from stories of Coco Palms is that it was a true gathering place. Everyone felt welcome—it was something different and unique. We want people to feel comfortable and invited here, and create lasting memories," Greene explains.

Welcoming both the local residents of Kaua'i and visitors from around the world, Coco Palms Hui is also interested in providing community focused cultural events. In addition to weddings and lū'au, some of their ideas include hula, 'ukulele and Hawaiian language lessons, movies in the grove, a summer concert series and a cultural museum. They would also like to implement a tree planting program in the grove.

With the goal to complete renovations by the middle of 2015 or the first part of 2016, the future of Coco Palms seems to have landed in the right lap. Remaining devoted to its authentic essence ensures the aloha spirit will prevail, and shine on for eras to come. ❖