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Luxury in the key of green

by Bob Tis

One in a series

Harith Wickrema is not delusional. He just finished a four-plus years construction marathon to develop Eco Serendib Villa and Spa, a palatial and opulent 8-bedroom villa, retreat and mini conventioncenter on a mountain on the south shore of St. John. Now he remains busy talking about reducing our carbon footprint.

And he is serious about it!

The noted international event planner and adjunct professor at Temple University (he teaches sustainable tourism) is very proud of the 69 solar panels on the top of his state of the art villa and the 30+ green products that were incorporated in the new edifice. The first weeks of November found Harith (which actually means "green" in Sanskrit) busily showing off the villa to writers from glossy international magazines like Islands, Coastal Living and Caribbean Travel + Life—in just this month alone. When the villa officially hits the market it will rent out at \$7,000 a night in high season--the most expensive game in a town with very expensive games.



So is this man the latest incarnation of St. John's own Stanley Selengut, the father of eco-tourism? He talks the talk, but as a relative newbie on St. John, Harith admits to having never heard of the man who developed the eco-friendly tents at Maho Bay and Estate Concordia. He is into luxury.

And for all Harith's talk about the environment, his quest for carbon neutrality, his seed-to-plate food plan, his organic gardens, his larger gutters for better water collection and the Energy Star invention cooking techniques at the villa—all great accomplishments-- he quite modestly will not claim that he is running a sustainable operation. "We are not 100 percent green, we are more about luxury, I will make no bones about that," Harith told the Sun Times.

Eco Serendib doesn't need this article's publicity, really. The idea, the vision, Harith explained, is to show other villa owners on St. John the good sense of green development and after that to inspire his guests in their own lives. "I feel privileged and blessed to be able to call this my home. My vision is to reduce the carbon footprint, to have more trees," Harith said. "Hopefully my guests will take that home with them."

"This is a beautiful island," says Harith, who first visited St. John in the 1980s and remembers being immediately taken by the serenity and low-key vibe of the island. "This is nature at its best."

Harith decided to develop Eco Serendib Villa and Spa into the ultimate 5-star facility to celebrate that beauty and to encourage the movers and shakers in the world to rethink how high-end homes are built.

"I wanted to figure out how to get influential decisionmakers to embrace the green movement," Harith explained. He shrewdly knew that making his guests comfortable

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was the first step. So at Eco Serendib, Harith has created a special sort of Shangri La with a giant dining room, a pool, private spas and soak tubs, Zen gardens, a boardroom, the opportunity to harvest dinner from the garden and an onsite staff, from chefs to spa directors, to attend to the whims of the villa's guests. All of this comes with sweeping views of the Caribbean Sea from Fish Bay to Rams Head.

At every turn, Harith explained, the environment was the first concern. The very large dining room tabletop and the desk in the boardroom? Made from recycled material to very artfully look like stone. The boardroom? Paperless. And the list goes on and on. Harith also made the first large contribution to the Island Green Building Association's Resource Center, which will soon allow builders and residents the opportunity to peruse donated leftover building materials they might not have been able to afford at retail prices.

While this development sounds (and is) a tad lavish, bringing it to fruition was perhaps a bit of a humbling experience, even for the energetic Harith, who says he



can now relate to and appreciate the pitfalls that plague the everyday homeowner on St. John. "Oh we were not even close to what we budgeted, or the timeline," Harith noted. "I would say that every inch of this project was a challenge and I think that is putting it diplomatically." While Harith was very happy to speak about the green movement he was much more reticent to speak of the green (money) necessary to build, run and maintain a villa of this magnitude.

"That is a private matter," Harith said. "I don't want to be known for this [villa], I want to be known for my contribution to the green movement."

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