



Paradise Found

by Julie Clay

SHANGRI-LA. You may be familiar with the fictional paradise first described in the 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton. Those who lived there enjoyed a carefree, harmonious existence and virtual immortality. Nestled on 8.5 acres

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between Tamiami Trail and Old 41 (thanks to a recently completed makeover, now known as *Historic Old 41*), Shangri-La Springs Resort in Bonita Springs has been busy living up to the name, quietly implementing a major restoration of its buildings and grounds over the past number of years. Upgrades are nearing completion and the schedule of events, classes and goings-on is staggering. From yoga, art and dance to healing arts and spa services, there’s something for everyone in search of rejuvenation. It’s also becoming quite the popular setting for weddings and private events. As General Manager and Artistic Director Zawi Borsa puts it, “It’s about bringing everybody together and allowing this property to give back to the community in general.”

From the street, the sign beckons. Turning into the property you instantly begin to catch the vibe. The majestic Great House greets guests out front. Built in 1921 by the Heitman family, the Great House was originally a 25-room hotel designed to house potential buyers of nearby property that they were

In the living room of the Great House is where you’ll find a white grand piano. Several nights a week it’s being played by a local performer, with accompanying musicians joining in on percussion or perhaps electric double bass. Artwork is everywhere, evoking a sense of comfort and home. Zawi shares that following renovations, the Great House will once again be a hotel for guests of special events taking place at the resort.

Wander through, check out the Paper Grotto (which, according to Zawi, the setting is all paper) and out onto the patio, which offers outdoor seating for lunch and dinner. From here you’ll enjoy a view of the courtyard, the centerpiece of which is one of the two magnificent Mysore fig trees (imported from India) located on property. “We have had since the very beginning a focus on art and nature,” says Zawi.

The Long House sits across the courtyard from the Great House. On the Art/Nature night that we attended, the Long House was hosting live dulcimer music by Debo Kumi. There was an art table for kids to make

Zawi recalls, “The original mineral spring dates back to the Calusa Indians. They gathered their water there and used it for ceremonial purposes. It flows out into Oak Creek, which meanders thru our property. It’s been the centerpiece for many owners.” Current chlorination codes prevent use of the pool at the moment, but the pool deck setting evokes a time long past. Zawi assures us that they are trying to resolve that pesky chlorination thing so guests may enjoy the pool.

Further down the property we visited the Hummingbird House, home to Hummingbird Wellbeing Center & Boutique, an independent company operating at Shangri-La Springs. Restoration efforts have brought the floors back to their original wooden shine, and it’s here that a plethora of classes are held including yoga, healing, meditation, dance, chakra balancing and much more. Visit the Shangri-La website for a complete schedule of events and classes.

The Octagon House is just off the courtyard, housing an array of live music and more within its unique shape. Nearby sits Shangri-La’s other Mysore fig tree. Shangri-La President Andrew Sroka remarked during our visit that when the fig trees are blooming the crows descend en masse, making a glorious racket as they consume their feast. As the trees produce more fruit in upcoming seasons, Zawi says, they’re hoping to nab some figs for people to enjoy and have nearby Momentum Brew House make an organic fig beer to be served at Shangri-La. If it’s here, it has to be organic. It all goes back to the very essence of life. Andrew adds, “This is the largest private green space in Bonita Springs. Everything we do here is designed to be sustainable.”

“The organic garden is the base of the entire project, the core of it all”, says Zawi, referencing the fact that from roughly the 1950’s on, Shangri-La Springs has had a focus on health and making its mark as a first-class health resort, even when things like fasting, juicing and a raw food diet were virtually unknown back then.

During our visit we marveled at the garden, overseen by the self-proclaimed “Unruly Gardener” Millisa Bell. Healthy, thriving vegetables, herbs and greens stretched for hundreds of yards. We sampled microgreens, radishes, peanuts, tiny native Everglades tomatoes, and the fruit of the loquat tree. A vast swath of sweet potato vines sprawls across their designated area. An

orchard filled with local and exotic fruit boasts four varieties of bananas, starfruit and an assortment of citrus. In true sustainability fashion, there is also a beehive in the starter phases of producing honey, as well as a building containing several giant worm composting bins. Many flowering plants exist here too which according to Bell, are excellent for beneficial pollinators.

All of this carefully grown, organic yield provides the substance for the Shangri-La kitchen overseen by Chef Pyro Rodriguez. His menu is updated seasonally, offering lunch and dinner ‘farm to table’ fare. He loves being able to just go into the garden and get what he needs to create dishes, listing foods like bronze fennel, Mexican tarragon, passion fruit, guava and dragon fruit as examples. Shangri-La partners with local vendors to bring in organic meat and fish to complement the vegetarian fare.

Fully encompassing their mission of total health, they offer a Dinner Theatre series bringing together art and music along with a delicious organic dinner to round out your evening. Dinner is served in the Art Gallery Dining Room followed by a concert in the Octagon. Scheduled for March 11 is a visit from Lancaster, PA’s Franklin & Marshall College Chamber Singers. “The restaurant itself is a unique experience for two reasons”, says Zawi, “We have art hanging on the walls. And there is a wall of windows facing the courtyard and the Mysore fig tree.”

When you’re situated on a mineral spring it just seems a given that a focus on health and wellbeing was destined to happen. Following Shangri-La’s incarnation as a hotel, a subsequent owner, Dr. Charles Gnau, capitalized on the health aspect by adding a spring-fed pool and a statue dubbed, ‘the



Indian Maiden of the Springs.’ In 1964, the property was purchased by R.J. Cheatham, whose interest in natural hygiene led to improving the property with recreation and health spa facilities. It was at this point the locale was redubbed Shangri-La.

The 1993 purchase by Leo Dahlman brought a sizable restoration with the end goal of developing it into a first-class health resort. His background in historic restoration and hotel management helped to reinstate most of the property to its original magnificence. A pair of longtime conservationists bought the resort in 1998 through the Lama Hana Land Trust to protect its place as a landmark in Bonita Springs. Then things got quiet on Old 41 for a few years, then a good decade or so, and the property went into foreclosure. However, it was not all for naught. In late 2015, major renovations to Old 41 began; all the while upgrades to all things Shangri-La continued to roll forward.

During this quiet time, Zawi says, “We were maintaining and preserving the land. The grounds became certified organic and the gardens were kept active the entire time. The trust came in and saved it from being developed. That was the goal and a success. As time went by they looked at different options for what it could be for the community, and finally in 2012 the public revealed their awe and interest in the property, which led to a push for getting the doors open one day a week,” adding that it took about a year to convince those in charge to let the public in even for that short time. Then Zawi came on board in 2013 as Artistic Director. “The current owners saved it,” she states, “They wanted to preserve it, protect it from being plowed down. The community’s

been supportive and they tell us what they love and what they’d like to see, and we try to make it happen.”

She continues, “There were three of us that opened it one day a week. We charged \$10 to come in and walk around. It grew to where [Facilities Manager] John Domanski took a passion in giving historical tours. He did all the research and developed a tour that we now offer. Andrew gives the tours now.

Soon after they started, people came in saying it would be a beautiful place to do yoga, dance classes, etc. Then lunch started. At the time, we didn’t have a working kitchen. It was all catered in. People wanted to stay and enjoy the grounds. We wanted and continue to be reflective of what the community wants.” And if the community wants yoga, they’ll find lots of it at Shangri-La Springs.

“We have a nice variety of yoga, restorative yoga, free yoga for veterans and service members, etc,” Zawi says, adding, “We have a full-service sauna and a really interesting slow spa.”

Outside of special programs and events, admission to enjoy the atmosphere of Shangri-La is free. And that just lines up perfectly with the Shangri-La vision. Zawi sums it up, “When you get in art and nature you start to realize what life’s all about. It’s a good escape. It’s a great place to come and just get away from it,” adding, “Everybody who walks in here says ‘I’ve been driving by here for 15 years and I had no idea.’ When they walk onto the grounds, it doesn’t matter their background, everyone says they can feel something special. We’re so lucky that it’s still here.” •

Shangri-La Springs is located at 27750 Old 41 Rd. in Bonita Springs. For information, call 949-0749.

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The Spa

developing. It was expanded to 50 rooms by a subsequent owner, Walter Mack of the Cadillac family. Proprietors that have followed, right up to the present, have been more interested in developing Shangri-La Springs as a health resort. Among the Great House offerings, says Zawi, are live painting, lunch and dinner service, a bar, and gift shop. There’s also live music.

laminated butterfly cards, potter Matt Kearney was creating pieces on a pottery wheel, an artist was painting on canvas to music of his own, and a section of floor had chalkboard pieces laid out with a chalk art project in creation.

Behind the Long House you’ll find a rectangular in-ground pool filled with healing water from the nearby mineral springs. As