Meet Emma Ángel: The First Transgender Hospitality Manager in Colombia

Posted by Kwin Mosby | Aug 2, 2023 | Cartagena, Front Cover, Hotels & Resorts, Interviews/People, Tierra Bomba Island, Transgender | 1

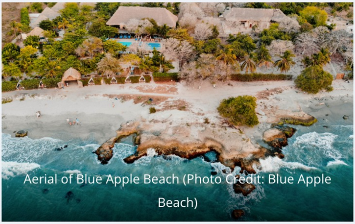
HELP YOURSELF

Emma Ángel, Transgender Operations Manager at Blue Apple Beach (Photo Credit: Emma Ángel)

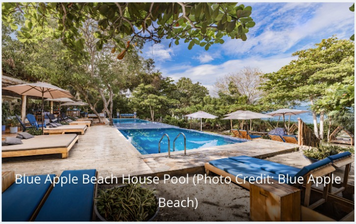
Transgender woman Emma Ángel chats with Vacationer about her journey to stepping into the role as the Operations Manager at Blue Apple Beach and why LGBTQ+ travelers will feel welcomed at the hip beachfront property on Tierra Bomba Island, Colombia.

From the moment a guest walks onto **Blue Apple Beach**, the stress and negative labels of the outside world melt away. Guests, including LGBTQ+ guests, come here to unwind, and relax, but this beachfront oasis on Tierra Bomba, also provides a safe comfortable space that allows guests to be their full authentic selves.

It's that welcoming, inclusive vibe that is the core philosophy of the property and its British-Trinidadian founder Portia Hart. In addition to Blue Apple Beach, the LGBTQ+ ally and entrepreneur also owns the **Amare Beach Club** near the northern tip of Tierra Bomba Island and the **Townhouse Boutique Hotel** in Cartagena.

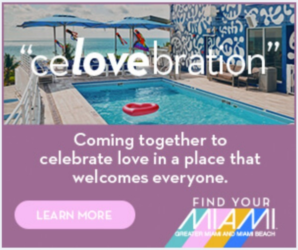


Aerial of Blue Apple Beach (Photo Credit: Blue Apple Beach)



Blue Apple Beach House Pool (Photo Credit: Blue Apple Beach)

Hart surrounds herself with a professional team that includes LGBTQ+ employees, including Emma Ángel, a Transgender woman once Hart's assistant, and now, works as the Operations Manager of Blue Apple Beach. That promotion has put Ángel in a category of her own – the first Transgender person to work as a hospitality manager at a luxury hotel in Colombia. Last year, she received special recognition from LGBTIQ Comercial Campera for her job in the Hospitality Industry and as a human rights activist. Although it's a great step in the right direction, Ángel said it's not enough.



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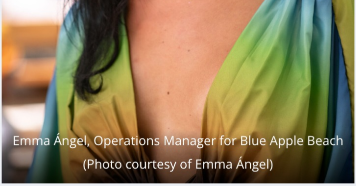
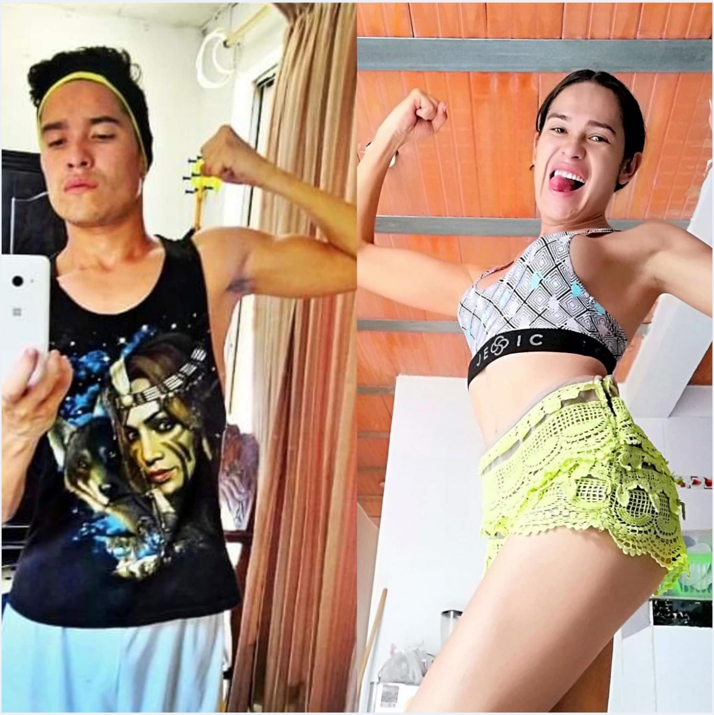
"It sounds nice, but it isn't enough for me because I want to see another person like me, another transgender person, in those high positions because we are talented. We just need people to trust us," she said.

Porta Hart, Founder-Owner of Blue Apple Beach, Amare Beach Club, and Townhouse Boutique Hotel (Photo Credit: Portia Hart / Blue Apple Beach)



Emma Ángel, Operations Manager for Blue Apple Beach (Photo courtesy of Emma Ángel)

Emma Ángel's Inspirational Journey



Before and after Emma Ángel's transition in Cartagena (Photo courtesy of Emma Ángel)

Before Ángel mastered her leadership skills at Blue Apple Beach, she had to navigate and master her personal life first. Her journey started in Morroa, an indigenous Cenú town located in the heart of Montes de María approximately 44 miles south of Cartagena.

"I moved here [Cartagena] 15 years ago because it was a horrible situation in my hometown. The Colombian

AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) circulated *Pasquines* – an anonymous pamphlet distributed to the public or attached to poles and walls – around town saying that they were going to kill LGBTQ+ people, lesbians, gays, etc."

Ángel's mom had bigger plans for her beyond their hometown. To protect Ángel, her mom asked what she wanted to do after high school. She had always wanted to study social communications and it wasn't a field that she could pursue in her hometown. So, she left Morroa not only for safety but also to pursue her dream and attend the Universidad de Cartagena, where she graduated with a journalism degree after five years. Making the move to the city also allowed Ángel the comfort level to come into her own and be her authentic self.

"I discovered myself here. I did my transition here in Cartagena. I also focused on becoming an activist and a human rights promoter at different events and campaigns for the LGBTQ+ community in Cartagena and the Caribbean." An enterprising woman who is always willing to absorb knowledge when and where she can, Ángel also taught herself English by interacting with a lot of foreign, English-speaking people.

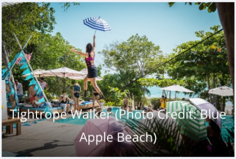
(Photo courtesy of Emma Ángel)

(Photo Credit: Kwin Mosby)

Get into The Blue Apple Beach Vibe

Pina Cabana (Photo Credit: Blue Apple Beach)

Manzana Cabana Interior (Photo Credit: Blue Apple Beach)


Tightrope Walker (Photo Credit: Blue Apple Beach)

Kwin Mosby in the plunge pool in front of the Pina Cabana (Photo Credit: Kwin Mosby)

Garden Cabana (Photo Credit: Blue Apple Beach)

Emma Ángel oversees the day-to-day operations at Blue Apple Beach and she's part of a team that coordinates frequent LGBTQ+ events for both locals and guests to enjoy. Blue Apple Beach features a pool, a main house with five rooms primarily for families, and six bungalows, each with an outdoor shower and plunge pool. Accommodations sleep approximately 23 people, but during the day, the property comes alive with a mix of overnight guests and day-pass visitors looking for the ideal beach escape. The beach club's happy hours are fun and something for everyone especially with the DJ playing everything from soulful Motown tunes to contemporary pop hits.

Expect to see straight and LGBTQ+, families, chosen fam, couples, solo travelers, locals, and tourists converge on this relaxing oasis. Blue Apple Beach can welcome up to 140 day-pass guests per day. For guests and visitors, the beach club's staff can arrange a soothing massage or adventurous excursions such as jet skiing, scuba diving, and snorkeling.

For adventurous explorers, guests can have the team arrange an eye-opening motorcycle tour around Bocachica to learn about the history, culture, and lives of the people who reside in the southern region of Tierra Bomba Island. It also provides guests with some insight into how important it is that Blue Apple Beach maintain special programs designed to stay engaged with the local community to create positive change.

The Green Apple Program & Giving Back to the Local Community

Green Apple Glass Cutting Facility (Photo Credit: Green Apple Foundation)

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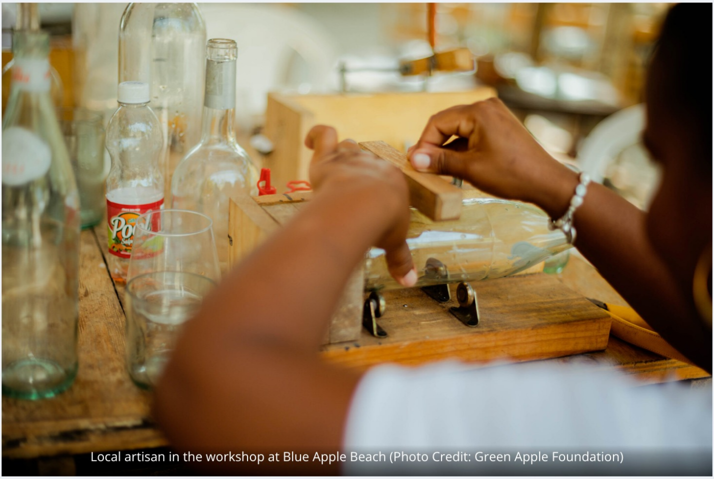
(Photo Credit: Green Apple Foundation)

Green Apple employee buffing a glass cup. (Photo Credit: Green Apple Foundation)



Local artisan in the workshop at Blue Apple Beach (Photo Credit: Green Apple Foundation)

One of those special programs, **Green Apple** is a not-for-profit social enterprise dedicated to implementing long-lasting change in the way waste and natural resources are managed by the hospitality industry in the city while creating long-term, dignified employment opportunities for the local community. Green Apple started Cartagena’s only glass recycling center and some of the crushed bottles are into sand for building, landscaping, and décor.

In a new onsite workshop at Blue Apple Beach, a group of female artisans from Bocachica creatively transform some glass into lamps, souvenirs, and glassware which you may spot at five local restaurants.

Green Apple recently received a $50,000 donation thanks to Portia Hart’s delight. The primary focus is “generating new, paid job opportunities for locals and helping them further develop their skills and knowledge.” Emma Ángel was given the chance to blossom from Assistant to Operational Manager, and other locals are getting that same opportunity to flex their skills and grow professionally. Green Apple’s sustainable approach has become a life-changer for the volunteers and staff too!

Different styles of drinking glasses are made from recycled bottles or glass (Photo Credit: Green Apple Foundation)

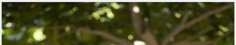
Standing lamp (Photo Credit: Green Apple Foundation)

A lamp created using a recycled bottle (Photo Credit: Green Apple Foundation)

“Working at Blue Apple really changed my mind about sustainability and the recycling project. When I came here and learned everything about Green Apple, and I discovered that part of the job was to be kind to the environment,” said Ángel. “The people who are working for the foundation taught me, being a native from here, how I can change things in my apartment to improve the environment… just by making positive changes in my house.”

She added, “I am now a volunteer at Green Apple. I love it and people love it! We are changing a problem into an opportunity to improve the economy, create jobs, and also do something good for the planet!

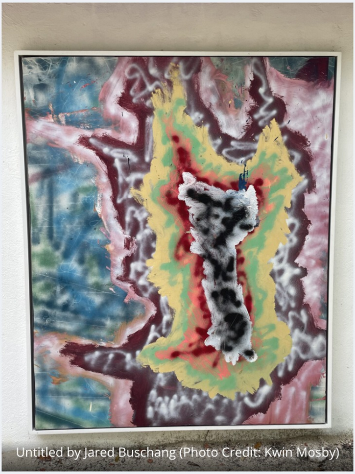
The Local Touch From Art to Food

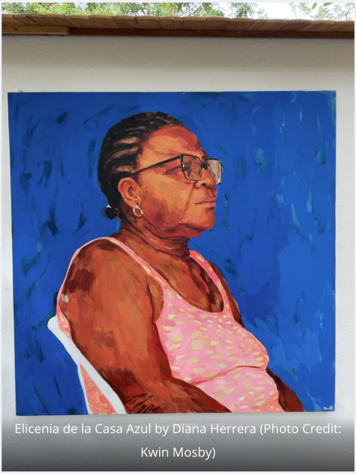


Food served at Blue Apple Beach (Photo Credit: Blue Apple Beach)

Executive Chef Pedro Mosqueda (Photo Credit: Blue Apple Beach)

Seafood Paella (Photo Credit: Blue Apple Beach)


Untitled by Jared Buschang (Photo Credit: Kwin Mosby)


Elicenia de la Casa Azul by Diana Herrera (Photo Credit: Kwin Mosby)

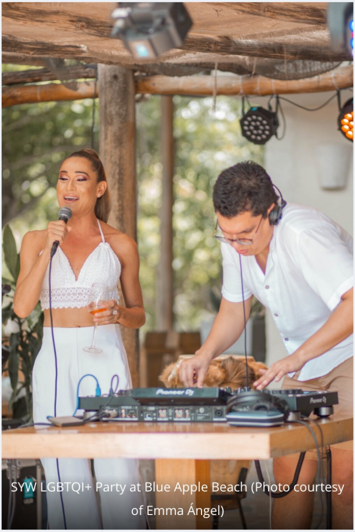
Local artists are reaping the benefits of their work, too! Blue Apple Beach has an outdoor gallery with artwork and assigned individual QR codes. Guests can purchase the paintings or artwork and the proceeds not only go to the artist, but people featured in paintings also receive a percentage of the proceeds as well.

In addition to the Green Apple initiative and gallery for local artists, the food served at Blue Apple Beach is equally important, providing guests with the authentic flavors of all the dishes served from the kitchen, prepared by native Colombians.

“It’s important to mention our food. It’s a presentation about our culture here on the island. The chef and the people in the kitchen are native to the island, so they use elements and ingredients with special flavors, making simple preparations to elevate the food to A-list dishes,” said Ángel.

The onsite kitchen has been graced by guest **Chef Kristen Kish** and others. A few must-try menu items prepared by onsite Chef include the Roasted Cauliflower, Pork Springs Rolls, Penne Al Crema de Pesto, Tagliolini Con Camarons, and the Cartagena Mule. Click **here** to check out more of the menu.

Welcoming All – Including the LGBTQ+ Community



SYW LGBTQI+ Party at Blue Apple Beach (Photo courtesy of Emma Ángel)

COME SIT FOR DADDY

Emma Ángel gives a fierce look for the camera at an SYW LGBTQI+ Party at Blue Apple Beach (Photo courtesy of Emma Ángel)

From the food to the attentive staff, guests at Blue Apple Beach feel just like VIP guests. With almost 11 years of experience working in the hospitality industry and tourism, Emma Ángel identifies with Blue Apple Beach's philosophy about service, sustainability, the environment, and the importance of demonstrating inclusivity through LGBTQ+ representation via the beachfront property's staff.

"Just having me in a high position as a manager, people respect me, and I pass that respect on to my co-workers who identify as LGBT, and they pass that on to our guests and customers. It's what Blue Apple is doing daily. Making guests feel happy and comfortable, and also making LGBT people feel important because they are a target group."

You can find out more about Blue Apple Beach on its website and or follow them on Instagram. Click here for more information about their sustainable Green Apple program, too!