

Suburban Chicago company brings Central Park to the high seas

November 17, 2010

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A park full of trees and exotic flowers was planted over the weekend — on the newest of the world's two largest cruise ships. And a suburban Chicago company is the green thumb that made it happen.

Buffalo Grove-based Ambius had only a few days to transform a football field's worth of deck on Allure of the Seas into a lush "Central Park," with some 12,000 plants, pathways and benches under the shade of 57 canopy trees.

The Royal Caribbean ship — the younger twin of megaboat Oasis of the Seas — arrived at its Port Everglades, Fla., home late last week after being built in Finland. Shortly after Allure docked, 60-plus Ambius staffers began loading aluminum modules containing pre-planted sections of the park that had been growing in southern Florida. Allure will start cruising the Caribbean early next month.

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A nighttime view overlooking Central Park on Oasis of the Seas. The same Buffalo Grove-based company is creating Central Park on Oasis's sister ship, Allure, which starts sailing the Caribbean next month.

"It's an elaborate logistics plan, doing the planting, the irrigating, all in a matter of days," said Denise Eichmann, senior project manager for Ambius. The company, which supplies workplace plants, built a Central Park on Allure's sister ship, Oasis, last year.

Ficus, Cuban laurels, southern yews and lady palm trees are peppered among seasonal flower gardens and patches of ginger, ground orchids and colorful crotons on Allure. Three gardeners and a landscape specialist will be on board; one worker's sole job is to monitor the garden traps to make sure Caribbean insects aren't hitching a ride back to the States.

The idea behind Central Park is to create a tranquil outdoor sanctuary — smack in the middle of a massive ship. With the sky as its roof, the park starts on Deck 8 and is surrounded by restaurants and staterooms whose balconies overlook the manicured grounds.

"Usually the only area on a cruise ship where you can lounge outside is the pool deck, but not everyone wants to bake in the sun and listen to Calypso music," Eichmann said. "This is like being in a botanical garden," she added. "You can sit under a shade tree with a book or eat at an outdoor cafe in the park. It's a totally different experience being surrounded by nature when you're out on the ocean."