

Hospitality



Exceeding Expectations

An Interview with Karen Whitt,
General Manager, Regent Palms Turks & Caicos



Infinity pool (left); Penthouse balcony (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Karen Whitt began her career in the marketing/communications industry in Dallas, Texas and studied hospitality at Cornell University in 1999. She was named to her post as General Manager of the Regent Palms in January 2011. Prior to this, she was General Manager and part of the opening team at The Somerset on Grace Bay in Turks & Caicos from 2005 to December 2010. Before joining The Somerset, she spent six years working in Jamaica as a general manager in the hospitality industry.



Karen Whitt

Whitt has served as President of the Turks & Caicos Hotel and Tourism Association for four years, and was named "Hotelier of the Year" in Turks & Caicos in 2010 and 2012. She was appointed to serve on both the Jamaica Tourist Board and the Turks & Caicos Tourist Board. She has also served on the Marketing Committee for the Caribbean Hotel & Tourist Association for the past five years.

PROPERTY BRIEF Situated on the world-famous Grace Bay Beach in Providenciales, Turks & Caicos, the Regent Palms (www.regenthotels.com) is a 72-suite luxury resort where guests will appreciate elegantly appointed suites just steps away from powder white sands and azure waters. The hotel's world-class amenities include a 25,000-square-foot spa, two signature restaurants, a collection of eclectic retail shops, and a gorgeous infinity pool. Visitors can remain active with complimentary non-motorized water sports, tennis, a fitness center, and children's club activities.

What makes Turks & Caicos so special?

The island is small and compact, and there is a feeling of tranquility here you don't find elsewhere in the Caribbean: the product itself contributes to that. The islanders are genteel, and because we're small, we're like an extended family here.

Turks & Caicos is a young and vibrant destination – it's hospitality history is only about 15 to 20 years – and the bulk of it is even narrower, having developed over the past 7 to 10 years.

The basis of our product is the condo-resort business model; large uber-luxury suites as opposed to hotel rooms, which also translates to a high-end luxury demographic. We haven't attracted a number of big brands on the island, although there are a few looking at the island now. People are attracted to the island by the sun, sand, and sea, but once they come here and experience the peace,

tranquility, and beauty of the island and its people, they fall in love with it.

How do you drive service in a destination like the Caribbean?

Service is a key component of a value that drives any company's success. You must first understand your customers' needs and expectations. We're always looking to meet and exceed the expectations of our guests. The tone in the entire destination is of a very high standard – it's all about luxury and five-star service. There are more five-star resorts here than you will find almost anywhere, including

very large destinations.

We cater to an upmarket demographic and their expectations are high. They're paying premium rates and the service standards have to match.

At Regent Palms, we are fortunate to work with experienced hospitality professionals from around the world, who work in concert with the local employees allowing us to remain on the cutting edge of trends and techniques to continually improve service standards. Our staff participate regularly in rigorous and continuous training, and education programs. It's important that even the most seasoned staff members participate in continuing education with orientations and opportunities for growth and development.

Are there areas you're focused on for the future?

At Regent Palms, we're constantly polishing and upgrading our facilities.

This past fall, we did a complete renovation of our swimming pool; we're increasing and enhancing our F&B outlets; and we're doing a major refresh of our main lobby.

We have very high standards throughout the resort, and especially when it comes to the guest accommodations. Although these suites are individually owned, they must follow our set of standards and guidelines, and they're constantly refreshed.

We also relaunched our spa, which is a big part of our operation. We have a world-renowned 25,000-square-foot spa that continues to bring in accolades – for example, this past year in April, *Condé Nast Traveler* named it the number-one spa in the Caribbean.

We constantly introduce new modalities and products so our therapists can stay up-to-date on the latest trends and techniques.

Is the spa truly a revenue generator?

The spa is a destination in and of itself, and yes it is revenue generator because we don't

have a facility that just offers a few treatment rooms and baseline service – we have 17 treatment rooms, a fitness center, a movement studio, a salon, and several specialized treatment rooms, such as Vichy Bath and Zareeba Treatments.

For guests who are really interested in a high-quality spa experience, it can drive them to decide on our resort over another. Aside from the sun, sand, and sea, decompressing and healing are one major reason people come to the Caribbean, and we feel that we do this better than anyone. We don't promote the spa as a stand-alone business, it is part of the resort, however, we do allow outside guests to enjoy the services on a space available basis.

How do you drive revenue in the food and beverage area?

Food and beverage is a tough operation, and the profit margins are slim even if you're doing it well. It's a huge challenge, particularly in the Caribbean, because all of the resources we utilize come from elsewhere, and that's expensive.

That said, our restaurant is ranked as one of the top on the island and, in addition to our resort guests, we attract outside guests to our fine-dining restaurant. We also offer unique experiences with beach parties, and theme dinners such as wine pairing and celebrity guest chefs.

How far do you go with technology?

Our philosophy is minimal technology because we prefer the personal touch. Regent Palms is now eight years old, so we have a lot of repeat guests, and we continue to build on those relationships. However, we do realize that we live in a technological world, so we have adopted certain systems and technologies that enhance guests' experiences, from the booking stage straight through their stay and departure. For example, we have a virtual concierge that guests can contact prior to their arrival to start an electronic dialogue and arrange for all their needs. Despite this, we're finding many of our guests still want to hear a voice over the phone.

What has kept you in this industry for all of this time?

The hospitality industry offers very dynamic career opportunities, and each day offers unique challenges and rewards. I enjoy interacting with people, and touching people in positive ways, whether it be a guest, staff, owner, vendor or colleague. There is nothing better than exceeding someone's expectations, as well as your own. We create memories here every day, and being a part of that is very rewarding. ●