

Above & Beyond

**An Interview with Olivier Bottois,
Vice President of Operations, Ladera Resort**

EDITORS' NOTE Olivier Bottois is a third-generation hotelier who studied hospitality at Cornell University in 1989. In September 2011, Bottois was named Vice President of Operations of Ladera Resort in Saint Lucia. An expert in luxury, his experience includes time at some of the world's most iconic hotels including Hotel George V and Hotel Ritz in Paris; The Connaught in London; and Vier Jahreszeiten in Hamburg. He also worked at The Élysée Palace in Paris as President Mitterrand's private maître d. Bottois moved to the United States with the Peninsula



Olivier Bottois and the luxurious open-air accommodations at Ladera Resort

Hotels Group in New York and then joined Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts where he fine-tuned his leadership and management skills for over a decade. He transitioned into exclusive boutique properties (Relais & Châteaux and Leading Hotels of the World) in the United States and Canada.

PROPERTY BRIEF Ladera (ladera.com) is the only resort in Saint Lucia set in between the Pitons, an UNESCO World Heritage Site. The exclusive eco-luxe resort is on a forested ridge 1,100 feet above the Caribbean Sea, perched on top of the Soufriere volcano. Ladera is the only hotel in the Caribbean ever rated number one in the world according to Conde Nast Traveler's Best of the Best List. Over two decades ago, Ladera pioneered the concept of the open-air, three-walled guest suite that remains its signature design. The only authentic luxury Saint Lucia resort, Ladera prides itself on its handcrafted furniture made by local artisans and fresh local Caribbean cuisine.

What makes Ladera so unique?

The authenticity, sense of place, and genuine and friendly staff are what make Ladera so unique. Everything is handcrafted. We have a well-established property with an amazing open-air concept – the fourth wall is missing in the rooms. We are on the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Pitons, on top of the crater of a volcano. It's all about adventure and experiential travel.

Ladera had been the only luxury property in Saint Lucia for the longest time until five new high-end hotels opened on the island in 2008, which impacted the market significantly.



As a result, it was important to define a marketing strategy to differentiate Ladera in this new market. This has been my role since I joined the resort in 2011.

Where does the property stand today?

Ladera is now positioned as one of the top experiential properties in the world and we are proud to be the only hotel in the Caribbean invited to the exclusive "Pure" experiential travel event in Marrakech for the second year. We are consistently on the top lists of hotels and resorts in the world. To date, we are the only Caribbean resort ever rated number one by *Conde Nast Traveler's* Best of the Best List.

It's now a couples-only resort, so no children. It's all about romance.

I tried to determine what would work long-term, because I believe in consistency and continuity. I thought we should promote Saint Lucians from within to continue creating jobs on the island.

I believe in hiring local talent and promoting from within given the opportunity. It is important to support the local economy and create job opportunities for the new generation on the island.

Is there a similar feel throughout the suites and villas?

It's all traditional Saint Lucian ambiance – everything is locally made tile and wood. All of the employees are Saint Lucians – there are 140 employees and I'm the only one who is not Saint Lucian. This can be a challenge and also an opportunity because you are dealing with a different culture – and Ladera itself has its own spirit, because 80 percent of the employees have been there for 15 to 20 years.

It is rewarding to inspire, nurture, and mentor great people.

A real success story was to promote our long term Chef de Cuisine, Nigel Mitchel, to the position of Executive Chef instead of relocating an ex-patriot, which most hotels do in the Caribbean. I am proud to have taken him to international food destinations such as New York, where he had the opportunity to experience various culinary institutions.

Everything we do is local – all of our vendors are from the local community. We use area farmers and fishermen to supply our award-winning restaurant, Dasheene. Also, by hiring only locals, we keep the talent on the island.

What is the restaurant's focus?

We focus on fresh local cuisine, and our Dasheene restaurant has been in operation for 30 years. The team in the kitchen have all been there for at least 10 years.

We used to bring in chefs from England and the U.S. who would stay a few years, then leave. In reality, the chefs we bring in from outside don't know anything about local products and they don't know how to use these products as well as my local team. This is why I promoted our local chef and now I only have Saint Lucians in the kitchen.

We have a very talented culinary team that is invested in constantly evolving Dasheene. We support their travel overseas to gain exposure to the world's best restaurants. They have done a great job adapting the best of these experiences to our local Caribbean cuisine.

People come to Ladera to experience Saint Lucia, so that's what we give them. ●