

Hospitality

The Best of the Caribbean

Interviews with Gordon “Butch” Stewart, Chairman;
Adam Stewart, Chief Executive Officer; and Wayne Cummings,
Director of Business Processes, Sandals Resorts International



Sandals LaSource in Grenada

COMPANY BRIEF Sandals Resorts International (sandals.com), founded in 1981, is based in Montego Bay, Jamaica and owns and operates 15 couples-only, Luxury Included® resort hotels in the Caribbean. The resorts are located in Jamaica, Antigua, Saint Lucia, Barbados, Grenada, and The Bahamas and offer upscale amenities such as gourmet à la carte dining and activities including scuba diving and golf. The company also owns three resorts under the Beaches brand name in Negril and Ocho Rios, Jamaica, and in Providenciales, Turks & Caicos. Beaches Resorts caters to families with Kids Camp programs, Xbox® 360 video game centers, water theme parks, and nanny services. Beaches is also home to the Beaches Resorts Caribbean Adventure with Sesame Street, which brings kids’ characters Elmo, Cookie Monster, Grover, Zoe, Abby Cadabby, Oscar the Grouch, Big Bird, and Bert and Ernie to the resorts year-round for daily activities and special stage shows. The most recent addition to the portfolio is Grand Pineapple Beach Resorts, open to both families, couples and singles. It’s all-inclusive and covers accommodations, meals, snacks, unlimited drinks, watersports, and entertainment.



Gordon “Butch” Stewart

EDITORS’ NOTE “Butch” Stewart founded Sandals Resorts in 1981 and Beaches Resorts in 1997. He was born in Kingston and educated in Jamaica and England.

You have taken “all-inclusive” to a whole new level around the luxury theme. Is that well understood?

There is much discussion about the rise of luxury all-inclusives, but we actually introduced our Luxury Included concept in 2007. We are the brand leader; the ones to watch and the competition does watch us, but the fact is that imitation is not innovation. Exceeding expectations remains the philosophy that drives everything we do. As a result, we are extremely critical of ourselves. Literally, every day, we look to make our resorts better and I can honestly say that we have never taken shortcuts.

All-inclusive resorts are not the same. There is a Sandals difference. Our product starts with the real estate. We are known for having the best beaches in the Caribbean. If it doesn’t have a good beach, we’re not interested. And we include more quality amenities and services than any other resort on the planet.

Scuba-diving, for instance, is included. Our boats are manned with captains and crew that are trained to the point where the PADI organization recently recognized Sandals for being one of five best scuba operators in the world. We’re also probably the largest scuba operation collectively in the Caribbean.

In terms of food, nobody provides the number of restaurants per person that we do.

Our suites, particularly at the butler level, are spectacular, private enclaves with high-end design treatments and infinity edge pools.

It’s really about daily, dedicated attention to details. I don’t know how many organizations offer something like wind surfing

where, if you’ve never done it before, we instruct you for free and in 20 minutes, you’re almost an expert. This goes for everything we do.

Some people love boats. In the old days, we used to have special wooden boats with glass bottoms. Today, our boats are fiber glass and every piece of equipment onboard is top quality. Additionally, the crews are literally trained in a military style; anything can happen when you’re at sea and we have to be prepared for it.

I am pleased to say we are always improving so that, in some ways, we have left the competition behind. Anything to do with water sports or land games or gardens is our specialty. There are no other botanical gardens of the quality that we have at Sandals. The gymnasium, the spas, the restaurants, and the food are all top of the line.

Service is also paramount and reflects the warm Caribbean hospitality tradition of the region. Staff members receive rigorous training in concert with Sandals Corporate University, which is committed to their professional development in partnership with 13 top-ranking accredited institutions of higher learning.

Every day, people are in awe of how far all-inclusive resorts can go in terms of the overall quality of the inclusions, from the selection of great food to the level of accommodations, and we are working hard to make sure that message is becoming better understood. We have come out with a whole new marketing program encouraging audiences to take a look closer at Sandals Resorts.

We place a strong emphasis on the operations side, the marketing side, and the standards that we always have to maintain. Cost is also a major factor, so we have to be efficient. But our team is very well coordinated and most people have been around for a long time. On top of that, we’re friends. As a hotel business, work doesn’t stop when it’s sunset – in many cases, that is when it starts.

I’ve always tried to stay ahead of the pack, but I’ve also made relationships within the industry – most of my competitors are great friends and I get on fine with them. We welcome smart development in the region, which is good for the people and the countries where we live and operate, and we have never been insecure about our product standing up to any competition. Our numerous awards stand as a testament to the quality of our product, but these things are not achievable unless they’re done by people who love what they’re doing, and we do.

If I’m staying at my villa in Montego Bay, the first thing I want to do when I get up in the morning is to take a swim on the largest private beach in all of Montego Bay. I do it in the Bahamas, Antigua, Turks & Caicos, St. Lucia, Barbados – if I get up in the morning and the weather is gorgeous and I haven’t been up all night, I am going to swim. The salt water is medicinal. I spend more time in the Caribbean than anywhere else. It just happens to be the prettiest and nicest, and it has the most exotic and clearest waters with interesting communities island by island. They’re all democracies and it’s a great world where people are enriched by each other. The community life and the island life is wonderful. People may say that we in the Caribbean are too laid back but that is what we’re promoting. We are the Caribbean and we care deeply about our guests, about our Caribbean home, our employees, and our neighbors. We are here to stay and we are committed to getting better and better. ●



Adam Stewart

EDITORS' NOTE Adam Stewart has held his current post since November 2006. Stewart oversees all areas of operations for the Caribbean resort empire founded by his legendary father Gordon "Butch" Stewart. Prior to becoming CEO, he was Director of Resort Product, responsible for all on-property operations and revenues across the company's three major brands: Sandals Resorts, Beaches Resorts, and Grand Pineapple Beach Resorts. A member of the Sandals Resorts International Executive Committee, Stewart also served as Chairman of the Sandals Youth Committee and is currently the President of the Board for the Sandals Foundation, Inc. He was raised in Jamaica and graduated from

Florida International University's Hospitality Management Program before implementing his knowledge in various departments within Sandals Resorts International.

Would you talk about what has made Sandals so special?

There are many reasons. Our properties are ultimately real estate investments and resorts that take care of people. When you look at the motivation for people to get into the real estate industry and the reasons to get into the resort/hospitality industry, they should be very different.

There are many people who get into our industry backed by pension funds looking for long-term assets and returns on the real estate. They hire a management company, but the asset is owned by some form of holding company that is looking for 30-year returns. They're not invested in the resort, nor in the people who work and stay there. They're interested in a balance sheet.

Sandals is a unique company in how it's held. We are the owner of the asset and of the management company, so we work together. Our family's vision has never been to have 500 resorts – it has always been to have the best resorts in the Caribbean. Whenever we can take that dream to a new island or destination, we do it.

We all walk around our properties everyday with the ambition of continuing to evolve the company and bring in what is new. That is our mandate.

Sandals has taken all-inclusive to a whole new level with providing that high-end experience. Is the market beginning to understand that?

It's beginning to. We believe in a genuine five-star experience where everything is included, so there is no up-charge restaurants, no tipping, and no hidden taxes – even your transfers to and from the property are included.

For decades, the all-inclusive sector has suffered from the perception of midnight buffets with no à la carte service or fine dining. Our vision at Sandals is genuine international five-star standards in an environment where everything is premium and part of our all-inclusive setting.

We believe this is the right model and it's proving to be very successful. Our customers are growing up with us and those new discerning customers, the younger generation that grew up with the Internet, can go to Trip Advisor and get third-party endorsements that you may spend more money at a Sandals, but you certainly get what you pay for.

Would you touch on the impact Sandals Corporate University has had?

When we were about to hit our 30-year anniversary mark and had enjoyed three decades of success, there was a lot of competition from those pretending to be as good as us. But we're a Caribbean-owned entity and we know our region best because we're from the area.

To ensure the longevity of our organization, we had a brainstorm to take our training programs, which were miles ahead of any of our competitors, and form a corporate university that partnered with the best hotel schools and training institutes around the world. We take their theories and marry them with the lessons we have learned in the Caribbean.

Around 4,000 of our 13,000 staff have enrolled in the University and earned certificates, and are now on a growth trajectory to become the best they can be with their particular skill sets.

We say to our guys, let's round you out – let's put you in positions you never thought you could hold, and what you're looking for is their given talent. When they find it, that employee becomes a superstar. It's about putting the right people in the right positions. Our focus on team member development is one of our greatest strengths. ●



Steven Wayne Cummings

EDITORS' NOTE Steven Wayne Cummings began his career at age 19 with Sandals Resorts International as a Management Trainee at Sandals Montego Bay. Specializing in Rooms Division, he gained hands-on experience in Housekeeping, Laundry, Front Desk, Reservations, and Maintenance across Sandals' Jamaican Resorts. He has significant experience in the refurbishing and opening of hotel properties, having spent time focusing on construction at resorts in Jamaica and in the Eastern Caribbean, and with the Projects and Development department of the corporate offices. Cummings earned his M.B.A. in Hotel and Restaurant management and holds numerous other certifications.

What is the secret to Sandals' success and what makes it so special?

It starts with believing that we are truly a team – and we're driven by a leader who pretty much has endless energy. Butch Stewart (Founder) is amazing – he works harder than the rest of us and he's a good role model for us to look up to.

When we talk about development over these past 35 years, training has factored very high on our scale of things to do. Competition is all around us; everybody says they're like us, but we pay detailed attention to getting our business done and doing it well.

I'm in my 25th year with the company and, when you look at the management team generally and the people behind us, it's clear that longevity is the name of the game for us.

But we have also looked outside of our company for assistance, and for motivation and inspiration. I'm just one example of this. When I was young, I was sent to work with Omni in an internship; we, in turn, have since approached Fairmont and invited their people to an exchange program. If you can develop partnerships with others who are not necessarily competing head-to-head with us, we can do valuable exchanges without having to deal with any suspicions.

We still had to do a lot of original thinking because we knew that we had to break the mold of what people thought of as an unrefined type of business. We have pushed the product year after year into the luxury space and it has served us well.

What kind of standards have you put in place and how critical is it to have metrics to track your efforts?

The corporate office for Sandals Resorts International creates the standards for all brands: Sandals, Beaches, and Grand Pineapple. Each of the divisions – rooms, food, water, sports, security, etc. – are headed by a group director. Each of them are at the top of their game, and those SOPs under which the various departments run are developed by them and rolled out to the teams below.

As we have gotten bigger, it has become clear that things have to be done in a more systematic way with refined standards. When we turned 30, we launched the Sandals Corporate University.

We mapped out our COMPASS system, which is the competence assessment system. Job functions are aligned with our educational training system. We have been able to map this system out in such a way that our management and department heads are able to deliver exceptional training programs to team members.

Previously, many team members lacked certification. Even though we were doing the necessary training to uphold property standards, self-actualization is necessary for an individual to remain engaged and moving ahead with their own personal growth and development in tandem with the company's growth and development.

Also, we believe that outstanding customer service is just the minimum expectation. Whether we're looking at centralized procurement management or at the ever-expanding suite of water sports activities that we offer, we're constantly focused on how we can partner with companies, schools, and institutions, and share best practices.

When we founded Sandals Corporate University, we went out to colleges and universities in Jamaica and the region, and presented an attractive umbrella under which people could come and partner with us. This provides a central entry point to address the entire Sandals organization rather than just the individual hotels. In some instances, after learning what we have to offer, these institutions asked if we would take their students for internships because of how we have been able to maintain and grow our quality and delivery standards. ●