



The infinity pool at Regent Palms Turks & Caicos

Enhancing the Strength of the Destination

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

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. Earlier, she spent six years working in Jamaica as a general manager in the hospitality industry. 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 and was recently elected 3rd Vice President.



Karen Whitt

PROPERTY BRIEF Situated on the world-famous Grace Bay Beach in Providenciales, Turks & Caicos, the Regent Palms (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.

How important is it for the Regent Palms to maintain a focus on the community?

Regent Palms is one of the largest employers on the island, so from a community perspective, we are proud and fortunate to employ a lot of the local population.

We're a resort that caters to tourists and to our condo owners, but we also do a lot locally in that we have our spa, our food and beverage operation, and retail operations, so we always want to maintain strong visibility in the marketplace. We also want to be regarded as good corporate citizens that support the community in which we operate. Giving back to the community is very important to us.

Everything that we do enhances the strength of the destination. For instance, when we do an event that is supporting a cause like the Cancer Society,

which we do every year, it that enhances the community and the destination.

It's very important to maintain a strong presence and play our role as good citizens in supporting community efforts.

We tend to focus more of our efforts on education than anything else. We have a local community college here, which offers a very nice hospitality program. I'm on the board of directors for the community college foundation so we want to ensure we're playing our role in mentoring and educating the youth, and integrating them into the hospitality industry.

What is the advantage of Turks & Caicos with so much competition in the region?

There are a number of advantages; it's probably not any one thing. Our airlift is one of the best in the Caribbean and we certainly have a seamless transition. There are nonstop flights from New York, Miami, Dallas, Boston, Newark, Atlanta, and Charlotte, and we're constantly working on new gateways. You can leave New York City at 7 AM and be on the beach by noon – it's that easy.

The U.S. dollar is our main currency, so there is no currency conversion. We have the lowest crime rate of any Caribbean island today, so it's small and cozy. It's not overdeveloped or overpopulated, and the beaches are pristine.

Even when we're in full capacity, because the building and zoning regulations are adequate and well thought out, you don't see beach wars. It's very well controlled and maintained.

When it comes to hospitality, it's a newer destination compared to others that have 30, 40, or 50 years of history in the industry. Ours has only blossomed over the past 10 to 15 years, so our facilities are fresher.

Another advantage is that it's primarily an upscale destination. We have probably the largest concentration of four- or five-star products anywhere in the Caribbean. Many Caribbean destinations offer a few properties that stand out as being five-star attention-getters, but we have 20 or more. So we're catering to a demographic that is more upscale.

People come here to decompress and escape the fast pace of big cities. You're never going to see a restaurant on the island like McDonald's, Burger King, or Pizza Hut. The government doesn't allow that, which is a very good thing. This allows our guests to escape to a tranquil, traditional upscale holiday destination.

It is so difficult to articulate this to anybody who hasn't been here. Travel agents who come

here say we have undersold ourselves. The attitude and tone here is so sweet that you understand the benefit over another destination when you get here and experience the beauty, including the infrastructure, the natural environment, and the people.

For such a quaint destination, we have more than 80 restaurants on the island and the caliber of the food is extraordinary. We have chefs from all over the world. A number of those restaurants offer fine-dining and are very unique. We're quickly becoming known as a culinary destination.

Every November, we participate in the Caribbean Food and Wine Festival, which attracts prominent chefs from different parts of the world, and we bring in winemakers that do pairings and unique presentations with food and wine. Many of our guests, particularly those who have been here before, come back for this extraordinary culinary opportunity.

Nearly every hotel has a flagship fine-dining restaurant, but there are also a lot of local stand-alone options, which are all unique.

From a cultural standpoint, there is almost nothing on the island that you can't find. It ranges from Caribbean to Thai to Indian to Japanese to Seafood to Steak.

Is Turks a year-round destination or is there really a right time to visit?

In years past, Turks, like the rest of the Caribbean, did well predominantly during that winter season high peak.

But over the past three years, the season has spread out into summer and early fall.

Winter peak starts around mid-December and normally runs to the end of April. The shoulder season is May and June, which always did okay but never really well. The summer would then signify a drop and it bottomed out in September and October.

But lately, there has not been a distinct break between the high peak going into late spring – Regent Palms will end 2014, our 10th year in operation, as the single best year in the history of the resort.

I attribute this to the strength of the destination itself and to the partnerships we enjoy with each other and the government in promoting the destination together. Last year, about eight hotels teamed up with our government and the tourism board for a roadshow to the U.S. We set out in unison to spread the message about our remarkable destination and all that the Turks & Caicos Islands have to offer. Clearly, this effort, coupled with all the individual and collective efforts, has led to extraordinary success for each of us. ●