



A Trendsetting Destination

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



Swimming pool overlooking white sands beaches (above); the lobby (left)

EDITORS' NOTE Karen Whitt began her career in the marketing/communications industry in Dallas, Texas and studied hospitality at Cornell University. She was named to her post as General Manager of the The Palms in February 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. 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.



Karen Whitt

PROPERTY BRIEF Situated on the world-famous Grace Bay Beach in Providenciales, Turks & Caicos, The Palms (thepalmstc.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 is the property positioned in the market today?

I joined the Palms in February of 2011. The senior management team is the same team that I put together at that time and we're all still together. It was an evolution from the time that Steven Pan bought the brand, and we developed into a different mold and now we have matured into our own.

Even since the September transition, we have received other accolades. We have been managed by Regent going on four years and there has been an alliance, and we have worked very much with them.

Has the market caught up to the supply when it comes to air-lift within the community and how strong of a market is Turks & Caicos today?

We're a leader in the region. We're very serious about tourism and hospitality. Statistically, it's shocking to know that we only had two flights a day to the destination; today, we have an average of 12 to 15 flights a day, and up to 24 flights on Saturday. The growth has been exponential. Our airport has also been recently expanded.

There is some room for growth. However, we're not looking to be a mass market tourism destination. It's not what we were founded on nor the direction we're headed in. We're a low-density destination and we don't ever want to outgrow to the point where it impacts who we are and what we founded ourselves on.

One of the trends we, as a community, are looking towards is coastal preservation and renewable energy, and other environmental initiatives. We're looking for more attention and a focus on best practices as it relates to environmental issues.

The other thing we're focusing our attention and efforts on is more efficient and top-notch service. We have a reputation for being high-end but pricey and people are willing to pay for this but their expectations are always high. We have to make sure we're focused on providing cutting-edge service.

Are you happy with where the product is today and are there changes on the horizon?

Turks & Caicos is a trendsetter and we've established ourselves as the top of the chain but we have to constantly be aware of what people are expecting. We have to follow trends and expectations. People are looking for top-notch culinary experiences. They come to Turks & Caicos for amazing beaches, which we're so well-known for, but we have to continue to find solutions to remain not just on par with trends but ahead of the curve.

At the Palms, we are constantly looking for ways to enhance our facilities, and to provide better services because we're hoping to understand the real wants and needs of our guests, and ensure that what we do is relevant.

When we decide to make a change, it has to be relevant to the needs of the consumer.

We're happy with the success we have had and for the staff retention; almost 40 percent of our staff has been with us nearly the whole time we've been in existence.

The product is very special. People are looking for nothing short of perfection so we're always fine-tuning. However, we don't feel the need to change who we are. We have a high ratio of returning guests because they love the experience.

Is it harder today for a GM to find the time to be with guests? Is it tougher today dealing with the shorter booking window?

It's tricky. We were on a fast track for high-tech everything. When we experienced the great economic crisis, it changed the way we do business and now we're in a mode of stabilizing again. We are able to view things differently, and things are starting to make sense again.

The shorter booking window is a challenge. Years ago, we could count on our traditional forecasting. Then we went through a complete dilution of that, but now I see it coming back a bit, and we're finally starting to see something that makes sense in terms of trends.

Today, there is nothing more important than the human connection. As a GM, I have to find time to meet obligations in terms of financial oversight, participate in sales and marketing, and be responsible for budgets and forecasting, and we have very well-qualified revenue managers and a seasoned team of hotel people that have the ability to feed us metrics. We're consuming a lot more information but we're also able to make smarter judgments than we once could.

Still, we're in a people business and it's all about human relationships, and we can't ever lose that. People can go many places but they're coming here for something more, which is the human connection.

What makes Turks & Caicos so valuable as a destination?

I'm very proud of the relationship we have here as a community with each other and that includes all of the people who play a critical role in a guest's experience from when they arrive to when they leave.

I find a dynamic here unlike any other I've seen to the point where we have other regional neighbors telling us they don't know how we do it here. What the tourist board is saying to the world about this beautiful place has to be rock solid and supported by everything we do. ●