

Hospitality



Four Heartbeats

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



The swimming pool of The Shore Club (left); The Palms Turks & Caicos spa (above)

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.

Will you talk about the secret to the success of The Palms Turks & Caicos?

For a 12-year-old property, it's amazing how relevant the design, the architecture, and the service facility are today.

This means there was a lot of thought, foresight, and vision put into the original concept, design, and construction to ensure that the resort reached a level that, at the time, did not exist on the island – it was quite visionary. However, it was created with all of the right mechanisms and foundations necessary to allow us to do what we need to do in terms of providing a world-class guest experience.

Moving on to today, we have a combination of factors contributing to our continued

success starting with the strength in the destination itself. We are one of the hottest destinations in the Caribbean and Grace Bay Beach is second-to-none with multiple accolades.

When I evaluate The Palms as a whole, it's clear that its strength comes from our leadership in the market and from our service delivery.

We recently hired consultants to help us recreate the service culture of all three of our resorts – The Sands, The Palms, and The Shore Club.

They've tailored a specific service-culture program that addresses the needs of our specific demographic but also allows us to provide the type of service that is indicative of and relevant to the Caribbean rather than a cookie-cutter service. It's an intense program, and its creation and execution involves managers at all levels, even line staff.

It started with reimagining the vision and mission statements; creating what we call our four heartbeats that reflect our primary four standards for the property. We then delved deeper into how we want everyone on our team to behave and to be perceived and received by the customer.

This has helped our team in terms of how they connect with our guests. The overall satisfaction scores have skyrocketed due to some really consistent service points. They're pretty simple, but when we have consistency across the board, it makes a huge difference.

Another factor in our success is our ability to adapt to the rapidly changing needs of consumers, be it via technology, design, experience, or offerings – whatever the case, we have a well-seasoned team that can react quickly.

We spend a lot of time studying trends and seriously evaluating our scores from guest feedback. We continually evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the destination in order to remain prepared as a team to stay on top.

How have you positioned Long Bay Beach and The Shore Club?

Long Bay is an amazing oasis. The fact that it's not that well-known is a plus for us. It's a pristine blank canvas where we have the opportunity to create something very special.

Its side of the island has a bit more of an active lifestyle. It's every bit as beautiful as Grace Bay Beach, but the nuances are

slightly different. The water is more shallow on this side; it doesn't have the third largest reef in the world, like Grace Bay has.

It's tucked away in a cove where privacy is a big factor, but there is also opportunity for more activities. For example, there is a big kiteboarding haven on the island and this little cove provides a perfect venue for beginners and professionals. We do some amazing kiteboarding adventure events here, and it's become a rapidly growing sport.

We also have three pools on site, an amazing spa and fitness venue, and strong dining facilities.

In addition, playing off the success of The Palms, The Shore Club has taken those positive attributes and enhanced them. We have 12 years of experience developing a tried-and-true formula and we now have the opportunity to improve upon it.

The investment here into the common space and amenities alone is extreme because our developer is a visionary. He could have cut back on certain aspects of the property but he wanted it to become an icon, so he spared no expense in creating something phenomenal.

Will the three products on the island compete with each other or work together?

All three products are dynamically different. The Sands at Grace Bay is a four-star product so there is a specific demographic that it attracts. It has also been around almost 20-years so it has developed a very rich history. The returning guest ratio is probably one of the highest on the island, if not in the Caribbean.

The Palms is five-star luxury, and what I would consider an icon on Grace Bay Beach with a nice reputation and a good database of clients.

The Shore Club is more of a five-plus-star, and we're reaching for a more discerning client. The rate structure is a bit higher.

I don't see competition among them, but there may be clients who have stayed at one of the properties who love the destination but want to try something different. We're also looking for The Shore Club to reach a whole new demographic.

We have amazing synergy within our own marketing network and between the staff, the management, and the leadership. We can do so much more because we have the economy of scale with three resorts. ●