

Hospitality



Service Culture

An Interview with Karen Whitt,
Vice President of Sales & Marketing,
The Hartling Group



Shore Club (left); Parallel 123 restaurant at The Palms Turks & Caicos (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Karen Whitt began her career in the marketing/communications industry in Dallas, Texas and studied hospitality at Cornell University. She is currently the Vice President of Sales & Marketing for The Hartling Group, which includes three resorts in Turks and Caicos: The Sands, The Palms and The Shore Club. Previously, Whitt served as General Manager of The Palms and was part of the opening team at The Somerset on Grace Bay in Turks & Caicos. 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 BRIEFS Situated on the world-famous Grace Bay Beach in Providenciales, Turks & Caicos, The Palms (thepalmstc.com) is a 72-suite luxury resort featuring a 25,000-square-foot spa, two signature restaurants, a collection of retail shops, and a gorgeous infinity pool. Visitors can remain active with complimentary non-motorized water sports, a fitness center, and children's club activities. The Shore Club (theshoreclubtc.com) opened in 2017 as the first and only resort on Long Bay Beach. The resort features 106 suites, six villas, four pools, three dining venues including a Peruvian-Japanese fine dining restaurant and spacious banquet space.

Where does Turks and Caicos stand in terms of hurricane recovery and what is the message you'd like to get out to visitors?

Turks and Caicos did sustain some damage, but we're very fortunate that we're a much newer destination in comparison to some of the others in the region, so the quality and standards of the construction in most cases is much different.

We were impacted by back-to-back Category 5 hurricanes, Irma and Maria. A large part of the Caribbean did suffer, but it's a very large region – over one million square miles. There are some areas that were impacted more severely than

others, but that only represents 20 percent of a very large region.

We suffered primarily cosmetic damage and this applies to most of the resorts on the island.

We had a massive cleanup so nearly everyone closed for at least two weeks so we could refresh and restore landscaping and repair the cosmetic damage to the buildings.

We worked together as a team and a community. Everyone joined hands and handled the cleanup and restoration very quickly.

Today, one would hardly notice any impact at all. The airport sustained very little damage. Our essential services are completely intact.

Our staff is in good spirits and everyone is excited about welcoming visitors back to the island and instilling a renewed confidence among the traveling community that we're open for business and stronger and better than ever. We need their business. The best thing people can do for the Caribbean region is to travel there.

Will you describe the strength of your properties within the market?

The Palms is 13 years old and is a flagship property on the island. It's a quality, virtuoso property that has received a lot of accolades – we have one of the largest spas in the Caribbean. The reputation of The Palms throughout the years has been one of a top five-star luxury resort.

In 2016, the property underwent an extensive refresh. This past year, we renovated our ballroom, dining room and some of the outside common areas. It's looking more vibrant and appealing than ever.

The Shore Club was developed by the same group that worked on The Palms. The resort is completely different from any other product on the island – it's very chic and hip, but also shares some slight nuances that one might notice from The Palms in that there is a rich attention to detail and use of natural elements like coral, stone, water and fire.

The Shore Club is very amenity rich – we have four swimming pools, three restaurants and three bars. It's on a large plot of land as well. This allows for mixed use in that we have the regular condo resort concept, but we also have stand-alone private villas that are attached to the resort.

We have an amazing visionary at the helm and strong leadership overall, and there is a

synergy between both properties, which allows us to do more.

Will you discuss the service standards that you have put into place for both properties?

A few years ago, we hired a consultant to help us enhance our service culture. There are four primary pillars to this program that are focused on how we want our guests to feel at our resorts and how we want our resorts to be perceived.

We do a very good job at driving home that this program is for all of our employees. It's mandatory that everyone in our group fully participates in our service culture. We emphasize this at orientation and continue to refresh it on an ongoing basis.

We can have the best infrastructure and surroundings, but it's how someone feels while they're here that ultimately makes the experience. We want to ensure that our guests feel safe and are treated with respect.

Guests come here to feel special and our service culture ensures that this happens. Our service principles are very basic and are delivered through a straightforward, fundamental program that everyone can follow at any level. This has led to a dramatic improvement in our customer satisfaction scores and our staff's attitude as well.

What is it about the culture within Turks & Caicos that lends itself to hospitality leaders working so closely together?

We have a very elite team of individuals who, in their own rights, are completely successful and have also done many amazing things throughout the world, but there is a magical camaraderie here that I don't see elsewhere.

We're one big family. During the hurricane, we were in constant communication with each other. Once we got the all clear after the storm, we came together as hoteliers, government leaders and tourist board members to determine how we could work together to make repairs. We were concerned with the message going out to our consumers and travel partners.

Having this relationship of trust with each other and that team spirit helped us accelerate the entire process of getting the island back on its feet much quicker than other regions.

The great thing is that this doesn't only happen during a crisis. We're a nucleus of special individuals that enjoys working together all the time. ●