

## The Caribbean Way

An Interview with Adam Stewart, CD, Hon. LLD, Executive Chairman, Sandals Resorts International

**EDITORS' NOTE** Adam Stewart is Executive Chairman of Sandals Resorts International, the company founded by his father, Gordon "Butch" Stewart, the legendary hotelier who passed away on January 4, 2021. He previously spent more than a decade as Deputy Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of SRI. His efforts have been recognized by numerous hospitality industry awards including being named the 2015 Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association



Adam Stewart

Hotelier of the Year. In addition to his responsibilities as Executive Chairman, Stewart continues his leadership role in the family's extensive hospitality, media, automotive and appliance business holdings, including his position as Executive Chairman, The ATL Group, comprising the Jamaica Observer, the country's leading daily newspaper, and ATL Appliance Traders, a chain of domestic and commercial appliance outlets combining exclusive distributorship of the world's top electronic brands with exceptional customer service throughout Jamaica. Deeply committed to the region, he is the President of the Sandals Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization aimed at fulfilling the promise of the Caribbean community. He was recently appointed to the Executive Committee of the World Travel & Tourism Council. Stewart has been personally recognized as the Jamaica Hotel and Tourist Association's Hotelier of the Year 2015, World Travel Awards' Rising Star, Caribbean World's Travel and Tourism Personality of the Year, and received the Distinguished Alumni Torch Award from FIU and The Gleaner Company's Jamaica 50 under 50 Award. Stewart graduated from the Chaplin School of Hospitality & Tourism Management at Florida International University in Miami. An avid adventurer and lover of the sea, Stewart was inspired to share his passion for the Caribbean and launched the region's premier tour company, Island Routes Caribbean Adventures, offering unique and exciting tour and adventure experiences throughout the region. Island Routes has since transformed from a small island outpost to a multiple World Travel-Award-winning company offering hundreds of adventures in 13 countries. In 2020, Stewart played an integral role in managing the company's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Under his guidance, Sandals Resorts International implemented the respected Platinum Protocols of Cleanliness at

Sandals® Resorts and Beaches® Resorts to ensure guests' and team members' safety. Additionally, he consulted with industry groups, government entities, health organizations and international associations alike for the betterment of the travel industry. His work guaranteed Sandals Resorts and Beaches Resorts was at the forefront of providing a safe and enjoyable destination for international travelers.

**COMPANY BRIEF** World-renowned Sandals Resorts and Beaches Resorts ([sandals.com](http://sandals.com); [beaches.com](http://beaches.com)) has transformed from one brand and one resort in Montego Bay, Jamaica to become one of the most well-known and award-winning hospitality names in the world. With four brands and 24 properties in eight countries including Antigua, The Bahamas, Grenada, Barbados, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Curaçao and Turks & Caicos, and a ninth location coming soon to St. Vincent, Sandals Resorts and Beaches Resorts is the undisputed leader of Caribbean vacation experiences and remains fiercely committed

to the region, dedicating itself to innovative resort development that in the words of founder Gordon "Butch" Stewart, "exceed expectations" for guests, associates and the people who call the Caribbean home.

### Will you highlight the history and heritage of Sandals?

The story of Sandals is one of ingenuity, innovation, and drive. Today, Sandals is one of the most recognizable brands in the world, and it's simply incredible to be part of what my father, the late Gordon "Butch" Stewart, built. The first Sandals – Sandals Montego Bay – opened in 1981, and like so many with the entrepreneurial gene, my father saw the spark of promise and was relentless in his vision to create the Caribbean's first-ever true super brand, and he succeeded. It began with one hotel on one island and over the next four decades and countless innovations – from the invention of the swim-up pool bar to the first-ever Over-the-Water suites in the Caribbean – we evolved into the all-inclusive leader with 24 resorts.

My entire life, my father was on a journey to make the Sandals experience better and



Sandals Montego Bay, the resort company's flagship resort, opened in 1981





*The all-new Sandals Royal Curaçao*

better. And together, we did. Our brand, although perhaps not the largest resort chain in the world, is one of the most well-known, award-winning, and influential. For any brand, this would be remarkable, but for an idea developed in the Caribbean, it is a singular confirmation that what is born in the region can make a global impact. It is a beacon and a continued source of pride for the Caribbean people who have played an enormous role in its continued success.

**Sandals continues to expand with new properties and new markets. Will you discuss Sandals' growth plans and where you see opportunities for the future?**

We always look through a future lens. It's part of our DNA. We are charting forward on an ambitious expansion plan from the debut of our 16th resort, Sandals Royal Curaçao, last year, which represents our eighth destination in our portfolio, to the return of a completely re-conceptualized Sandals Dunn's River, and new developments at Sandals Halcyon, Beaches Negril, Beaches Turks & Caicos and more. But growth for growth's sake has never been our modus operandi; this is about continued reinvention of our best-in-class resort experience and always with a guest and island-first mindset. What is the next innovation of the all-inclusive experience? We believe – and have been preparing for – the idea of getting closer to place. This notion, the seamless marriage of resort to the destination in which it lives, is what has driven us to our latest expansion plans. And our commitment is to our home, the Caribbean. The region is vast and diverse, and no one knows it better than we do. Helping our guests discover it through immersive opportunities and giving them access

to authentically connect to the destination is just the beginning.

**Will you discuss bringing Sandals Dunn's River back into the Sandals family in Jamaica and what guests can expect from the property?**

Sandals Dunn's River was the last project my father and I collaborated on and it has very special meaning to our family. My father grew up on the very beach where the resort is situated and it is also an homage to the natural beauty of our beloved Jamaica. Adored by couples since its initial addition to our portfolio in 1991, Sandals Dunn's River will return as a brand-new

resort, undergoing a thoughtful, top-to-bottom restoration – designed to embrace the essence of Jamaica, its curving rivers, lush forests, and majestic banyan trees – with amenities, accommodations and culinary concepts brought forward by our brand's uncompromising quest for innovation. Debuting in May 2023, the resort will bring to life some of our newest innovations including the addition of brand-new Tufa SkyPool Butler Suites, which will feature glass panels spanning the length of oceanfront balconies, and the Coyaba Swim-Up Rondoal Butler Suites with Private Pools, our iconic, standalone villas reimagined with vast open-air rooftops with water pulled and circulated from natural reserves.

**Sandals has a culture focused on continuous improvement. How critical is this focus to make sure Sandals is meeting evolving guest needs and expectations?**

As a family-owned company, we are driven by exceeding expectations, for our guests and for our team members and for our communities alike. Investing in the future guarantees opportunity – for the Caribbean, for our people and for the brands.

Owning our hotels and being an integral part of the communities where we operate makes a real difference. The ability to move on a dime to make things better and better and treating staff and customers like family has had the biggest impact on guest service, and I think that's the real Sandals difference. We have an authentic and meaningful connection with our guests, some who have enjoyed more than 1,000 room nights with us, which has earned us a repeat rate of close to 50 percent. They are our anchors and our best brand ambassadors.

**How do you define the Sandals difference and what have been the keys to Sandals' industry leadership over four decades?**

The all-inclusive concept, and there are many variations, is the fastest growing segment of the hotel industry and Sandals not only helped



*Coyaba Rondoal Village at Sandals Dunn's River, which will house 12 distinct stand-alone villas featuring a private river pool offering guests swim-up access*





*Sandals Resorts' newest program, Future Goals, repurposes plastic waste and fishing nets lost at sea into soccer goals for local primary school children in Curaçao and beyond*

create that demand, but set the benchmark for best-in-class.

We've always said that although we didn't invent the all-inclusive concept, we certainly perfected it. The key is never resting on our laurels. We were founded by a consummate dreamer who never accepted no; he believed in the power of possibility and that drove his fervor, to not only create a best-in-class product, but to delight and exceed guest expectations.

This legacy comes through today with experiences that continue to up the ante on what it means to be all-inclusive, to fully embrace a destination, its unique treasures, and its people, and immersing our guests in that magic. The programs and experiences commitment to evolve.

**Will you discuss Sandals' investment in its workforce and its focus on training and service standards?**

Generosity is the essence of hospitality. It is the Caribbean way. It's why we invest deeply in education and ongoing training for our people, forge innovative ways to care for the environment, and recognize that the real measure of tourism's success is the ability of Caribbean people to live healthy, meaningful lives.

The Sandals Corporate University was created over a decade ago and has been a vehicle for change within the Sandals corporation directly impacting our 15,000-plus growing team members. The basis of the Sandals Corporate University is equity inclusion for workers of all levels, putting them on a path to success that will result in more employees being promoted from within and climbing the ranks to achieve their goals, regardless of their economic and educational background.

My father, who built one of the only true superbrands to be born out of the Caribbean, had no formal education himself and was incredibly passionate about providing access and opportunity. We knew preparing the next

generation for the industry that is going to be the catalyst for not only Caribbean tourism, but to the development of the region, would be the perfect way to honor him. The Gordon "Butch" Stewart International School of Hospitality & Tourism will be the world's leading Caribbean hospitality enterprise together with two of the finest academic institutions – FIU and the University of the West Indies – who have recognized that together we will achieve more for the future leaders of the Caribbean and across the globe. We're re-imagining, re-inventing, and re-energizing tourism and we're using this new university to act as a source of energy for the entrepreneurial vision and capacity.



*Sandals Dunn's River will be home to Jamaica's largest pool with its design inspired by the natural curves of the Dunn's River*

**What do you see as Sandals' responsibility to the communities it serves and to being engaged in the community?**

The Caribbean is our home, and we bring the same passion and perseverance to supporting its health and the well-being of our neighbors and team members who live, work, play, and

raise families here as we do in exceeding the expectations of guests who visit our hotels. Being part of the community is in Sandals' DNA. Forty years ago, my father began with a policy that each hotel adopted a school. Many decades and labors of love later, that work has expanded exponentially and been formalized under our philanthropic arm, The Sandals Foundation.

When we come to a destination, we create a marriage with the community – from the creation of supply chains that impact everyone from farmers to taxi drivers to the development of programming in schools. Curaçao being a new island for Sandals, we also saw this as a great opportunity to expand our impact. When we opened the doors of Sandals Royal Curaçao, we also announced the launch of our newest philanthropic program, Future Goals – a unique program that turns fishing nets sourced from the ocean and recycled plastic waste into soccer goals for children in partnership with the Netherlands' AFC Ajax professional soccer team and local Curaçao plastic recycling company, Limpi. This program is two-fold, giving children the tools to play a sport they love and, in the process, teaching them about protecting our planet – which truly is a "goal" in and of itself.

**Will you elaborate on the mission of The Sandals Foundation and how the work of the Foundation has evolved?**

What began as a singular promise to give back to the destinations in which we operate is now in eight islands across the Caribbean, with close to 30,000 volunteers and \$79 million invested in projects, touching the lives of over 1.1 million people and counting. The Sandals Foundation is a 501(c)(3) and all costs associated with its administration and management are supported entirely by us so that 100 percent of every dollar donated goes directly towards funding impactful initiatives in three key areas including education, community outreach, and the environment.

Everything we do has meaning. Last year, we identified and initiated 40 projects across the eight Caribbean destinations where we operate to help transform communities and improve local lives. The projects are focused on six vital areas: Conservation Efforts and Tours, Investing in Food Security, Small Business and Community Market Support, Supporting Local Artisans, Music Education and Entertainment, and Hospitality Training and Certification. And we still have so much more work to do.

**Your father, Gordon "Butch" Stewart, was a pioneer and visionary in the hospitality industry. What impact did he have on your life and how is his legacy continuing to impact Sandals today?**

Even with his tremendous professional success, my dad was a family man at heart and my greatest gift was to be his son. Perhaps the most important lesson he taught us was to "give all you have to what you love and never stop." He was magic. A dreamer and a doer who fiercely understood the promise of possibility. I am blessed to carry on his legacy of innovation, and honor him, our organization, and our team members worldwide, not merely by what we've accomplished – although I am very proud of that – but by what we will do next. ●