

Hospitality

A Relaxed Luxury Lifestyle



Regent Palms Turks & Caicos infinity pool at night

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. 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 the past four years and was named "Hotelier of the Year" in Turks & Caicos in 2010. 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 Regent Palms (www.regenthotels.com) is a 72-suite luxury resort where guests will appreciate elegantly appointed suites just footsteps 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.

Turks & Caicos has a number of leading luxury resort offerings. How do you differentiate this property within the space?

Turks & Caicos has the largest collection of luxury properties in the Caribbean – most of the resorts are high-end luxury and all offer a signature fine-dining experience.

Many of the properties are similar– the condo resort model is prevalent on the island so it lends itself to a high standard, and the craftsmanship is impeccable.

Because of this, we must differentiate ourselves through our service standards and amenities, and by providing a unique guest experience.

Being a Caribbean destination, it's all about sun, sand, and sea, but Regent Palms offers much more than that; it's a refined luxury

lifestyle offered at a very high level; it's sophisticated but not stuffy.

We are a 72-unit all-suite property, and although we are considered boutique, there is nothing boutique about what we offer guests. For example, our 25,000-square-foot spa – one of the largest in the Caribbean – was recently awarded "Caribbean's Leading Spa Resort" at the World Travel Awards.

Parallel23 is considered one of the leading fine-dining restaurants on the island and we offer the largest collection of retail shops of any resort in Turks & Caicos.

Our boutique size offers us the ability to provide personalized service, and we are large enough to offer the amenities and services you would expect at this level.

How do you offer a more relaxed Caribbean feel while retaining the service for which the Regent brand is known?

One of our primary objectives is not to eliminate the personality and heartbeat of the Caribbean but to capitalize on that charm and culture, and build on it while maintaining the high service standards that the Regent brand is known for. Continuous staff training and education are paramount to our success. We want our service to be relaxed and comfortable, but it also has to be sophisticated and elegant.

What is your concept for the spa?

The vision is to create a living experience, drawing upon the natural elements of color, sound, fragrance, and movement. Ambiance, lighting, and other textured materials help create a "sense of place" and contribute to the nurturing and healing effects that are the heart and soul of the spa experience. This year we launched a new "East Meets West" theme, combining Asian therapies with Caribbean herbs, spices, flavors, aromas, and color palettes.

For example, the Mother of Pearl Body Polish is an indigenous island experience blending hand-crushed local cleaned conch shells with the choice of an aromatherapy oil. The Asian healing rituals reflect origins of the Regent brand and ingredients of the Caribbean creating an innovative, authentic, and powerful spa experience.

Would you talk about your food and beverage concept? Is that an area where you can be profitable?

Turks & Caicos is on its way to becoming a favorite foodie destination and the island is home to renowned chefs from around the world.

Our primary demographic is from the Eastern Seaboard and our guests are discerning and love fine dining.

Although it's a competitive market, our Four Diamond Parallel23 has become one of the favorite restaurants on the island, not only for our guests, but for locals and other island visitors as well.

Is there a Regent feel when you walk into each property or is the focus on incorporating the local flavor?

As Robert H. Burns, the founder of Regent Hotels, said, "the only thing we specialize in is luxury and the only thing our hotels have in common is the fact that they are all unique."

Because of the geographic location, there is a difference among all Regent properties.

However, the guest experience that we deliver at Regent Palms meets the high brand standards that you would normally expect at any Regent hotel.

Are you training local staff? Is schooling available on the island?

Although there is not enough local population to accommodate all needs, as tourism becomes more important to the destination, we're seeing an increased level of interest in the hospitality industry.

Hoteliers are working together on several initiatives for increased staff training and development opportunities.

Our number one goal is to recruit as many locals as we can and we're even talking with the government about a hospitality school where hoteliers would donate our time to teach courses and prepare students for a career in hospitality.

What can be done to encourage more women to go after leadership roles in this industry?

The demands of the job are intense and although I'm seeing more women assume leading roles in hospitality such as financial controllers, I don't see a lot of women that want to be in the role of General Manager. It's a 24/7 business and it takes a huge commitment and dedication of time.

In a male-dominated profession, a female GM must maintain grace and stamina, and be perfectly composed while possessing razor-sharp business acumen. ●