

Leading a Luxury Caribbean Icon

An Interview with Olivier Bottois,
Vice President of Operations, Ladera



View of the Pitons and the sea from Ladera

EDITORS' NOTE In September 2011, Olivier Bottois was named Vice President of Operations for Ladera Resort in Saint Lucia. An expert in luxury, his experience in six countries includes time at some of the world's most iconic hotels including Hotel George V and Hotel Ritz in Paris; The Connaught in London; and Vier Jahreszeiten in Hamburg. He also worked at The Élysée Palace in Paris as President Mitterrand's private maître d. Bottois moved to the United States with the Peninsula Hotels Group in New York and then joined Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts where he fine-tuned his leadership and management skills for over a decade. He transitioned into exclusive boutique properties (Relais & Chateaux and Leading Hotels of the World) in the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean.



Olivier Bottois

PROPERTY BRIEF Ladera (ladera.com) is the only resort in Saint Lucia set in between the Pitons, an UNESCO World Heritage Site. The exclusive eco-luxe resort is on a forested ridge 1,100 feet above the Caribbean Sea, perched on top of La Soufrière volcano. Ladera is the only hotel in the Caribbean ever rated number one in the world according to Conde Nast Traveler's Best of the Best List. Over two decades ago, Ladera pioneered the concept of the open-air, three-walled guest suite that remains its signature design. The only authentic luxury Saint Lucia resort, Ladera prides itself on its hand-crafted furniture made by local artisans and fresh local Caribbean cuisine.

How would you describe your leadership role for an independent luxury property in 2015?

It is all about people. You are a great leader if people follow you. Trust and respect have to be earned; claiming a title will not automatically generate that. My role is to assemble and lead a team of talented people, which is our greatest asset. It is a priority to be consistent and to create experiences and memories for our guests at all times. As an hotelier, I also have to enhance the long-term value of the resort and generate cash flow for shareholders. I need to make sure that our operation is profitable at all times in order to bring return on investment, and fund operations and ongoing renovations.

What is your leadership style and what makes a great leader?

I am comfortable with a "democratic/participatory" leadership style. My school was Four Seasons where I learned to "involve and include" people in the decision-making process. I like to get a buy-in before making changes and consider brainstorming as a team a "best practice."

I always seek to be a role model and walk the walk, work hard, and stay focused. My role is also to nurture the team and to mentor as many people

as possible. I believe that setting high standards, providing training, giving feedback, and holding people accountable are all important. Recognizing individual and team contributions on a daily basis is also essential, as well as creating a "culture of feedback." Looking for someone doing something right differentiates a great leader from others who only look for what is wrong. Another key quality of an effective leader is the ability to make sound decisions and provide answers to the team in a timely fashion.

How do you spend your time leading an iconic property like Ladera?

I spend a great deal of time training and coaching, and enforcing the standards that I expect, reality-checking those standards, meeting customers, and inspiring the staff who are our number-one asset. Driving revenue is essential. Without cash flow, we are eventually out of business. I personally oversee revenue management, sales, and marketing. It can be tricky to maximize revenue and profitability when managing a small inventory with only 40 keys, so I am very hands-on and make sure "all parts of the puzzle fit."

What are the challenges of running a luxury resort in a remote location?

To reposition a luxury asset in a remote location requires that one has accumulated experience in all aspects of operations, human resources, sales, marketing, and finance. As an independent property, we need to be well-rounded and have the ability to make spot-on decisions on your own without corporate support. My prior role as an asset manager in Canada was helpful to that.

I made a bold move here by deciding to promote from within for all supervisory positions at the resort after expatriate contracts expired. A policy of hiring local people with

great interpersonal skills and training them accordingly brings consistency and stability for the resort long term. Ladera has one of the lowest turnover rates in the industry, not only because of the positive work environment but because we maintain an environment that is suited to the local culture for the employees. As an experiential resort, making the guests feel "a sense of place" is relevant.

With no prior experience in the Caribbean, what have you learned about being successful there?

It's all about relationships. I have to get along with everyone. Favoritism is out of the question. One needs to have prior experience in all areas of running a hotel in order to bring new standards that fit the native culture and the environment, as most local managers have never worked off the island. Bringing in consultants from overseas rarely works and requires a bigger investment. While training is essential, adapting the standards to the local culture or the specific hotel culture remains a priority. We do not want robotic behaviors in this experiential type of environment. We hire people with wonderful personalities and allow them to remain true to themselves as long as service remains efficient.

Some general managers have been at the same property for 20 years or more. Is this a good thing?

Stability at senior level is key, and of mutual benefit for the property and for the leader. In order to grow and remain marketable, it is good to move every seven to 10 years, unless one is a partner. However, one can never put the property on autopilot. While the product may be fantastic, how we bring in customers, especially to a remote location, is critical to financial success. The economic environment and international competitive set change constantly.

Twenty years at the same property can work if GMs update their skill sets on a regular basis and continues to experience other new properties in the market in order to stay current. They need to ensure that their products and service experiences meet or exceed expectations of the past and current generations, more specifically their target markets. They need to innovate to remain competitive and shift their marketing strategies as needed to areas that will bring the greatest return. We can't run a hotel today as we did a few years ago. We need to constantly pay attention. ●