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Entrepreneurs take new Routes to island travel

Luxury group scouts out best providers based on high quality standards

Liz Fleming
Special to the Star

Article

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Adam Stewart, a native Jamaican, is proud of his island roots. Now, the dynamic 28-year-old CEO of Sandals Resorts International can be equally proud of Island Routes – his newest brainchild.

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Launched recently in Jamaica, the company could well change the way Caribbean tourism works.

"When you're doing something for the right reasons," says Stewart, "you know it's going to be a success."

A luxury tour provider, Island Routes has designed quality standards that will reassure consumers by linking them with the top operators offering the best excursions.

It's a tall order.

With hundreds of operators on every major island in the Caribbean, sorting the tourism wheat from the chaff has been something many of us have found daunting. Island Routes' goal is enable tourists to book with confidence.

Using a rigorous qualification process, Island Routes has chosen 10 companies to offer tours in each of Jamaica's major resort areas.

The tours, divided into different style groupings such as family routes and romantic routes, include activities ranging from horseback riding to river tubing, zip-lining, deep-sea fishing, ATV riding, rafting and more.

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Private, individualized tours also can be booked through the "limited edition routes" stream.

Three major selection criteria were used; safety, product content and delivery, and customer experience.

The safety standards, which included guest-to-guide ratio, equipment checklists, safety briefings and more, were demanding and a 95 per cent customer satisfaction rating was required. To ensure that those stringent quality standards are maintained, both a customer satisfaction survey system and a secret shopper program are in place.

Not all applicants qualified, but, according to Dominique Peterkin, general manager for Island Routes, that initial disappointment is proving to be an incentive for many tour operators.

"Tour companies that did not make the initial offering list have the opportunity to re-present their tours – but they need to conform to our standards. Once they are certified, we stand behind their products. The door is always open; they just need to adjust and grow to our standards."

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Island Routes tours can be booked through the newly revamped touch-screen DVD systems at tour desks at Sandals resorts in Jamaica and soon in St. Lucia, Antigua and the Bahamas.

The tours are also available through tour operators and travel agents, independent of Sandals, and can be booked directly through www.islandroutes.com.

The system is proving popular with tour operators.

"Our contracted partners love the complete packaging of their product," says Tony Ebanks, director of operations for Island Routes Adventure Tours. "Our website has opened doors to anyone who wants to shop online."

Growth presents challenges. Ebanks, Peterkin and Stewart are Jamaican and knew most of the local tour operators, but don't have the same connections on other islands.

"When we go to other islands, we call upon our countrymen there," says Peterkin. "The programs in St. Lucia and Antigua have managers who are from those islands, so they've been our guides as we looked for great products that would meet our operational requirements. We get the inside track from our island specialists, then it's a matter of carrying the brand there, and letting them bring out the best in their islands."

Island Routes will be in place in every Caribbean destination where Sandals hotels operate within a year, but even greater expansion is anticipated.

"Five years from now, we hope Island Routes will be a household name, in the industry and for the mainstream consumer," says Peterkin.

"We dream big, but we feel that our company will help create memories that will last a lifetime and bring people back to the Caribbean again and again. Whether the choice is a family route, a romantic route, or a community route, our intention is to enhance the vacation experience and make an impact."

While Island Routes is a business endeavour, the concept was born of something more personal. Stewart, Peterkin and Ebanks all share a passion for their Caribbean home and a desire to showcase it.

"This is my island, this is my home — it is my absolute pleasure to show the best we have," says Ebanks.

Liz Fleming is a St. Catharines-based freelance writer.

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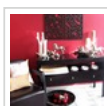
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