

Laurie Palumbo

Chief Operating Officer, Island Destinations

Laurie Palumbo joined Island Destinations (www.islanddestinations.com) as COO this past March. Here, the former senior vice president of GOGO Worldwide Vacations talks to *Luxury Travel Advisor* about the unexpected differences of her new position, the trends she's noticed in the luxury market and how best to make her son jealous.



Besides the obvious differences of cost and clientele, how is working for a luxury supplier different than the mainstream?

It's definitely different and it's very exciting, because it's the future of the business for travel professionals and wholesalers. The basics of the business are the same, but it's more of a challenge, because the product that you're dealing with and the expectations are very different and that's where you have to be very critical. I'm looking at products and services in a different light than I ever did before, because with travel, you can purchase it anywhere, but at the end of the day it's the total service you provide and it's never saying "no."

What has been the biggest adjustment for you?

The first time I was at a hotel with a butler, he met me when I checked in and said he could unpack my luggage for me. At first I was hesitant about having him rifle through my clothing, but I had a meeting to get to and then I had a dinner, so I realized I wouldn't have any time to unpack. So I said to myself, "If Lady Diana can do it, so can I." You can get used to that kind of service very quickly!

Is your fresh perspective helping you spot new trends in the luxury market?

Everyone is aspiring to be luxury, and I think it's gotten a little too complicated. What people are looking for now is understated luxury. I've been traveling a lot lately to promote our product and have experienced this frustration in some hotels. For example, I recently had to call the front desk of a hotel to figure out how to turn on the shower. Then the next weekend, I was at Sandy Lane [in Barbados] and there was a nondescript square panel in the room and at the touch of a button you could open the drapes or turn on the lights or the TV. You turned on the TV and you clicked on "2" to get on the Internet, instead of having to sign on or call downstairs. I think we're seeing more of that. People want to come in and feel comfortable and not start looking at complicated devices.

How has the clientele of the upscale market changed?

We're seeing more multigenerational families traveling together, and that's putting different demands on the resorts and hotels. Now it's all about having a cultural experience for the children as well,

so you're seeing youth-oriented cooking classes and local language and dance classes with the option for parents to come and join the children. We're also seeing hotel restaurants cater to children, but still serve gourmet food. Too, more and more hoteliers are building rooms that are adjoining or suites. With families today, it's not unusual to have three or five children, so you're even seeing two-bedroom suites with the option for another room added on at the other end. Clients also are asking for more exotic destinations. They want us to tell them something they don't know or send them to a place no one has been. When answering to our luxury clientele, we always try to take it to the next level.

And how do you do that?

In our market, some pretty common things are private jets, suites and villas, and now we're seeing demand for pet spas, complete with massages and gourmet food.

Clients pamper their pets as they do themselves. We're also seeing a large demand for concierge services. They want everything taken care of. We're using more services that meet you right as you get off the plane, claim your luggage, facilitate customs and recheck your luggage. They're with you all the way.

With so much experience behind you, what has been your most magical moment in travel?

This is a very easy question for me. I have one child who is 16 now and when he was nine, my husband and I took him to Italy. We thought he would be so bored, but we were walking around the streets and he looked up at me and said, "Mom, every corner is just more beautiful than the last." Then, without skipping a beat, he said, "And I don't think it's fair that you get to do this for work."

—Jennifer Merritt