

Tourism industry honours Stewart with Lifetime Achievement Award

A Jamaican businessman won the top accolade at the world tourism industry's annual gala attended by 1,000 of the sector's leading figures in London last week.

Gordon 'Butch' Stewart, the founder and chairman of Sandals Resorts International, was honoured with a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2012 Travel Weekly Globe Travel Awards ceremony in the Grosvenor Hotel on Buckingham Palace Road.

Typically, Stewart dedicated the honour to his employees. "I am delighted to accept this award on behalf of the 10,000 people who work within the Sandals family," he said.

He was publicly congratulated by Amanda Wills, managing director of Virgin Holidays, Sue Biggs, formerly of Kuoni and Thomas Cook and now director general of the Royal Horticultural Society, and Guy Zitter, managing director of the Mail Newspapers, who described Stewart as "blazing a trail", having been "impressive in spades" and "changing the face of tourism".

The award, which was voted on by travel agents, recognised Stewart not only as a pioneer of the Caribbean tourism sector over the past three decades but also for the contribution he has made to the communities where he does business.

Since his earliest days in the hospitality industry, Stewart has quietly supported community-based philanthropic initiatives. The Sandals Foundation, created in 2009 to carry on this work, has raised US\$1.9 million to date to help improve the education and environment of the local people.

The company, which has 21 properties across the region under the Sandals, Beaches and Grand Pineapple brands, is the largest private-sector employer and generator of foreign currency earnings in Jamaica and on most of the other islands where it operates.

It has been repeatedly praised — through awards, celebrity endorsements and journalistic reviews — for its luxurious suites, gourmet dining, and peerless service on some of the world's best beaches.

The Jamaican Government made Stewart a Commander of the Order of Distinction in 1988 and a few years later he received the Dr Martin Luther King Jr Humanitarian Award from the Jamaica-America Society. The Order of Jamaica (OJ) was bestowed on him in 1995, bringing with it the title "the Honourable".

"I always tell people that I've never worked a day in my life, and I strongly believe it," said Stewart, who is also chairman of the Jamaica Observer. "I've been extremely fortunate to be recognised by so many organisations over the years for doing something I love."

His first business, founded almost 45 years ago, was Appliance Traders Limited, which specialised in selling air conditioners. He ventured into the hospitality industry in 1980 to generate the hard currency he needed to buy A/C units from abroad.

His first hotel, the Bay Roc, a once grand but by then dilapidated property on Montego Bay's finest beach, required extensive work before it could reopen in 1981.

Despite having no experience in the field, Stewart put into motion a plan that would define his and his family's future, and with it, tourism in the Caribbean.

However, his career extends far beyond building the Caribbean's most successful private-

sector company.

During a currency crisis in 1992, when speculators drove the price of the US dollar up from \$21 to \$32, Stewart led the campaign, later called 'the Butch Stewart Initiative', to stabilise the exchange rate by personally depositing US\$1 million a week into Jamaican banks at a rate of \$25 to one US dollar.

It cost him U\$30 million but by the time it was over, Stewart and thousands of ordinary Jamaicans had beaten the international speculators, pushing the price of a US dollar back down to \$22.

Just two years later, Stewart acquired the national airline, Air Jamaica, when it was on the verge of collapse. He helped to reinvent the organisation from the ground up, stamping his legendary flair on the airline's operations and marketing, before returning it to the Government and walking away.

Sandals Resorts also won the Best All Inclusive Resort Operator at last week's ceremony. Karl Thompson, the company's UK & European managing director, accepted the award, saying: "This accolade is very important to us because it is voted for by the industry. We always strive for excellence and continue to invest enormous amounts of money to elevate and modernise the product."

The latest awards build on previous successes for Sandals. For 16 consecutive years it has been named the Best All-Inclusive Resort at the prestigious World Travel Awards and was voted Best Caribbean Hotel Group for ten. For this year's awards, Sandals was also nominated for Best Trade Sales Team and Best Trade Friendly Brand.

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