

MAGDALENA GRAND  
BEACH & GOLF RESORT  
TOBAGO W.I.

# Magdalena Grand

A PARADISE INSIDE A PARADISE



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*Located on the Caribbean island of Tobago on the Plantations Estate, the four-star Magdalena Grand Beach and Golf Resort has made a name for itself in sustainable luxury*

RESEARCH BY *Joseph Philips*



**H**estled among several old homes and holiday villas, unlike many of its peers in the Trinidad and Tobago archipelago, it has steered clear of the commercialism that one would usually associate with a resort of this kind.

Under a government-backed plan, Tobago is also looking to be viewed independently from its sister island, Trinidad. A new tagline for the island has been adopted, “Tobago beyond,” which looks to reflect its unique character. Recently, the Chief Executive at

the Tobago Tourism Agency noted that the island was keen to stand out, by highlighting features such as longest protected rainforest in the western hemisphere, one of the highest densities of bird species and the largest brain coral in the world.

As the premier hospitality provider, the Magdalena Resort will play a key role in delivering on this message. The resort has been led by General Manager, Vinod Bajaja, for nearly two years. Mr. Bajaja brings a wealth of international experience to the hotel and

indeed, tourism in general on the island. He trained in Europe and is a qualified CHA (a Chartered Hotel Administrator), bringing experience from large hotel brands such as Sandals, Marriott and Starwood Hotels. He was kind enough to tell us about the hotel, where he sees its strengths, his own journey to get there and how Tobago offers something that is very difficult to find anywhere else.

#### Background

Mr. Bajaja began by telling us a little more

about the hotel and its facilities. He begins: “The hotel is over 20 years old. It was initially built by Hilton Hotels and they were the first ones to manage it. Seven years ago, it changed to the Magdalena Grand Beach and Golf Resort. We have 200 rooms and five outlets. When I say outlets, I mean restaurants and bars. We also have four pools and a PGA-level golf course.”

The hotel attracts a mixture of locals and internationals, he says: “We also have a good mix of international and local guests. The

majority of our guests come from England. There is a direct flight from London to the island twice a week. We get locals coming at the weekend, flying in from Trinidad. We have over 200 staff, the vast majority of which are local. Locals come here to dine and drink, and enjoy the live music that we put on three times a week.”

The hotel has also gained a reputation for world class service, recently winning an award on TripAdvisor based on customer feedback. When this is put to Bajaj, he nods in agreement. Clearly it’s something that’s a source of pride to him? “Absolutely, I believe

in people. We provide a lot of training. Many of the people have never had any exposure to world class hoteling before, so I put a big emphasis on training when I arrived. The staff have been excellent. They really care. The culture we have created is a service culture. The word ‘no’ doesn’t exist in our vocabulary. I tell my staff, ‘do whatever it takes to make the guests happy as long as it’s not immoral.’”

### **International expertise with a local accent**

The government of Trinidad and Tobago also recognizes the need for the country to

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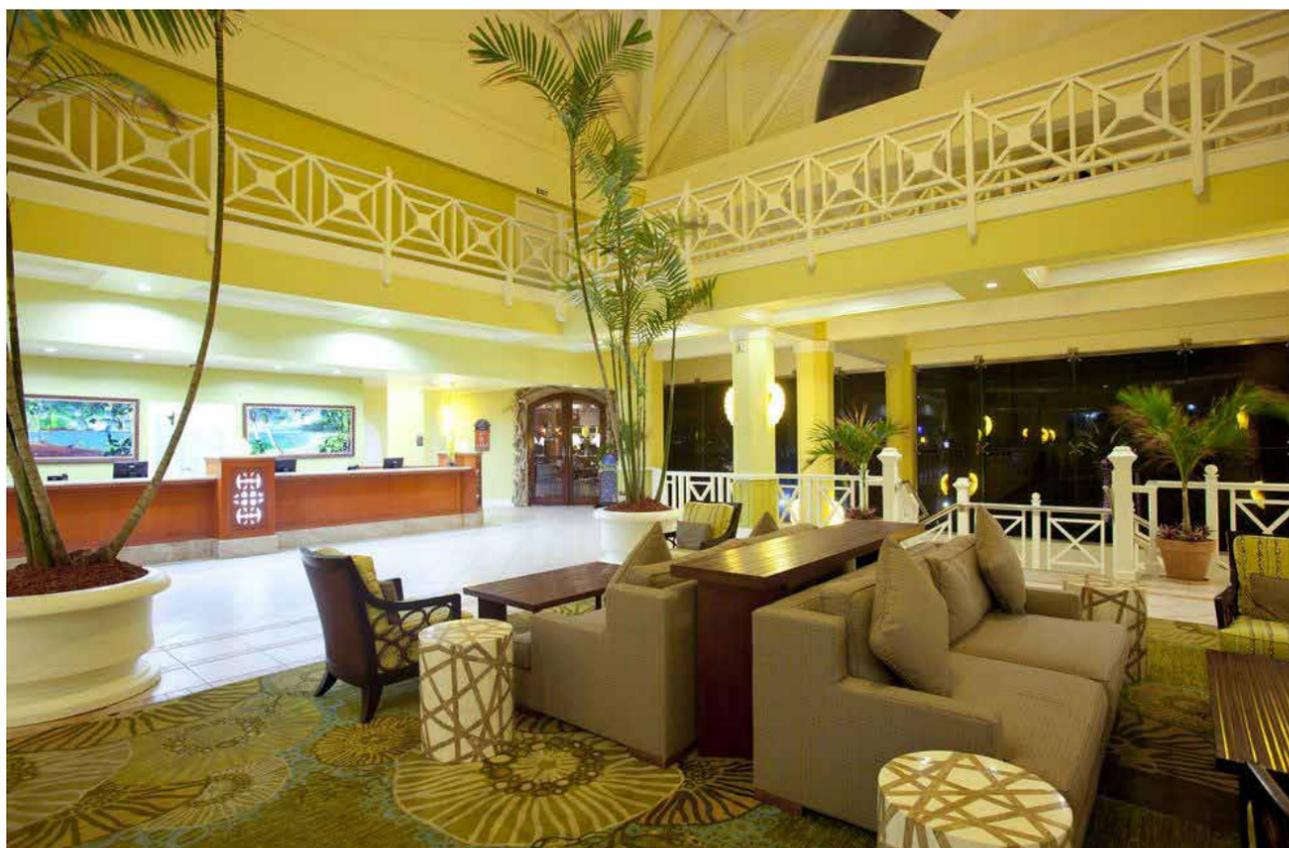
develop its tourism, whilst maintaining the qualities that make the island attractive - less commercialized, and with a local accent. Mr. Bajaj says: “It’s not just providing local employment. We always encourage local suppliers as well. The Sandals resort will arrive here soon and steps are already being taken to ensure that they can source most of their food locally. Farmers and other suppliers are preparing for that as we speak. I believe there will probably even be government incentives to source locally.”

He continues: “This is a beautiful island and I feel we have to be careful in its

development, so that it doesn’t become overly commercialized like some other Caribbean islands. I think perhaps until now, we’ve got it wrong. Tobago is different and you can’t sell it in the same way as other islands. It’s not about reggae music and rum punch. It’s exclusive, unspoiled and environmentally aware - this is what Tobago is.”

### **Sustainable Hospitality**

The idyllic location of the resort puts all the more emphasis on sustainability. Mr. Bajaj says: “We’ve got a recycling program at the hotel, to keep an eye on the environment.



*“Tobago has a fascinating culture. It’s got quite a unique mix of ethnicities - African, East Indian, Spanish and French”*

We’ve also spoken about moving our energy consumption to solar power. We’re also very sensitive to beach cleaning. I have hired two dedicated staff to ensure that the beach - and the sea - are spotlessly clean all the time. There’s a constant effort from our side to maintain the environment.”

It’s something that he’s keen to work on at every level, down to the smallest detail: “I’m constantly looking to improve on these things. For example, I’m currently looking at removing all straws and plastic cups from the hotel. I’m also talking to some suppliers in the US about making our supplies more sustainable.” As new resorts arrive, there will be the opportunity to work together to provide support to local suppliers. Mr. Bajaj, with his role on the board of the country’s hotel association.

Finally, on the social sustainable side, the hotel does everything it can for local charities and non-profit organizations, generating a feel-good around the resort which extends across the community. “We participate in local events and encourage charity events in our hotel. If any charity wants, we can contribute a space. We’re highly involved locally at all levels.”

#### **Future Directions for the Resort**

The highlights for Tobago in the coming years will be the arrival of a new terminal at Arthur Napoleon Raymond Robinson International Airport, as well as the development of its cruise port. These changes in themselves will draw more tourists to the island’s outstanding natural beauty. But the hotel itself is also

looking for an uplift, particularly considering the arrival of new resorts like Sandals and Beaches in 2020.

As Mr. Bajaj points out, “Tobago has a fascinating culture. It’s got quite a unique mix of ethnicities - African, East Indian, Spanish and French. This also gives it a unique blend of food choices. No island in the Caribbean has a mix like it.” These are qualities that he, and all stakeholders involved with the resort will be keen to maintain as it develops over the coming years. He says: “Hotels age, like anything else, so in the coming years, we’ll be looking to refurbish our property and modernize it a little. I’m sure this uplift could happen in the next year or so.”

Elsewhere, it will look to attract a more diverse group of visitors. He says: “I think we need to focus more on the North American market. Right now, I’m working closely with Canadian tourism providers and that’s already showing results. We’re also talking with Caribbean Airlines. Hopefully, they’ll be adding another flight from New York JFK.”

When they do arrive, we’re confident that they’ll be impressed with what they see. The Magdalena Grand Beach and Golf Resort is a true paradise inside a paradise. **BE**

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