

FLORIDA'S NEWSPAPER FOR THE C-SUITE

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Extended stays

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Rick Brunette (front, is general manager of the resort); From Left to Right: Walt Mintel, 31 years; Khoum Khampapha, 25 years; Maggie Lang, 17 years; Debbie Curtis, 21 years; Chris Finck; 21 years; Cynthia Filipowicz, 19 years; Stephanie Ryder, 19 years; Debbie Davenport, 31 years; Randy Davenport, 33 years; and Lorey Campese, 15 years. (Photo by Ed Clement)

Debbie Curtis first started working at Palm Island Resort in 1995. And while her roles may have changed over the years, her place of employment has remained consistent for the past two decades.

“Why go someplace and start over if you’re happy?” she says. “And when I come to work I’m happy.”

Curtis began as a waitress at the resort’s Rum Bay Restaurant, then took on a restaurant management role, and now manages the resort’s activities and concierge services. “I learn something new every day, even though I’ve been here for 20 years,” she says. “I’m learning every day, and that’s the best part.”

Curtis isn’t the only one with some unusually high longevity at the resort. Of the site’s 150 employees, 20 have worked there for more than 15 years, with six of those staffers boasting resort careers of 25 years or more. In a fickle industry with high turnover, it’s an impressive feat.

Plus, it’s not an easy job to get to. Palm Island Resort, in Cape Haze, south of Englewood in Charlotte County, occupies a two-mile stretch on a barrier island that’s accessible only by boat. So every morning employees line up for the six-minute car-ferry ride to work, a process that adds time to their commutes. Some workers come from nearby Rotunda and Englewood, but others, like Curtis, live in farther-away locales such as North Port.

So why do so many employees stick around for so long? A feeling of job security is one reason, says Rick Brunette, the resort’s vice president and general manager.

Brunette says the resort has never laid off anyone in its 32-year history, despite economic downturns and Florida’s typical off-season slowdowns. “There’s a feeling of being responsible for the livelihoods of your employees and the well-being of their families,” he says.

During quieter times, staffers from one part of the resort will help out with capital projects or pre-season cleanings. “It’s determining how to come up with supplemental work in the off-season,” says Brunette. “Someone in our restaurant painted the restrooms this year, for example. There might be

some reduction of hours, but we try to evenly distribute that.”

Many of the resort’s property owners (units are individually owned and can be put in the rental pool if desired) and repeat guests love the site’s longtime employees. “The fact that they’re generally welcomed by a friendly face that they’ve known for years, it almost becomes magical,” he says. “They feel like they’ve actually returned home.”

Being valued and appreciated means a lot to the employees who have spent sizable chunks of their careers here. “Rick’s a great person to work with,” says Curtis. “He’s a great boss and he respects the years [we’ve put in]. And that’s a good thing.”

The resort veterans know every inch of the property, allowing them to quickly answer owners’ and guests’ questions, even if they fall outside the realm of their regular areas of employment. And a low turnover rate means the resort doesn’t have to spend lots of time advertising and filling jobs. “It helps the management and supervisory staff focus on being leaders rather than dealing with that revolving door,” says Brunette, who has been with the resort for six years.

About a dozen employees will celebrate the five-year mark at the end of the year, laying the groundwork for a new generation of long-timers. And concepts like teamwork and respect figure prominently into the resort’s new STAR program, aimed at guiding the company into the future and ensuring it remains a place where people want to vacation and work.

“If you view it as everyone’s success is based on a partnering, I think it has more value,” says Brunette. “It’s not we’re management and you’re an employee. We join hands together on so many common interests.”