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## Customer service and sustainability

### 'At Your Service' Spotlight: Ewald Biemans, Bucuti & Tara in Aruba



Ewald Biemans, owner of Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort in Aruba (With permission)

Aruba, with its tagline of 'one happy island', is one of the Caribbean's most popular destinations, welcoming about 1.24 million overnight visitors and over 800,000 cruise passengers in 2023. Between them, these tourists spent about \$2.7 billion, accounting for 73% of Aruba's GDP, and about 86% of all employment. Sustainability is important to Aruba, and the pursuit of happiness and wellbeing is the cornerstone of Aruba's approach. "Ultimately, we hope to be the model for a low-carbon, sustainable and prosperous economy that can be replicated in other island nations," say the Aruba Tourism Authority.

The tourism and hospitality industry in Aruba is leading some of the island's sustainability efforts with initiatives that range from aggressive conservation to renewable energy. One hotel in Aruba that has always been ahead of the sustainability curve is Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort. Owner Ewald Biemans is well known on the island for being an environmental preservation pioneer. Biemans supported the creation of Arikok National Park, which permanently protects 7,907

acres of wilderness from development, and he regularly consults with hoteliers in the Caribbean about how to become more sustainable.

Biemans's Eagle Beach property was the first resort in the Americas to be certified ISO 14001 – a classification that requires superior environmental management – and the first hotel in the world to win the prestigious Global United Nations 2020 Climate Action Award for Climate Neutral Now. "We've made sustainability a real science," says Biemans. "There's no plastic used anywhere at the resort, which has reduced our trash by 60%. All food scraps and leftover food are donated to local farmers for their animals. Guests use an electronic signature at check-in instead of paper. We recycle every drop of water. Our state-of-the-art air-conditioning system uses 30% less energy than other systems." Refillable water bottles are gifted to each guest, perfectly-sized food portions reduce waste; solar panels are used to heat water; motion sensors on lights in public areas and timers on office lights and some public areas cut further cut energy costs, as do insulated windows.

The environmental focus includes the local community. The resort offers schools eco-tours of the property, and encourages guests to experience local restaurants because it does not offer an all-inclusive program. "I think our guests appreciate our efforts and feel good with what we're doing" says Biemans. "It's a right of life to go on a vacation, and what's happening here gives our guests a dispensation to enjoy themselves and help sustain the environment at the same time."

Biemans came to Aruba during the 1960s, when tourism was still in its infancy. He has watched the island's economy shift from dependence on oil refineries to tourism, but he is concerned that the unchecked growth could backfire. Aruba is safe and prosperous because it has attracted the right visitors at the right time. But he says growing past sustainable limits or overdeveloping the island could have serious and irreversible consequences. He also admits that achieving sustainability is not easy. Bucuti & Tara became a certified carbon neutral property in 2018 and is on track to become a certified net zero hotel very soon. Net zero means the hotel produces the same amount of greenhouse gas that it removes. However, the final piece of the puzzle remains elusive – the hotel must find vendors with the same commitment to sustainability which is difficult in Aruba. Bucuti & Tara is also trying to get off the grid, but a utility company policy prevents it from installing enough solar panels to achieve that goal. "We have to keep going," says Biemans.

Despite these challenges, Bucuti & Tara maintains an enviable 90% occupancy rate. "Thanks to all the awards and accolades we receive for our pioneering work, we got a lot of publicity. And publicity of course, creates business. So our focus on sustainability has done wonders for us in many different ways. It has saved us money. It earned us money in terms of consistent high occupancy rates. And over the years it improved the environment around us" says Biemans.

Sources: Elliott (2024); Food Inspiration (2022); Bucuti.com (2023); Email communication with Amy Kerr and Ewald Biemans from Bucuti & Tara