

# Hotel ratings help level playing field

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Last week, when Starwood announced its plans to build a St. Regis brand hotel on Bahía Beach's lush property, it promised "the first five-star hotel in Puerto Rico."

Was the statement a dig at the island's existing "four-star" properties? Can a property in Puerto Rico provide the level of service other five-star Caribbean properties such as the Ritz-Carlton in Rose Hall, Jamaica, and the Four Seasons in Nevis currently offer? Who has the authority to rate the hotels and what do the stars mean?

Stephen Nass, the Caribe Hilton's Director of Sales and Marketing — Revenue and Business Development, says there is no one rating system worldwide for hotels.

"[It] depends on who you ask and who or what organization is doing the ratings," said Nass. "Most experts agree that the most reliable ratings are those that have been at it the longest. Mobil Travel Guide has been rating hotels since 1958, and AAA has been publishing ratings since the mid 1970s. Both use a common practice of independent teams of inspectors to evaluate properties. The highest award



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**Puerto Rico's four-diamond properties for 2006 are El Conquistador, Paradisus, Westin Río Mar, Intercontinental, San Juan Marriott, The Ritz-Carlton, Condado Plaza, El San Juan and El Convento, pictured here.**

[Mobile: five stars, AAA: five diamonds] is given out rarely. Less than 2 percent of the thousands of properties they inspect annually receive the highest accolade."

Triple A and Mobil are considered the industry yardsticks for hotels and restaurant ratings in the U.S., Canada, México and the Caribbean. Triple A awards diamonds, from one to five,

to the hotels and restaurants it evaluates. For 2006, no hotel in Puerto Rico merited the AAA five-diamond rating, although Bernice Cordero, Travel Manager for AAA South in the Caribbean, said both the Paradisus and Westin Río Mar properties are currently undergoing upgrades to meet AAA's tough standards.

In addition to the Ritz-

Carlton Jamaica and Four Seasons Nevis properties, the only other hotel to receive AAA five diamond denominations in the Caribbean for 2006 was the Sandy Lane Hotel in Barbados.

"Our evaluation is a very serious process," explains Cordero of AAA, which awards diamonds to some 31,500 hotels, measuring everything from the size of

the lobby and pool to the number of hangers in each room.

Puerto Rico's four-diamond properties for 2006 are Wyndham El Conquistador, Paradisus, Westin Río Mar, El Convento, Intercontinental, San Juan Marriott, The Ritz-Carlton, Wyndham Condado Plaza and Wyndham El San Juan.

Nass said decor, service, amenities and ambiance all count in the ratings.

"Any hotel that is in the midst of a renovation or expansion does not receive a rating until those projects are complete — this is the case with the Caribe Hilton," said Nass, who adds that most major branded properties in Puerto Rico are in the 3 to 4 rating scale.

"The rating system is just one of many important guides for travelers to help them make the hotel choice that's right for them," said

Nass. "The system helps to level the playing field so that, subjectively, each property can be judged in comparison to the price point they are asking their guests to pay. At the end of the day, it's just a guide, and personal needs, physical attributes, and amenities should make the decision for the guest."

### **Tourism Company to rate hotels**

The Puerto Rico Tourism Company is in the process of establishing its own ratings system for the island and to that end has contracted the services of a Canadian company, Diamond Hospitality, which has already evaluated the island's small, independent hotels and is in the process of evaluating the major brands, said Lydia Negrón, of the Tourism Company.

"We had initially sought to

do business with AAA, but couldn't reach an agreement," said Negrón of the current ratings system, which was introduced in 2004.

Negrón said that Diamond Hospitality rated El Convento with five stars while Villas del Mar Hau got a two-star rating. She said the ratings would be noted in the Tourism Company's "Que Pasa!" magazine, along with an explanation of what the stars mean.

Cordero agreed there is no one uniform rating for hotels around the world.

"There are hotels in the east, in cities like Dubai or Hong Kong that are superior to five diamonds and would perhaps merit six or seven for the services and impressive luxuries they offer," said Cordero, who said that each continent has its own ratings system.