

## Sandals Dunn's River – A Review



Janet and I just got back from a week at Sandals Dunn's River in Jamaica, and I want to share my impressions of the experience while they are still fresh in my mind. Overall, our stay was everything I've come to expect from Sandals, which is to say it was a great week. That picture above isn't an AI fake...I took it on my iPhone with no touch-ups or enhancements. It shows the view from our balcony, looking out at the ocean over our personal infinity pool. It was stunning, and we got to enjoy it every day of our stay. It made leaving our room difficult, but we made the sacrifice so we could share with our clients everything this amazing resort offers.

Sandals Dunn's River opened in May of 2023 and though it was not a completely new build, it might as well have been. After purchasing the land and existing buildings from the previous owner, Sandals promptly tore most of it down and spent the next three years building it back up again...a combination of new construction and a complete renovation of the few structures they chose to retain. Despite the rebuilding project, Sandals managed to retain the mature, lush tropical landscape, augmenting it with a number of new water features...waterfalls, streams and ponds...in keeping with the Dunn's River theme.

Our stay was all we hoped it would be, but we always find a few nits to pick. Mostly because as travel advisors, we look for them. It's what we do...it enables us to help clients avoid unpleasant surprises, to see how the staff handles any issues that crop up, and to set client expectations accordingly. And of course, I never shy away from addressing the good and the not so good when I review a property, so here goes.

### By The Numbers

**Room Categories:** 14, many offering beach or ocean front views.

**Resort Capacity:** 260 rooms, adults only, double occupancy only (520 guests max).

**Resort Staff:** 840 personnel.

**Staff to Room Ratio:** 3.23:1 at full occupancy (that's quite good).

**Dining Venues:** 12 total; 7 ala carte restaurants, 4 bar/pub/grill small plate venues, and 1 buffet.

**Cuisine:** Greek, Italian, French, Asian Fusion, Sushi, Latin Fusion, Seafood, Jamaican Jerk, Pizzeria, Beach Grill.

**Bars/Lounges:** 9

**Pools/Whirlpools:** 3/2

**Distance from Montego Bay Airport:** 90 minutes. Shared roundtrip transfers are included in each Sandals booking, and private transfers can be booked for an additional fee.

**Additional Features:** Full-service spa, fitness center (open 24X7), nightly themed entertainment, land sports and activities, unlimited non-motorized watersports, complimentary SCUBA (two 2-tank dives daily, weather permitting, PADI open water certification required), and PADI Dive Center offering open water and resort dive courses, refresher courses, and discover dives for non-certified divers (at an additional cost).

### Setting Expectations

I've written before about the importance of finding an all-inclusive resort that fits the vacation experience you seek, and how we as travel advisors can help with that. At Sandals that



experience is romantic luxury. You don't have to own a private jet or luxury yacht to be able to afford a stay at a Sandals resort, but don't expect Michelin star dining or gold-plated bathroom fixtures. You'll get neither. What you will get is affordable luxury and plenty of pampering. Sandals resorts cater to couples, but they leave it up to their guests to define what that means. Single guests are not allowed at a Sandals resort unless booked as part of a group such as a destination wedding or vow renewal, and then only after the resort manager approves the exception.

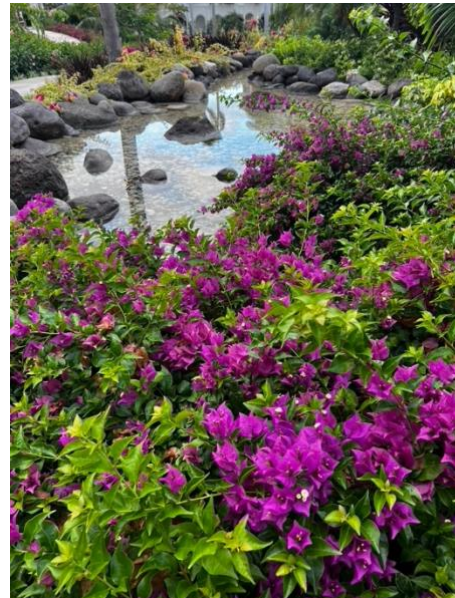
Occasionally, platonic friends will book a friends' getaway at a Sandals resort. As long there are two people in the room, the resort allows it, but we don't recommend it. Everything about a Sandals resort is geared toward romance, not best friend bonding...to include the bedding. If two friends want to share a room, they must be willing to share a bed as well. If not, someone is sleeping on the couch (not all rooms have them), or in the bathtub because all rooms have only

one king-sized bed, and there are no rollways, cots, or pull-out sofa beds. There are better resorts for a friends' getaway.

## The Resort

At 260 rooms, Sandals Dunn's River is a medium sized resort with a lay-out that makes everything convenient. There are no steep hills and no multi-story stairs to climb, unless you choose to skip the elevator to your fourth-floor room. I didn't. And there are no long treks from anywhere on the resort to get to a bar or restaurant. Everything you could possibly want is a short walk away. If you prefer, you can take advantage of the generous staff to guest ratio and stay put...someone will be along to take your drink order or book your spa appointment before you even know you wanted one.

A team of 40 grounds keepers maintain the beautiful landscaping by clipping, trimming, and cleaning throughout the day. They start well before most guests are awake, clearing the walkways with rakes and ultra-quiet, battery-operated leaf blowers, which I greatly appreciated. There's nothing worse than being awoken by the sound of a gas-powered leaf blower. Those are still used, but they don't come out until most guests have already headed to the pool or the beach. The beach staff was also at work before dawn, raking the sand and removing any seaweed and debris that washed up overnight. The other thing we didn't have to contend with on the beach were vendors. Even though Jamaican law dictates that all beaches are public, Sandals keeps beach vendors away. I suspect they get away with it based on their status as the largest private enterprise in Jamaica. They do invite select local artisans onto the resort to display and sell their handiwork, but you would hardly know they were there. There were no barkers hassling guests to get their attention, and no pressure sales pitches.



## The Layout



The Sandals Dunn's River resort is laid out in three main areas...the upper resort area, guest lodging, and the common area which includes the beach, restaurants and bars. Upon entering the resort's main drive from the coastal road, you pass through a guarded gate area where all vehicles undergo a cursory check coming and going. After a short drive from the gatehouse, you pass through the upper resort area. On one side of the entrance drive you find the resort's Rondeval guest cottages. Each Rondeval cottage comes with a shared lazy river, its own patio and plunge pool, and some have open air rooftop balconies suitable for sunning and dining. The view from the Rondevals to the beach are

blocked by the rest of the resort, but the resort buildings are mostly hidden by the landscaping. What they lack in ocean views the Rondevals gain in considerable, though not complete, privacy with their own luscious gardens.

Across the entrance drive from the Rondevals you'll find the spa, the resort's Latin fusion restaurant and the Dunn's Rum Club which offers an impressive list of aged Caribbean rums, all



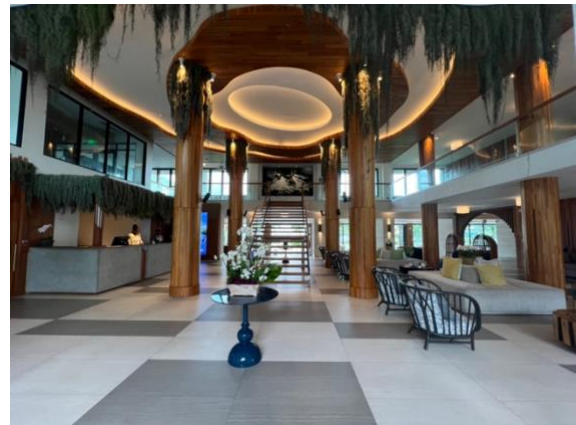
included in your stay. Rum is Janet's preferred adult beverage, so we made it a point to visit the rum club several times during our stay. They were out of the most interesting sounding label, Smith and Cross Traditional Jamaica Navy Strength Rum, which was probably a good thing since it is 114 proof. Go Navy! Janet opted for a tasting flight titled "Black Tot, The Final Ration" as well as individual samples of other rum labels...not all on the same night of course. Her favorite was



the Plantation XO rum from Barbados, aged for 12-20 years in bourbon casks. The aged rum is shipped to Château de Bonbonnet in France where it is blended, then finished in small French oak casks for 12-18 months. She did sample the Blackwell's Rum, mainly because the label comes from Chris Blackwell. No, not our son Chris...the well-known Jamaican record producer who worked with the likes of Bob Marley back in the day. It is always fun to see the double take on the faces of immigration agents when we present our passports upon arrival in Montego Bay's airport.

My favorite spot on the resort was Blum's Coffee Shop. The coffee shop features made to order, pour over coffee using freshly ground Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee beans. It was how I started each day, usually the first person in line when they opened at 6AM. The coffee shop also offers a variety of hot and iced specialty coffee drinks, and pastries throughout the day, all included.

Once you pass the Rondevals, the entrance drive ends at a modest Port Cochere, marking the main resort area. The Port Cochere leads to the main resort building, one of the few structures that wasn't completely razed during the resort's three-year rebuilding project. It did get a new façade, and the interior was completely gutted and rebuilt. The first floor houses the elegant main check-in lobby, the photo shop, a gift and sundries shop, and a bar that is open during the evening hours. The second floor is dedicated to administrative and office spaces, and the five upper floors are guest rooms with balconies offering either ocean or garden views. At most Sandals resorts, club and butler level accommodations each have their own separate



check-in area and lounges, but at Sandals Dunn's River those are combined into a single lounge adjacent to the main lobby. The Club Lounge is the only part of the resort that isn't open to all guests, and even though we had access to it, we didn't spend any time there other than passing through when we checked in. There are no exclusive pools or sections the beach set aside for guests booking higher level accommodations, though there are plenty of advantages to entice guests to book Club and Butler level accommodations.



In addition to the main guest building there are three additional 5- and 6- story guest buildings. Many of the ground level rooms are swim-up with a shared pool area, and all rooms above ground level offer balconies with ocean front, ocean view, or garden view rooms. The balconies come with either soaking tubs (with privacy curtains) or infinity pools (without privacy curtains), and some have both. The resort's 24-hour fitness center shares the top floor of one of the smaller guest buildings (to the left in the picture) along with an open-air lounge. Light sleepers will want to avoid the

floor directly below this area. We know this because our room was below this area, and every morning starting at 6AM we heard the dull thud of weights hitting the floor up in the fitness center. I am an early riser anyway and after discovering the coffee shop, I was usually at the door waiting for them to open when the weights started hitting the floor. Janet is usually not an early riser, but rather than grumbling about the early wake-up call she used it as motivation to get herself to the gym. Our butler offered to move us, but it was a minor annoyance, and we didn't want to give up the amazing ocean view our room offered.

There is no conference center at this Sandals resort, but there are several wedding venues on the beach and elsewhere throughout the resort. Bars open at 10AM, but you can get a spiked coffee at the coffee shop if you need a jolt earlier than that, and guest rooms have mini-bars stocked with beer and wine with higher level accommodations featuring 200 ml bottles of liquor, all included in the cost of your stay.

The resort's common areas...most of the restaurants, bars, and the two main pools...are situated between the guest room buildings and the beach. That means no beach walk-out rooms, but it keeps the entire beach open to all guests. To get a true ocean view you'll want to book rooms on the third floor or higher in the guest buildings to get above the common area structures and the low-level landscaping. Both pools are fresh water, free-form affairs each with its own whirlpool and bar. One pool is designated as the active pool and serves as the location for staff-led pool activities, while the other is designated as the quiet pool. Sandals



signature swim-up bar is located in the quiet pool, which makes no sense to me. The collection of guests hanging around the swim-up bar often made it louder than the active pool. For guests wanting a truly quiet venue, there is a third pool located in the upper resort area within the spa facility. Although spa services come with an additional fee, the spa pool was open to all guests for no fee.

The main pools are open around the clock, without lifeguards in the evening and overnight hours. They are designated as a quiet zone between the hours of 11PM and 8AM and guests complied. Once the sun rises, soft instrumental reggae music is piped into the common areas, offering a mellow start to the day. By 11AM the music transitions to a more active beat as the resort comes to life. By afternoon the pools become the resort's focal point with a DJ playing the usual Caribbean themed party songs to accompany staff-led, and ad hoc, pool games.

There is a large open area between the main resort buildings and the pools that serves as the venue for nightly entertainment. Sandals offers similar shows at each of their resorts...a fire dancing show, a mini-Cirque de Soleil style acrobatic show, a Caribbean themed beach party and several singers. The shows last about 45 minutes, though the beach party went on well into the night, and all shows were well attended.

All Sandals resorts offer a water sports center and an Aqua Center, and at Dunn's River the two areas are situated on opposite sides of the resort. At the water sports center you can check out sailboats, paddleboards, and kayaks. The Aqua Center is for snorkeling, diving and SNUBA...diving with the SCUBA apparatus floating on the surfaces so there is no extra gear to wear. The Aqua Center houses a PADI certified dive center where you can book SCUBA activities that range from discover dives, basic certification, and for certified divers refresher training and advanced certification dives. There is also a small shop where you can purchase rash guards and a limited selection of snorkeling and SCUBA gear. The Aqua Center opens onto a short boardwalk leading to a dock which serves as the departure point for the daily dive and snorkeling excursions.



Janet and I spent most of our time on the beach, which is one of the best parts about Sandals Dunn's River. It isn't the widest, longest, or even prettiest beach at any Sandals resort, but it was perfect for us. The beach leads to a protected lagoon where guests can snorkel, swim, or take a quick dip to cool off without having to deal with the surf which breaks over rocks or a reef further out from shore. The bottom surface of the lagoon is mostly well packed sand with very little vegetation, but getting past the first few feet of water requires navigating around a few rocky patches. Water shoes would have been a smart idea, but we opted to leave ours home. Once we found that there were clear sandy paths between the rocks, it was no problem. The weather was nearly perfect for the first part of our

stay with plenty of sun, warm temperatures, and a steady breeze that kept us pleasantly cool. Jamaica offers year-round daytime temperatures in the mid 80s, though we've noted from past visits it can get hot in July and August when the trade winds slack off. Towards the end of our stay, a low-pressure trough brought wind and occasional rain. We made the best of those days by lounging at the pool which made it easy to make a dash indoors when the occasional downpour blew in.

### **Sandals' No-Tipping Policy**

Sandals resorts include gratuities in the cost of your stay. Unlike other all-inclusive resorts that say they include tipping but allow it anyway, tipping is not permitted at Sandals and they mean it. Any staff member caught accepting a gratuity can be fired on the spot. It doesn't matter that the gratuity was unsolicited...if one is offered, they are compelled to refuse it, and they do. What I like about that policy is that it avoids the type of BFF behavior between guests and staff that has become all too common at other all-inclusive resorts we've visited, as guests seek preferential treatment and staff members oblige them in their pursuit of better tips.

There are two exceptions to the Sandals' no-tipping policy. Sandals contracts out spa operations through Red Lane Spas, and the spa automatically adds a 12% gratuity to your bill. The second exception is for butlers. Sandals leaves butler gratuities to the discretion of guests. They don't automatically add butler gratuities to your bill, but a gratuity of \$20-\$30 per butler per day of service provided is customary, generally given at the end of your stay.

### **The Food**

The culinary themes at Sandals Dunn's River restaurants are similar to other Sandals resorts with French, Italian, and Mediterranean cuisine, a seafood restaurant, a beach/poolside grill and pizzeria, and a Jerk Shack. I have to say one thing about the Jerk Shack...it isn't completely authentic. They don't cook



their meat over the traditional Jamaican pimento wood (what we call allspice) fire...they grill it. Their jerk still comes with an authentic rub and sauce, which is almost as good as the real thing, and much better than what I can cook in my own kitchen. Sandals Dunn's River doesn't have the signature steak house other Sandals resorts offer, but you can order steak in several of their restaurants. I usually pass since even their dry-aged prime quality beef isn't as good as what I get at home. I've read



reviews from other guests, and even from some of my travel advisor colleagues, that trash

Sandals' food and I don't know where those reviews are coming from other than perhaps brand bias. The food is good. It wouldn't call it gourmet dining...that's just a marketing label that sets up high expectation but carries no actual meaning. I can say without reservation that every dish I ordered on this trip was consistent with my past experience with Sandals dining...tasty, well-seasoned, the veggies fresh, crisp and full of flavor, and they know how to cook a proper curry. We didn't try the buffet...with no restrictions on dining in the ala carte restaurants and having booked a butler level room where our butler could bring us dinner from the menus at any of the ala carte restaurants, we saw no reason to.

### **That's A Wrap**

As much as we enjoyed our stay at Sandals Dunn's River, and we really did, we probably won't be going back anytime soon. Not because there was anything wrong with it...but because there are so many Sandals resorts we haven't yet visited. As travel advisors, revisiting a property we've already experienced is an indulgence we don't often make unless there is a major renovation. Sandals owns a substantial amount of land throughout the Caribbean, and they have aggressive expansion plans. They've recently opened brand new resorts in Curacao and Saint Vincent and The Grenadines, and we have plans to visit both in the coming years. My one hope is that Sandals sticks to their core value: "Find out what people want...and give it to them."