



# PARADISE FOUND

Jeff Gillard, one of the masterminds behind Salcombe's luxury South Sands Hotel, explains why UK Hotels are no longer the last (holiday) resort

Words: Chris Peck.



Main image: Phoenix from the ashes - the refurbished hotel's stunning exterior  
Inset from left: The unbelievable Salcombe - easily the equal of the Med Light; bright and beachside - a clear vision of aesthetics; Capturing the flavour of Devon - The South Sands restaurant; Decorative touches supplied by local suppliers and artists

For a great many of us, the concept of a holiday which doesn't involve a flight and a phrase book is quite simply unimaginable. But when we look back, memories of UK seaside holidays from our childhoods remain some of the fondest.

Over the years, many of us turned our backs on the British seaside to seek out the exotic delights of overseas destinations. But, while the nation has been heading to the airports, cursing the inevitable wasted holiday time spent stranded in departure lounges, the British tourist industry has taken off itself.

Talking to Jeff Gillard, one of the masterminds behind Salcombe's luxury South Sands Hotel, it's clear to see that the British tourist industry has drastically altered in recent years, meaning that once more it has become the perfect place to enjoy a truly memorable holiday.

"I think there is a general stereotype of British seaside hotels that is very much stuck in the 70s, and we were very keen to break away from that."

And break away they have. Along with business partner Andrew Turner, Gillard has set about creating the ultimate boutique hotel with a vision of re-establishing the UK as the place to spend your holiday.

"The English coastline as a whole is just absolutely stunning and massively under publicised and undervalued. I've been fortunate enough to have travelled a fair bit throughout my life and I still think that Salcombe is up there as one of the most beautiful places I've ever been to. On the right day Salcombe is truly unbelievable."

And while Gillard is keen to move British tourism away from its image of the past, it is his own fond memories of summers at the hotel that inspired the project to begin with.

"I spent quite a bit of time at South Sands when I was younger; I actually learnt to swim in their pool when I was a kid. We just happened to be on the beach one day with Andrew's kids and we noticed the For Sale boards. It had essentially been closed and derelict for a period of about five years which just seemed so sad.

"We both thought maybe we should call in about it, but we forgot about it for a few days until we were having dinner with some friends. They happened to have the information sheet and there were only a couple of days left before sealed bids had to be in for it."

Despite Gillard and Turner's considerable enthusiasm for the project it seemed for a time that it was not to be, as Gillard recalls: "We set about trying to get some interested parties, and we managed to get a couple of people interested in financing it. But when the bids were announced we found out that we'd actually been unsuccessful. So we sort of gave up on it until we got a phone call to say that the top bidder hadn't been able to come up with the deposit and that we were next in the queue."

And so South Sands was finally in the hands of owners with a clear vision of where it needed to go, and Gillard wasted no time in setting out to achieve his goal.

"We had a clear idea of what we wanted right from the outset and a clear vision of what was required in the South Hams. Andrew and I wanted a New England style hotel from day one. And we very much had the Ralph Lauren beachside theme in mind."

To achieve the stunning design of the hotel's interior, Gillard first consulted architects to put together themes for every room. But when this

failed to deliver an aesthetic which matched his own vision, he realised a different approach was needed.

"The initial designs we were given were sort of dark and moody and we wanted this light, bright beachside place. Then a friend of mine, Henrietta Thom, started getting involved in the interiors and ultimately ended up doing the lion's share."

Taking inspiration from the ethos upon which the hotel was built, Thom sourced all the furnishings and decorative touches from local suppliers and artists. As a result, the breathtaking, nautically themed interior truly encapsulates the hotel's celebratory spirit of the best Devon has to offer.

To continue in this vein, Gillard sought the perfect chef to oversee the hotel's delightful beachside restaurant – the highly acclaimed Mitch Tonks.

"People are much more aware now about their food and where it's sourced from. They like to know that it's produced locally and like to see familiar faces in the restaurant. I think what Mitch does just captures what we were trying to achieve perfectly. It's locally sourced products, cooked beautifully but simply. That to me is exactly where we wanted to be."

With its luxuriously comfortable rooms and fabulous restaurant, guests could happily enjoy a wonderful holiday at South Sands without ever leaving the building. But Gillard is always keen for visitors to enjoy as much of what Devon can offer as possible.

"One of the best things about South Sands is that we're on the beach and we want people to come down and get out there and do things. In summer particularly, it's absolutely wonderful, there's so



much to do. We have sailing, surfing, kite surfing, kayaking, and boat hire. There is also stunning coastline and Dartmoor on our doorsteps which provide some beautiful walks."

Gillard is also eager to ensure the increase in tourism generated by the appeal of South Sands has a positive effect on the wider community and other local businesses. He explains of this particular goal: "A big thing for me has always been to work very closely with businesses around us. And that's not just businesses that complement us, but competition as well. I work very closely with a couple of guys who run pubs and restaurants in Salcombe and we recommend that our guests go and try them.

## "SOUTH SANDS IS UNIQUE; IT REALLY DOES OFFER SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE."

"Literally with every activity we offer at the hotel, we work in conjunction with small local companies who have now become friends. Together, we're really trying to put Salcombe on the map."

Since the hotel's grand opening back in May, the South Sands has enjoyed a fabulous first season, in part thanks to some fantastic weather. As a result Salcombe's presence on the tourist radar has certainly increased.

"During our first weeks of opening we had beautiful unbroken sunshine – you could've been in the Med really. Having such a great start has meant that we've attracted tourists from across Europe, Canada, America, and even Australia. It's amazing because we're so new but people are really aware of us."

Gillard's passion for South Sands and the Salcombe area have clearly played a huge part in the hotel's subsequent success, however he is quick to praise the integral role his staff have played too as he explains: "I think people are looking for that friendlier aspect, where you have staff

retention and they recognise faces every time they come back, and equally the guests are recognised by name. I think all these small touches are very important. A lot of effort went into recruitment and sourcing the right team. We've worked very hard to assemble a core team that we hope will be with us here for years.

"Because of their continued hard work we've already got a great repeat business trade; it's outstanding really. We've been open since the first of May and we've got a good few customers who have been six or seven times, which in that space of time is pretty incredible. I'm really proud of my team, they're fantastic."

Having put Salcombe firmly on the tourism map, has Gillard now got any plans to embark on a similar venture somewhere else on the Devon coast?

"It's always a possibility and it's certainly something we've talked about. But you have to spend a sensible amount of time making sure you're getting things right. I would certainly say that we will stay here for at least three years, making sure we've got the business model right, before we look at doing anything else."

So, before you book your next holiday and take the gamble of placing your precious vacation in the hands of striking baggage handlers, erupting volcanoes, or financially unstable airlines, take a minute to ponder Gillard's closing words: "South Sands is unique; it really does offer something for everyone. We've really got an unrivalled location in this part of the country. If you want to be immersed in all the activity that's going on in Salcombe, then you have the opportunity to, but equally in two minutes you can be up on the South West coast path and you're away to total peace and quiet."

Does eight hours in an overcrowded departure lounge still sound like a holiday to you?

**For more information on South Sands Hotel, please visit their website [www.southsands.com](http://www.southsands.com) or call 01548 859 000**

Above from left: Local produce cooked beautifully but simply; Undervalued no more - a coastline view to rival anywhere