

# Limousine DIGEST

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"The Voice of the Luxury Ground Transportation Industry"

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# Bienvenido a Puerto Rico!



First Class Destination Solutions raises the bar on luxury service in this tropical locale



**W**elcome to Puerto Rico. La Isla del encanto—or “island of enchantment”—is one of the most popular vacation destinations in the Caribbean. If you’re into things like lying on the sand with a cocktail—who isn’t?—Puerto Rico has 270 miles of beaches and is home to the world’s largest rum distillery. U.S. citizens looking for a break from their everyday lives account for approximately 80 percent of tourism in this territory that doesn’t require them to have a passport and uses the dollar as its currency.

But leisure travel isn’t the only thing fueling the economy in Puerto Rico. Manufacturing plants of some major U.S. companies are located on the island, including Johnson & Johnson, Colgate Palmolive, Procter & Gamble, and Amgen. There’s no question that some very powerful people are traveling to and from the island for meetings, site inspections, and maybe a round or two of golf.

That’s where First Class Destination Solutions comes in. Formerly First Class Chauffeurs, the luxury chauffeured ground transportation company is a joint venture between industry veteran Robert Rodriguez, president/CEO, and concierge extraordinaire Michael Bemis, vice president/COO. Rodriguez has been in the transportation business since 1998 when he was driving a taxicab to make some extra money while going to college. After obtaining his first corporate client, Rodriguez upgraded to a Lincoln Town Car and more corporate accounts followed. Bemis’ background is in the high-end hotel industry. He was chief concierge at one of the top hotels in Puerto Rico and president of the Puerto Rico Concierge Association on the island—roles that put him in contact with Rodriguez. Bemis’ knowledge of service, paired with his experience in executive protection—something Rodriguez wanted to offer his clients—made for a natural business partnership that began in 2004.

Both men share responsibilities within the company. Bemis is heavily involved with operations, training, and staff, while Rodriguez works more on the sales side. Their strengths and experience complement each other, having allowed First Class to grow and provide the same level of luxury service you’d find in any of the major cities in the U.S.



First Class #1000 Michael Bemis (left) and President/CEO Robert Rodriguez in front of a San Juan



By Liz Hunter

You won’t find tropical shirts or linen pants in this company. Chauffeurs wear three-piece suits, despite the Caribbean climate. And the vehicles? Well, there’s no sacrifice in quality here either. First Class’ fleet of 34 vehicles includes Town Car sedans, SUVs, minibuses, and Sprinters, but the *crème de la crème* are its exotic models. The company owns the only Rolls-Royce Phantom in Puerto Rico, along with a Bentley Mulsanne, Porsche Panamera, Audi A8, and Mercedes S400. Rodriguez is used to the surprise most people have at hearing about these vehicles. “Some people think Puerto Rico is like a third-world country,” he says. “It’s far from it.”

Puerto Rico’s Port of San Juan is one of the busiest cruise ports in the world with approximately 20 ships docking each week

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during the high season, according to Rodriguez. The new Puerto Rican Convention Center has also made a big difference when it comes to marketing the destination to groups. It can accommodate groups up to 25,000 and was the recipient of the Prime Site Award of Excellence from Facilities Media Group as voted by meeting planners and other industry members.

Rodriguez says Puerto Rico’s tourism began focusing on high-end clientele a few years ago. Hotels and resorts were being renovated or built from the ground up, enticing visitors with beachfront properties, beautiful golf courses, and endless amenities. First Class capitalized on this boom and now has in-house transportation contracts with the three most luxurious destinations in Puerto Rico: The St. Regis Bohia Beach, La Concha Renaissance, and the five-star Condado Vanderbilt—which opens later this year and will be joined in December by a second five-star property, The Ritz-Carlton’s Dorado Beach Reserve. Rodriguez is fully vested in the tourism industry in Puerto Rico. He was just installed as vice pres-



ident of the Puerto Rico chapter of Skai International, a professional organization of 22,000 tourism leaders in 500 clubs throughout 90 nations, promoting global tourism and friendship. Rodriguez suggests that everyone in the ground transportation business become involved in this organization. He is also on the transportation committee of the Puerto Rico Tourism Company, and active with the CVB and the Puerto Rico Hotel & Tourism Association. "This is what we do on a daily basis," he says. "We network and build relationships all for the benefit of Puerto Rico."

Many of these relationships involve the executive assistants of



From left to right: Jessica Duran, Michelle Torres, Michelle Rodriguez, Jennifer Vazquez, Camille Malinowski, and Melissa Garcia



A First Class SUV on its way to the Puerto Rico capitol



Omar Quiñones, St. Regis (left), and operations manager (right), with David Lopez, group and sales director



The chauffeur lounge at First Class features a pool table and private restrooms



First Class' wedding area where planners bring brides for meetings



The Porsche Panamera is First Class' sanger

their corporate or hotel accounts. First Class recognizes that these people are the true decision makers when it comes to choosing ground transportation. "We're not sealing deals directly with a company's CEO," says Rodriguez. "These assistants are the ones who need to find reliable providers, and we work to gain their trust. With that, they call us not just for car service, but often for things like restaurant recommendations and other feedback." First Class reg-

ularly treats the assistants with special event outings. "When you live on an island you can use your imagination to create events or experiences that those assistants have not done," he says. One of the most recent included surprising them with sunset cruise along San Juan harbor on a catamaran with fine wine, cheese, and a live band. Another time, First Class created a spa area on a beach offering yoga classes and massages.

The partnerships created at these venues and among the tourism community in Puerto Rico prompted the company to rebrand itself from First Class Chauffeurs to First Class Destination Solutions. "Our motto is to 'upgrade your experience,'" says Rodriguez. "We are responsible for a trip becoming an experience from the music we select and the way we greet you, to our chauffeurs who act as your personal concierges." He adds that the only way hotels can guarantee their guests the same level of service is to deal directly with First Class, meaning that when destination management companies bring a group to these properties, there is no middle man to deal with. "Our chauffeurs are trained specifically for each hotel," he says. "They know every detail—the best restaurants, spas, or where to see a live band. It saves clients time and makes it easier when handling groups."

First Class also does a great deal of celebrity work. The company provided the transportation for the 2010 Latin Billboard

"We are responsible for a trip becoming an experience from the music we select ... to our chauffeurs who act as your personal concierges." — Robert Rodriguez

Awards—one of the biggest events ever held on the island—and has chauffeured The Rolling Stones, Britney Spears, Elton John,

and Metallica, among others. First Class offers executive protection and security as well, which Rodriguez says is a major selling point for this type of work. "When these clients know we are handling their transportation and their security, they feel safe. We know all of the protocols and have access to private areas in the hotels for their discretion. It can all be handled by our one company."

The more popular Puerto Rico becomes in terms of tourism,



L to R: Michael Berrios, Mario Gouzeau, Omar Regis, Luis Duran, Director, and Robert Rodriguez



Hotel Amer on Fort San Felipe del Morro



Dispatch Operations and Affiliate Manager Michelle Torres



The Bentley Continental is the most luxurious vehicle in the fleet

corporate travel, and celebrity appearances, the more First Class' affiliate network grows. The company's fleet and level of service has gained the attention of some of the most well-known companies in the U.S. Rodriguez says a great deal of affiliate work comes from New York, New Jersey, Boston, Washington, and Miami. Affiliate Manager Michelle Torres helps develop the relationships with these affiliates through meetings at trade shows and other events throughout the course of the year. "I feel we have gained the trust of many affiliates on the mainland," he says. "There is no sacrifice in the quality of service, and our chauffeurs are bilingual. When they go through training they are taught to read the notes on each trip. The notes explain the company we're representing and the contact number of that company in case of a change." Rodriguez says he will never say no to a passenger, but any special request or change in the reservation is brought to the attention of the affiliate and authorized.

First Class' exposure is growing and Rodriguez would like to see further expansion of his network into areas like Texas, Phoenix, and California. "I think a lot of people on the West Coast don't realize the business they might be missing by not having an affiliate in Puerto Rico. Movies are shooting here every week, spurred by film industry incentives offered by the Puerto Rican government, which means more celebrities coming in and out."

Rodriguez is confident about the service he delivers because he has the qualified employees to back it up. Each person brings their unique skills to the company, helping it function as a whole. David Lopez directs the groups and sales division; Melánia Garcia runs the reservations department; Carmen Maldonado works in accounting; Jennifer Vazquez is the comptroller; Luis Duran is the fleet manager who also oversees seven car washers; and stationed at the St. Regis is Omar Quiñonez. Jessica Duran is

the events and wedding coordinator and also Rodriguez's wife. This department specializes in destination weddings, and even has its own area in the office specifically designed for wedding planners to come and meet with brides. Here, First Class has information on vendors—whether it's a florist or salon—as well as computer access. "We work with a core group of wedding planners that we offer this space to instead of asking to meet the brides in a hotel lobby or coffee shop," says Rodriguez. It's just another example of the attention to detail First Class provides.

First Class' headquarters are brand new. Until this year, the

**"The more popular Puerto Rico becomes in terms of tourism, corporate travel, and celebrity appearances, the more First Class' affiliate network grows."**

company was in two different offices. They purchased one acre of land and custom-built a 3,000-square-foot office building, as well as a hanger that can accommodate 45 vehicles and a car wash area. Chauffeurs have their own lounge that includes a gym, kitchenette, pool table, TVs, bathroom, and showers. "This place is truly a dream come true. Everything we ever wanted is here," Rodriguez says. The building is in the process of being green certified by the Puerto Rican government. "It's all part of our company's commitment to the environment—along with the Mercedes hybrid diesel—little by little we're going to be changing our fleet to more eco-conscious models."

Rodriguez says the new location and current rebranding are bringing First Class to another level. He says he is extremely happy with the ground transportation service his and Berrios' company provides, but looking forward, the sky's the limit. "I would say that in 3 to 4 years we may begin offering private aviation services," he says. "That's going to be our goal. But for now, we've got a lot of great things happening with tourism and new hotels, not to mention the addition of a JetBlue terminal, that are going to bring a lot of jobs to the economy and visitors to our island." **LD**