

Hotels with Personality

An Interview with The Honorable Sir Rocco J. Forte, Chairman, Rocco Forte Hotels Limited, London



EDITORS' NOTE Prior to founding Rocco Forte Hotels in 1996, Rocco Forte served as chairman and chief executive of Forte plc, a company founded by his father in 1934. During his time at Forte, Rocco was responsible for more than 800 hotels, 1,000 restaurants, and nearly 100,000 employees in 50 countries around the world. British born and educated, Rocco took a degree in modern languages at Oxford University and qualified as a chartered accountant in 1969. He was knighted in December 1994 for services to the U.K. tourism industry.



The Hon. Sir Rocco J. Forte

COMPANY BRIEF Established in 1996, Rocco Forte Hotels Limited is a collection of luxury hotels located throughout Europe, each with its own individual style, reflecting its nationality and location; exemplary levels of service delivery; extensive exercise facilities; and state-of-the-art technology. The ever-expanding collection currently includes 10 luxury hotels located in some of Europe's preeminent cities, such as Brussels, Edinburgh, Florence, Rome, and St. Petersburg. Future openings are scheduled for Frankfurt, Berlin, Munich, Prague, and Sicily.

Are you satisfied with your current level of brand awareness?

As far as brand awareness goes, there's always room for improvement. We are a very young brand – we're only about eight years old. Obviously, we have good recognition for our name, because of the old Forte group. But the old company had a very broad portfolio, ranging from budget hotels to luxury properties, whereas Rocco Forte Hotels is just about luxury. We're well known in the U.K., and to some degree in Italy. We're less well known in the States, and I think we're hardly known at all in the Far East. So there's a hell of a lot to do in terms of promoting the name on an international basis.

Do all your properties carry the Rocco Forte name?

No. The whole idea of the brand is

that each hotel should have its own personality, which reflects its local environment and community. That impression is helped by each property having its own name. Today, the more sophisticated travelers are looking for something different. I don't think they want to stay in a hotel that feels like it is part of a chain.

Many of your properties are located in very competitive markets. How challenging is it to differentiate?

Obviously, there's competition everywhere you go. In some cities there's more competition than in others. However, in most of the cities we're in, our properties are actually the leading hotels, in the sense that they have the best yield. We have achieved that by making our properties really special, by giving them a particular local flavor.

In July 2003, the company acquired Brown's Hotel in Mayfair, London. Since then, it has been undergoing extensive renovations. What is your vision for that property?

Brown's Hotel is important to the group, because we are based in London and we didn't have a property in that city before. We needed to have a property there so people could see what we're about. Brown's used to be part of my old company, so I feel a bit nostalgic about it. It's very well located, in the heart of Mayfair. It's not too big – about 117 keys – so it's a very intimate property and it fits well within the profile of the brand. It was very rundown and needed a complete makeover, which is what we're giving it.

We've increased the size of the rooms quite considerably, and there are now more suites than there used to be. All the rooms have great bathrooms, which the old Brown's didn't have. At the same time, we are keeping the intimacy of the original hotel. I think this is a good time to be entering the London marketplace with a brand new property in the heart of Mayfair. Most new properties are being developed in more peripheral areas of

London. So I'm quite excited about Brown's, because it offers the group an opportunity to create one of the best hotels in London.

Are you planning to expand your portfolio further?

Our aim is to be the premier luxury hotel group in Europe, so we need to cover quite a large number of cities. In all, we need about 25 properties. I think I can continue to manage a group of that size and still have direct involvement in the properties. At the moment, I visit each property three or four times a year, and I think I can keep close to that even with a few more properties added to the group. After that, I don't know. When we get there, I'll take another look at things and see how we go.

Will you remain strictly focused on Europe?

Yes. I don't understand the Far East at all, so I'm not interested in going there. I'd like to go to the United States eventually, but I'm not in a hurry to do that now.

Does your expansion plan mainly involve taking over existing properties?

It depends on the financial viability of the project. Generally, when I take over an existing hotel, I like it to be a bit rundown and faded, so I can buy it at a better price and then redo it. That way, we have the advantage of the old brand, which is usually well known. This was the case with Brown's, for example, and it will be the case with the Richemond in Geneva, which we are in the process of completely refurbishing.

Looking to the year ahead, are there one or two key priorities for the group?

It's important for us to get to a number of our target cities as quickly as possible, so that will be a priority. We will also be working at keeping our product fresh. That is a continuing priority for us. And we would like to become better marketers. Generally speaking, I don't think people are particularly good marketers in the hotel industry. ●

Lobby of the Hotel Savoy, Florence, Italy