

Forte's Future

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, he 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, Forte 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.



Sir Rocco J. Forte

COMPANY BRIEF Established in 1996, Rocco Forte Hotels Limited (www.roccofortehotels.com) 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 collection includes the Hotel de Russie in Rome, The Balmoral in Edinburgh, Le Richemond in Geneva, and Hotel Amigo in Brussels.

Many leaders throughout the travel industry have remarked upon how strong business was last year. As you look to the future, are you optimistic for continued strong growth?

Yes. All of my properties are in Europe, and a large proportion of business in those properties comes from the United States. I've seen strong growth in business from the United States in all my hotels. This coincides with what the up-market travel trade is saying in the States, that last year was the best year since 2000. I think that, going forward, the prospects at this end of the market seem to be good. There's no reason to think that 2007 should be any different to 2006, unless, of course, there are major events that affect people's perception of travel. The interesting thing in relation to the U.K. market is that the terrorist attacks that occurred there have not had a major impact on the number of American visitors we've seen. It would seem as if high-end American travelers are much more sanguine about this now. They see terrorism as a fact of life and one of the risks of traveling.

How do you intend to grow the brand?

We have more properties coming onstream, so our sales will increase quite significantly every year. The European economy is generally still very stagnant. It has not been very buoyant, apart from in the U.K., where the outbound markets have been strong. Our second-biggest portion of customers after Americans are British people, and that's excluding visitors to our two U.K. properties. The other area that has seen considerable growth is business out of Russia. There is an increasing level of affluence there, not just at the super-rich level, but among the professional classes.

Will the brand remain focused on Europe for the foreseeable future?

Yes, I'm just concentrating on Europe, because at the moment I still don't have the coverage that I'd like to have there. There's no luxury hotel company that has any significant coverage in the major European centers. In fact, my company is one of the strongest in this regard. But I don't have representation in centers like Milan, Paris, Madrid, and Barcelona, where I would want representation. That applies to Moscow as well, and Amsterdam. Those are my main targets.

Is it important for you to have a distinctive feel in all of your hotels, so that guests instantly know they are in a Rocco Forte Hotel as soon as they walk in?

There's an element of a Rocco Forte feel in all my properties, but it's not regimented at all. There's a consistency in the atmosphere that we create in the properties, which is very friendly and relaxed. Quite a lot of luxury hotels can be very stuffy. And, of course, there's a consistency in the levels of service we deliver to the customer. Ultimately, though, we strive to create properties that are individualized according to their local marketplace, so that you feel you are in whichever city you are in, not in a hotel that could be anywhere. So we try to reflect the national characteristics of the country in which our hotels are located, and I think that contrasts rather dramatically with the uniformity of many of the international chains.

What is your approach to food and beverage?

We put quite a lot of emphasis on it, because, apart from anything else, it helps to define the character of the hotel. But our properties are not huge, so each one generally has only

one restaurant. That means one kitchen looks after the restaurant, room service, bar food, and everything else.

We are not aiming to create Michelin-starred restaurants, but we do aim to offer high levels of service and broad menus, to cater to the different moods of the guests. Very often, hotel guests arrive late in the evening. They don't really want to go out and often just want to have a quick snack. I believe that's something that should be available to our guests within the hotel. I think that kind of service is more practical than running a Michelin-style environment, where it's a performance to get the meal. So we go for simplicity in our menus, and we don't overelaborate the food, to allow the ingredients to speak for themselves. Moreover, we try very hard to attract local people to the restaurant, because that improves the atmosphere of the hotel. It gives it a much more local flavor, and makes guests who come from another country feel part of the local environment.

When you look ahead two to three years, do you have one or two key priorities for the brand, to ensure that you continue along a growth trajectory?

We've just opened in Berlin. It's the second hotel in Germany we opened last year, and we're opening in Munich in May. So I want to see us consolidating our position in Germany. With three properties there, we will be a dominant feature of the German marketplace. In addition, I'm going to continue to try to get into those cities where I don't have representation at the moment. I want to be the first European luxury hotel company with complete representation across all the major city centers. That's an important focus for the brand going forward. Plus, I'll continue to find ways of improving the services we offer our guests, and our efficiency in delivering those services.

Even after all your years in this industry, you still seem to exude a certain excitement and passion. Is it really as much fun as it was in the early days?

It's more fun really, because I've created something new. This is a product in my image, and that gives me a big kick. I still think we have a long way to go. I'm very ambitious for the business to become recognized as the finest luxury hotel company in the world. ●

The bar of the Hotel de Rome in Berlin (left); the Speyer Suite of the Villa Kennedy in Frankfurt (right), both Rocco Forte Hotels