

Restoring the Heritage of a Historic Resort

An Interview with Karen Earp,
General Manager, Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Barbara



EDITORS' NOTE Karen Earp, General Manager of Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Barbara, was selected in 2005 to oversee the property's \$240 million historic restoration project. Prior to this, Earp was General Manager of Four Seasons Hotel Canary Wharf, London. In 1994, Earp played a major role in the renovation of Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at Sultanahmet and was General Manager on Assignment at Four Seasons Hotel George V Paris. In 1991, Earp was Operations Director for Disneyland Paris, where she opened seven hotels and a golf course. Earp graduated from the University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom, where she studied hotel, catering, and tourism management. Earp earned a master's degree in business with an emphasis on marketing from City University, London.



Karen Earp

PROPERTY BRIEF Built in 1927, Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Barbara (www.fourseasons.com/santabarbara) features 207 guest rooms, suites, and cottages on beach-front property in the exclusive community of Montecito. The resort offers 15,000 square feet of meeting space; a 10,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art spa and fitness center; a swimming pool in addition to the exclusive Coral Casino Beach and Cabana Club; access to championship golf courses; and three tennis courts. The resort is operated by Toronto-based Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts (NYSE: FS), one of the world's leading operators of luxury properties.

Are you happy with how the property's business is growing?

I'm happy with how the business is growing and with our reputation as one of the pre-eminent resorts in the Americas. Our owner, Ty Warner, invested a lot in making sure the resort was meticulously restored. But it's not just the resort itself; it's the service we provide. Since 2006 we've been awarded the AAA Five Diamond award, which is a result of the experience our guests have when they're here.

Was it important to maintain some history and tradition at the resort?

Ty Warner wanted to restore the heritage of this iconic resort, and he did it with great finesse and attention to detail. It has all the modern conveniences, yet it still has the sense of place

as a popular resort destination it has had since 1927. The Spanish colonial feel has been maintained, respecting the property's history. In the lobby, artisans hand-painted the ceiling in a Mediterranean design with 23-carat gold. It looks as if it's been here for years. We had the furniture made so it's very much in keeping with the '20s era, but then hidden away is the Internet access.

What is unique about your food and beverage offerings?

We're fortunate to have access to an abundance of fresh foods. We get most of our produce from local farms, and more than 75 percent of our wines are from California, many from Santa Barbara county. We've been very successful with our restaurant, Bella Vista, which has amazing ocean views, a terrace, and retractable glass roof that allow guests to fully immerse themselves in the setting. We're opening our second restaurant at the Coral Casino, which is a private members beach club. It has 180-degree views of the Pacific Ocean, and you can see the Santa Barbara coastline and Channel Islands. It will offer Mediterranean-style cuisine, and will be open exclusively to our hotel guests and members. At the pool, there is the Coral Café, for those who want a casual dining experience. So, with three restaurants and two bars, we'll be able to offer a choice of different menus and cuisines.

How much have you focused on the spa and fitness offerings?

We realize how important it is to have state-of-the-art facilities, and we actually have two fitness areas: One is on the resort side, overlooking a beautiful rose garden and Spanish fountain, with the ocean beyond; the second, which is at Coral Casino, overlooks the pool and ocean. In 2002, we added our stunning 10,000-square-foot spa with 11 treatment rooms overlooking the ocean, designed by Peter Marino. It offers four lovely deluxe suites with their own fireplaces and terraces for an intimate lunch or couples massage.

Is it challenging to balance technology and human interaction for a property and a brand like yours, which is known for the human element?

We have diverse guests. The baby boomers came into technology later in life and feel more comfortable with the human element, while the

Y Generation demands state-of-the-art technology. So it's important to balance both. What is key in the industry is being aware of what the up-and-coming technology trend is and providing it to guests. We have to remember that our high-end luxury guests have technology in their own homes, so it's important for us to replicate that and create a home-away-from-home feeling at the resort.

Are you happy with the way you've been able to attract and retain talent?

It is critical to find the best employees possible, and we have a very rigorous interview process. I am at the final interview for every employee, and they go through four or five interviews before being hired. The key to retention is making sure we're constantly developing and training our employees. We're very proud that, for many years now, we've been voted among the top employers by *Fortune* magazine. We take our responsibility of developing our people and affording them different opportunities within their careers very seriously. We currently have 76 hotels in 32 countries, and we're still growing in many different areas of the world. For young people who want to travel and explore the world, it's a fantastic opportunity.

How did you end up in the hotel business?

In my home village in Great Britain, I got a weekend job in a small country hotel. I did everything from washing pots to cleaning rooms, and I loved the wide variety of people that I met, not only the people I worked with, but also the guests. I very much like that it's a people business. I've been able to travel the world and explore different cultures, which has been a wonderful journey for me, and I knew from a very early stage this was the industry I wanted to be in.

Do you see strong opportunities for women in the business?

It's a dynamic industry for women, providing tremendous opportunities for international travel. Our company is very much an equal-opportunity employer. The women on our executive committee and in our corporate offices are incredible role models for any women in this industry. Here at Four Seasons The Biltmore Resort Santa Barbara, we have five women in senior executive roles, reflecting change in the industry. ●

The Spa at Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Barbara