

Hospitality

Enhancing the Guest Experience

An Interview with Christian Clerc,
Regional Vice President and General Manager,
Four Seasons Hotel Washington, D.C.

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to assuming his current post, Christian Clerc served as Hotel Manager for the Hay-Adams and held the same position at the Four Seasons Hotel Washington, D.C. A Lausanne graduate, Clerc served as General Manager of the Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita (Mexico) before moving to his most recent role as General Manager and Regional Vice President at The Ritz-Carlton Chicago (A Four Seasons Hotel).



Christian Clerc

PROPERTY BRIEF Located in historic Georgetown – the U.S. capital's most exclusive residential neighborhood – the AAA Five Diamond, Mobil Five Star Four Seasons Hotel Washington, D.C., features 222 guest rooms, including 58 suites. Guests enjoy 24-hour concierge and room service, a state-of-the-art health and fitness center, private spa room treatments, power breakfast in Seasons restaurant, and Michael Mina's BOURBON STEAK restaurant. The property is a member of Toronto-based Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts.

In light of recent economic challenges, have you seen an impact on business for the property, and is it challenging to achieve growth in this type of market?

There are a lot of unusual circumstances linked to this economic downturn, and the impact is being felt nationally and internationally. It's too early to determine what impact this will have on our business. The best thing you can do in a downturn is to continue taking care of your guests and to make your product better. Strategic Hotels & Resorts, our owners, have invested \$40 million in enhancement projects this year. All of our rooms were renovated, and we added 11 new rooms, plus a 4,000-square-foot Royal Suite, to our inventory. The lobby has been redesigned and we brought in a new restaurant, BOURBON STEAK, with Michael Mina, who has been recognized as one of America's best chefs. We should have a very good first quarter in 2009 because of the election. Every time a new President comes in, there is a flurry of activity.

Washington, D.C., is known for having many good stand-alone restaurants. Is it challenging for a hotel to be successful in the restaurant area, and how did you

determine that your restaurant concept was the right one?

Washington was not considered a restaurant town 10 or 15 years ago. Today it is, and there are many competitive restaurants out there. When we considered redoing our restaurant space, we looked at what would complement the hotel. The BOURBON STEAK concept is very compatible with what we are: it offers a great dining and service experience in a comfortable setting and will be more casual than what you would expect from a traditional luxury hotel restaurant. The idea is to provide our guests and the local market with memorable dining and a fun and exciting concept.

How much of a focus is the full-service spa offering? Do you need to offer all the treatments and therapies?

Absolutely. We've been focusing very much on the spa and the fitness club. Our guests are looking to have a comfortable night and be reenergized for their meetings or private life. We continue to delineate the fitness club component – which is more of a high-energy area – from the spa, which is a serene, peaceful environment. We're also focusing on new treatments and lifestyle products. The spa experience should complement the guest experience at the hotel.

How do you balance offering guests technology with ensuring you don't lose what Four Seasons is known for – human interaction and a personal touch?

Our approach to technology is that it has to enhance the guest experience and be simple to use. What we don't want is to clutter the guest experience or make it less personal. Technology should be an option that our guests can elect to use, but by no means should they be forced to use it if they don't want to. One example is the automated private bars. The benefit is the automatic tally of items purchased, which eliminates one other knock on the door from the minibar attendant, or one last question at checkout about what a guest may have consumed, or the possibility of an inconvenient late charge.

In an industry with fairly high turnover, Four Seasons has always been successful at retaining employees. What is it about the brand and the culture that has

made the company so successful at keeping the talent?

It all comes down to our philosophy, which is "treat others the way you want to be treated." We apply this to everything we do with our employees and start with hiring the right people. Our employees are proud to work for Four Seasons, and that is a result of the relationship they have with the company, which is one of trust. Our goal is to be the employer of choice, and this drives all of our decisions. But this has to be a genuine process. Loyalty creates low turnover, which results in great service. When people are proud of what they do, and feel a strong sense of loyalty, they go above and beyond to provide genuine service. That has been the key to the success of this company.

With a wide variety of responsibilities, the hotelier seems to be more of a generalist. How do you define that role?

Today, it is important to be a good businessperson as well as a good hotelier if you want to succeed. But it's crucial to not lose track of your core business. At Four Seasons, our core business is delivering excellent service to our guests. As General Manager, I have to manage a very delicate balance between running a profitable business while staying in touch with the details of the operation, the guests, and the employees. So there's no doubt that the general manager's responsibility has evolved over the years, but I can't say that one role is more important than the other.

Did you know early on this was an industry you wanted to join? How did you end up in the business?

I was born and raised in Switzerland, and we have a strong tradition of hoteliers there. Growing up, I was always fascinated with hotels. A good family friend owned a restaurant in Montreux – my hometown – so I was exposed to the food and beverage business very early and fell in love with it. While on vacation as a child, I would try to visit the grand hotels in whatever town we were in. The beautiful lobbies and public areas fascinated me. For me, it's all about connecting with people. I get my energy from interacting with people, so I felt this was the right path. I'm very fortunate that I wake up every morning with a smile on my face. I'm thrilled to be doing what I'm doing. ●

The presidential suite in the Four Seasons Hotel Washington, D.C.