

LEADERS IN
Hospitality

A Perfect Performance

An Interview with Manfred Hörger,
Hotelier, Hotel Savoy Baur en Ville



Christina and Manfred Hörger

EDITORS' NOTE Manfred Hörger and his wife Christina, have been managing the Hotel Savoy Baur en Ville since 1985.

PROPERTY BRIEF Founded in 1838 by Austrian immigrant Johannes Baur, the Hotel Savoy Baur en Ville is Zurich's oldest hotel, sitting proudly on the celebrated Paradeplatz, which houses the gold vaults of Swiss banks. Its 97 elegantly appointed rooms and 15 lavish suites include dramatic lofted ceilings, luxurious marble bathrooms, and exquisite Biedermeier-style furniture. The property is also renowned for its two exclusive restaurants and its popular café/bar. Over the years, these attributes – as well as the Savoy's legendary discreet service – have attracted a loyal worldwide following of discriminating guests.

The Savoy has just been named “the best business hotel in the world.” How did the Savoy achieve that rare title?

Our aim is to make guests happy and to be at their service. You can produce a lot of wonderful brochures, but in those brochures, you cannot capture the atmosphere or the performance of the hotel, and I think we perform perfectly. The main reason for that is that we run this hotel

like a private household. My wife and I are responsible; she is behind the curtains, and I am in front of them. A hotel of our standing is just like a theater; you have to perform perfectly, but never play the main part. These days, a lot of people who invest in luxury hotels really want to provide luxury, but to me, luxury means atmosphere and good service. If you have a hotel with more than 150 rooms, it becomes very difficult to provide luxury, because the staff is not around as much as it should be.

So good people are hard to find?

That's one aspect of it. Certainly, good people are hard to find, and this starts with the way they're educated in school. The British have a wonderful saying about education: If you don't know chocolate, you don't miss it. I think we give youngsters today too much chocolate, so they miss everything else.

If you have a hotel with a lot of rooms, it's very hard to achieve what I would call true luxury. Large hotels may have ambassador floors, and they may have key floors, but that's not the same. I think a luxury hotel should be small; it should not have more than 150 rooms. When I advise people who invest a lot of money in big hotels, I suggest that they make sure there's a residential component, as well as offices and shops on the ground floor, because a hotel itself will never make enough money on its own.

Is the bank that owns your hotel satisfied with the money being made there?

I think they're satisfied, but it was never my aim to be 100 percent fully booked all the time. I prefer 50 percent booked and 100 percent paid. It's costly to provide excellent service. If you want to have a good staff, you have to pay people well. But you should never run a business just for revenue gain. The moment your customers are satisfied, they will definitely recommend you.

The hotel is right in the heart of Zurich's business district, surrounded by major financial institutions. Is it mainly bankers who use your private rooms?

It's celebrities as well, as they also have the right to privacy, and they request it.

It seems that certain manners no longer apply. For example, people have open collars and don't wear ties. What has contributed to this change in values?

It's because they had too much chocolate as children. If you don't educate your children during the first two years of their life, you are lost as a parent. They don't feel bad about it,

because they don't know anything else. But they are thankful when you give them the chance to overcome all this wrongdoing. This is what our dress code is about. In the old days, our guests knew how to behave, and we could learn from them. I wasn't born General Manager of the Savoy. I had to build my career step by step. Today, sometimes we have to educate the guests, and that puts us in a very funny position. The dress code, for instance, is written all over the hotel, but sometimes a guest is surprised by it and is unprepared. If a guest comes in wearing shorts and a T-shirt, I deal with it myself. I give him a private room so he can eat by himself. There's nothing personal about applying the dress code. It's about making sure that this hotel maintains its high standards.

Educating young people begins at home. How might parents contribute to the process, and how are they hindering it?

The problem is that mothers want to have children who become only doctors or lawyers. They stress out their own children, because they seem unable to appreciate a child who has a wonderful character or is a fantastic carpenter or an artist. That is the problem. Every mother wants to have something better, but nobody knows what “better” means. That is the big problem with education.

My wife and I have two children. We believe that there are two really important things in life for children: going to bed at night and getting up in the morning. So when our children were growing up, we had dinner with them in the evening, and in the morning we had breakfast together. During the day, the children didn't need us. They had to learn to fight. But the two emotional moments – going to bed and getting up in the morning – are important for parents.

Have your children grown up to be doctors, carpenters, or hoteliers?

They could have chosen whatever they wanted. My wife suggested never telling our son that he should go into the hotel business. We knew he would be successful in life if he chose to do what he loved to do. My son is a biocompatible engineer, and my daughter is getting her doctorate, working with different universities in the United States. But that was not planned. If they had become bankers, I would have been as happy as anything else. It's important that they live their own life. You have to give children wings, so they can fly. ●

The lobby of the Hotel Savoy Baur en Ville