

Defining the Luxury Hotel Experience

LEADERS asked leading hotel executives to define the luxury hotel experience today. Their answers follow:



Francois Delahaye,
Director of Operations,
Dorchester Collection &
General Manager,
Hôtel Plaza Athénée

Francois Delahaye

A palace, or luxury, hotel is a building whose character lies, more often than not, in a majestic and/or historic structure of striking appearance. In the case of the Plaza Athénée, its 100-year-old facade (of Baron Haussmann Parisian style), is also instantly recognizable from afar, from its red geraniums and awnings. These form its visual signature.

Inside, we introduced custom-made 'Amber' as our signature scent, which is diffused throughout its public areas. These two elements are important in how they add to the Plaza Athénée's distinctiveness.

As for the guest's experience of the hotel, we strive to maintain the highest level of quality, which is illustrated in Chef Alain Ducasse overseeing all of the five restaurant outlets, as well as banqueting. Chef Ducasse runs his only Naturality restaurant, in the Plaza Athénée – a concept of organic fish, pulse, and vegetables, which was awarded the top 3 Michelin star-rating in the Guide's 2016 edition. In the pastry department, our consultant is a Meilleur Ouvrier de France laureate and Pastry World Champion.

We emphasized our association with Dior – Monsieur Dior's business was started across the street from the hotel, so he could more readily dress the Plaza Athénée's feminine guests – by introducing on our premises, the brand's first spa – the only one in Europe – entirely dedicated to beauty, with its unique treatments and exclusive use of its custom products.

Luxury comes with space and light as well. In the recent enlargement and restoration works – completed in August 2014 – we worked to increase the level of light inside the hotel, in its public spaces. We also proceeded – having had an opportunity to acquire three adjoining buildings – by interconnecting these to the central, original structure, thus creating a wider and overall more spacious lay-out.

The most up-to-date technology has to come with a degree of seamlessness to add to the guest's comfort. Hence, from instant video



conferencing to sound quality or easy ordering from Room Service, we integrated the latest in computer engineering, and work to upkeep it accordingly.

Above all, luxury lies in how well guests are taken care of, and looked after. It is key to anticipate what would make an enjoyable experience for them, and exceed their expectations. Whether it is catering to their winter habits by putting up an ice-skating rink in our signature courtyard or ensuring the spirit and soul that this ancestral building is known and appreciated for is kept and enhanced, maintaining an environment that is pleasing both to the senses (and to the eyes) is an important element of the luxury hospitality.

We kept the Plaza Athénée's employees while the hotel was being refurbished because, aside from every investment made to provide an ultimate experience, what makes it truly ultimate is personalized service and attention. Staff who knows guests by name, recognizes them, and sees to them like individuals familiar to them, is a most special memory of a 'luxury' hotel, that visitors take home. It is in fact, even perhaps, what may also make whatever price they paid to stay reasonable and totally worthwhile.



Debrah Dhugga,
Managing Director,
DUKES London

Debrah Dhugga

For me, luxury does not refer to all that glitters or the building; it is about the service. It is about the friendliness of the staff, the attitude of employees, from the moment your guests step into the hotel. The attention to detail in service is critical to any DUKES hotel experience. It's about offering the simple things well with consistency and a smile from a well-groomed member of the team.



Geoffrey Gelardi,
Managing Director,
The Lanesborough

Geoffrey Gelardi

I firmly believe that getting the basics right for guests every time, without fail, still remains of paramount importance in ensuring a luxury hotel experience, be it the perfect type of material for a bathrobe or simply ensuring you have a free, fast, and reliable Wi-Fi connection available at all times.

The luxury guest experience today goes beyond the basics; you need to be able to cater to the senses, creating experiences that your guests will cherish. This can be from the smallest of things to the larger bespoke experiences, but they must resonate emotionally with our guests.





Michael Hoffmann

**Michael Hoffmann,
Managing Director,
Waldorf Astoria
New York**

Luxury today is the ability to do what you want when you want it; in other words, time is luxury – and when you finally find the time, you want to be able to take full advantage of the opportunity and maximize

the benefits.

In hospitality, that translates to being respectful of privacy, anticipating needs, and delivering on the promise.

If you do that, the customer has the freedom to get on with his plan and enjoy his time the way he would like to. Traveling today is tedious; nobody respects the value of time: there are lines to check in, lines at security, lines at boarding, and so on.

The real luxury is avoiding these and taking advantage of what's important: arriving early, clearing all hurdles, and getting settled.

The better we can help the customer reduce the interferences of his experience, improve on the delivery of the expectation, and exceed those anticipations, the greater the outcome.

True luxury is looking after your customer and the customer feeling looked after.



Gail Isono

**Gail Isono,
General Manager, The
Scarlet Huntington**

The luxury hotel experience today starts with the anticipation of arriving at a hotel that conjures an image of warmth and confidence, knowing you'll be taken care of by a staff with "heart." The Scarlet Huntington is the perfect

example of a luxury hotel, and we create memories because this is "home." Luxury isn't just about the finer amenities in the hotel. Luxury is feeling that your stay is "priceless."



Olivier Lordonnois

**Olivier Lordonnois,
General Manager,
The Mark**

Luxury has become less about acquiring "things" and more about self-actualization and gaining one-of-a-kind experiences. While the physical aspects of a hotel are still of great importance, truly rarified luxury lies more in the creation of a completely unique experience for the guest – the ambiance and energy the guest feels upon arriving to the hotel; the location of the property and the way in which it connects guests with local culture; the variety of exclusive and bespoke amenities that a guest can enjoy during their stay; and the exceeded expectations that can only be achieved through a highly personalized level of service and keen attention to details.



Suzie Mills

**Suzie Mills,
General Manager,
Trump International
Hotel & Tower New York**

A luxury experience is defined, in my view, as impeccable personalized service. While the means of learning about a guest's likes and dislikes, or how a guest prefers to book and receive communications may have changed with technology and social media, the ultimate premise of luxury and uncompromising service has remained the same. It is about learning about a guest's likes and dislikes so we can customize their stay.



Elizabeth Mullins

**Elizabeth Mullins,
Vice President and Area
General Manager, Ritz-
Carlton Central Park**

Luxury travelers now place more emphasis on service, personalization, and authentic travel experiences than the mere physical trappings of luxury. The need for personalization continues to impact luxury travel, leading to the creation of enduring personal relationships based on trust between luxury travel providers and travelers.

This trend is amplified by the use of ever-advancing technology, and especially by the phenomenal growth of the digital space and social media.

With time being the most precious commodity, all elements of the luxury travel experience must work seamlessly, from the planning process to returning home.

Ultra-luxury positioning, authenticity, content, knowledge, real relationships, customization, and personalization are redefined as ruling principles.

Luxury travelers tend to travel often and stay with a single brand for hotels and airlines; however, they are looking for tangible benefits for their loyalty. 'Authentic local experience' is what luxury travelers want most.



Offer Nissenbaum

**Offer Nissenbaum,
Managing Director,
Peninsula Beverly Hills**

True luxury in hospitality is about making the experience effortless for the guest – not only saving them time and making things convenient, but anticipating their needs in the most thoughtful way. Our 'Peninsula Time' flexible check-in and check-out is based on this premise, as is our Airport Concierge Service. We want to take the stress out of travel and make the process of arrival and departure as seamless as possible. At the end of the day, it's about the full experience beyond the physical product.



Gary Schweikert,

**Gary Schweikert,
Managing Director,
Trump SoHo**

Luxury today goes beyond high-thread-count sheets and signature restaurants – those are expected. Today's luxury consumer is interested in personally curated experiences. Providing our guests with a seamless way to learn about and take advantage of unique offerings in our neighborhood is where we excel – New York, and SoHo in particular, offers a wealth of opportunities to give guests an experience that simply cannot be found elsewhere.



Thomas Steinhauer

**Thomas Steinhauer,
Regional Vice President
and General Manager,
Four Seasons Resort
Orlando at Walt Disney
World Resort**

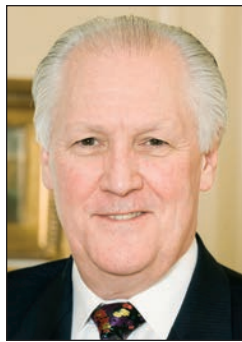
Luxury will always be associated with quality at the highest level, which also dictates price.

Materials used when building a luxury hotel, for instance, are selected based on several criteria beyond look and functionality – how they feel to the touch, and in some cases, uniqueness and rarity of their availability. The appreciation for luxury products goes beyond basic functionality at the best price.

Thoughtfully designed and well-appointed guest rooms, as well as common spaces, quality food and bar offerings in attractive restaurants, top quality (high efficacy) products in spas, etc., are basic expectations for the luxury traveler.

But what truly makes a hotel distinct in the minds of our guests – what separates luxury from lavishness – is the performance of the staff, their responsiveness, flexibility, intelligence, and curiosity. It is truly about the hotel's ability to understand the guest.

Luxury Hotel Brands achieve their status and reputation based on how well – and consistently – they meet those expectations.



Philip Wood

**Philip Wood, Managing
Director, The Jefferson
Hotel DC**

To me, the word “luxury” has become diluted because of its overuse, especially in all things marketing. I recall when a “boutique” hotel was smaller than 100 rooms and usually identified with independent, top-of-the-line properties, whereas nowadays, it is not unusual to find chain hotels with 200-plus rooms abusing the word.

Many hotels have excellent standards of operation and staff trained accordingly. This though is the minimum requirement in today's marketplace. To me, the differentiator is the sense of ownership that the hotel can impart to its employees. World travelers are not only looking for interesting and unusual experiences but to identify the front-line staff at every level.

In our operation, we seek to hire people with a positive attitude and we encourage them to add their own personality in exceeding guest expectations. It is then management's job to give them the resources to execute at every possible level.

In a high-tech world, personal caring, anticipation, and commitment are what will separate one luxury property from another, regardless of physical attributes.

People, People, People!



Maria Razumich-Zec

**Maria Razumich-Zec,
General Manager, The
Peninsula Chicago**

Luxury travelers today expect personalized service, curated experiences, and thoughtful design, and they expect the staff and the overall experience to be intuitive and seamless.

Luxury at The Peninsula Chicago is all about personalized service and exceeding guests' expectations. Our goal is to always anticipate guests' requests. We take great care in getting to know our guests' preferences and occasion for travel so that we can tailor each stay with the utmost attention to detail.

Today's travelers are looking for more curated experiences, insider access, and knowledgeable hotel staff that can share exclusive opportunities to experience a city's treasures. At Peninsula Chicago, the Keys To The City program was created to offer one-of-a-kind experiences that highlight the best of Chicago's art, architecture, theatre, dining, shopping, attractions, and more.

Thoughtful design is not only about the finest quality materials and product, but true luxury is created through an experience that is both seamless and sophisticated. Our recent guest room renovation is a perfect example where every detail of the design is both beautiful and purposeful. With today's continued proliferation of technology, we have incorporated tools to our guests' experience that help make their stay more efficient. Our extensive guest room tablet technology includes the ability to control lighting, temperature, housekeeping requests, TV, access to 4,000 online publications, room service menu, city attractions, and more –and it translates into 11 languages. As the needs of our guests continue to evolve, we are committed to continuing to design our luxury experience around them. ●