

# LEADERS IN *Hospitality*

## Conrad's Can-Do Attitude

An Interview with Dennis A. Clarke,  
Managing Director, Conrad Hong Kong



**EDITORS' NOTE** A veteran hotelier with 41 years' experience, Dennis Clarke assumed his present post in 1999. During his tenure with Hilton Hotels Corporation, Clarke spent two decades serving as General Manager of properties in the greater Los Angeles area, including The Beverly Hilton in Beverly Hills.



Dennis A. Clarke

**PROPERTY BRIEF** The Conrad Hong Kong, occupying the top 22 floors of a 61-story skyscraper in the heart of the city's business district, features superb views of Victoria Harbour or Victoria Peak from each of its 513 rooms and suites. In addition, the hotel is renowned for its excellent restaurants, opulent executive lounge, and state-of-the-art in-room technology. The Conrad Hong Kong is part of Hilton Hotels Corporation, a leading global hospitality company, with more than 2,900 hotels and 490,000 rooms in 76 countries and territories. The company owns, manages, or franchises a hotel portfolio of some of the best known and most highly regarded brands.

### Has the travel and tourism business been strong in Hong Kong over the past year, and what is your outlook for growth for the Conrad Hong Kong in 2009?

We have been enjoying good business since 2003; however, it started to slow down during the fourth quarter of 2008, giving increasingly bleak prospects for 2009. The economic downturn is expected to have a deeper impact on the global appetite for business and tourism, and Hong Kong will face a bigger risk of falling into a recession next year because of the global economic volatility.

### What are some of the projects taking place at the Conrad Hong Kong that guests can benefit from in the coming years?

It is necessary to keep our hotel fresh and up-to-date. A comfortable room with appealing decor and user-friendly facilities is a key requirement for our guests, and a recently completed refurbishment of our guest rooms and suites enables our guests to enjoy an enhanced level of comfort. The contemporary classic theme accentuated with Chinese traditional elegance is carried through from guest rooms to public areas to provide a warm residential ambience. This is complemented by our new hotel

lobby – an arrival point for our incoming guests – as well as our refurbished Grand Ballroom, a venue that attracts the social limelight with a host of local prestigious social functions and gala events. In early October 2007, our Italian restaurant, Nicholini's, and in 2008 our much-acclaimed Chinese restaurant, Golden Leaf, reopened after renovation and are already proving again to be favorite dining spots for gourmet connoisseurs and local restaurant critics. Currently under development are our health club and our ever-popular all-day dining outlet, Garden Café. The ultimate completion of our renovation ensures that the Conrad can compete effectively among the new generation of luxury hotels in the city.

### How challenging is it to differentiate from your competitors, and what makes the Conrad Hong Kong unique?

In the face of increasing luxury inventory in the city and the growing sophistication of our customers, it is very important for us to be able to differentiate our product from that of our competition. This is true anywhere, but especially in a city like Hong Kong, which is crowded with some of the best hotels in the world, the physical product alone will not do it. Guests are looking for a hotel experience that offers them the lifestyle they are accustomed to. Guests are also looking for personal recognition and to engage with their environment. The issue of people is vital. From hiring employees with the right attitude to training and empowering our team members to meet and exceed guests' expectations – all of that is part of the culture at the Conrad. Ultimately, it is our team members' can-do attitude in meeting guests' needs and their fast and flexible approach that gives us a competitive edge.

### Would you highlight the food and beverage business at the Conrad Hong Kong?

People in Asia enjoy dining in hotel restaurants, as opposed to in the United States where people usually prefer to go to freestanding restaurants. Nicholini's and Golden Leaf have a fantastic reputation, and our regular customers remained keen supporters when they reopened. Both restaurants are doing exceptionally well and have earned an enviable reputation for fine, exquisite cuisine. The signature dishes and seasonal specialties, skillfully created by the culinary experts in our restaurants, including

Brasserie on the Eighth, entice our patrons to return time and time again.

### How much of a focus has the spa experience been for the Conrad?

Many leading properties today place great emphasis on offering high-end spa and fitness facilities. Wellness is very important. In 2009, our health club will receive a new designer's touch, which I am sure will be hailed as a great success when completed.

### What impact is technology having at the Conrad Hong Kong, and how do you balance it with the human contact element?

Technology enables us to eliminate activities that don't add value to our hotel. By applying technology to continually improve our business processes, we can spend more time with our guests. The Conrad can count on one thing: Information technology is expected to play a major role in improving efficiency and service, keeping customers happy and coming back.

### How do you define the role of General Manager today, and how do you focus your time and efforts?

A good leader trusts more and abandons bureaucracy, allowing for direct communication up and down the hotel and quick turn-arounds. Effective leaders master their time by relentlessly clearing items off the to-do list in lightning speed, keeping things simple, and not making a federal case out of anything. This allows us more time and attention to service our internal and external customers with no politics, to achieve higher morale and increased productivity, and to create greater value for the shareholders through higher profitability.

### As you look to 2009, what key priorities are you focused on for the property to ensure you keep your leadership position in the industry?

When a downturn hits hard, people usually overreact. They cut costs and staff indiscriminately and trim capital expenditure. Then, when conditions improve, they must spend heavily to regain momentum. In our case, we will manage our costs carefully and consistently, focusing on what we do best, reinforcing the core business and spending to gain market share. We will aggressively monitor the competition to ensure our competitive edge and accelerate when the economy starts to improve to take advantage of competitors' mistakes. ●

*A view from the Conrad Hong Kong*