

Executive TRAVEL

Understanding People

An Interview with Jack Naderkhani,
General Manager, Raffles L'Ermitage Beverly Hills

EDITORS' NOTE Jack Naderkhani has been in his current position for more than 17 years and is an active contributor to Beverly Hills tourism and to the civic community. Naderkhani has degrees from Barnet College in London, the University of Dallas, the University of Houston, and Cornell University's General Managers Program. He is also on the Advisory Board for the Executive Hotel Management Program at the UCLA Extension.



Jack Naderkhani

COMPANY BRIEF Raffles L'Ermitage Beverly Hills (www.raffles-lermitagehotel.com), located on a tree-lined residential avenue in Beverly Hills, has 119 guestrooms and suites, a rooftop pool exclusively for residents, and is home to the famed Writer's Bar. The property, which has a reputation for catering to a sophisticated clientele looking for a respite from the frenetic Los Angeles scene, is the recipient of the Mobil Five Star and AAA Five Diamond awards for 2009. Additionally, it received the highest rating in the Michelin Guide to Los Angeles and was selected for the prestigious Forbes Traveler 400 list.

Raffles Hotels & Resorts (RHR) is a collection of luxury hotels and resorts worldwide, each distinguished by its luxury, elegance, and residential charm. Each hotel is a landmark in its respective city, positioned at the top of its local market and rated among the very best in the world. RHR currently has seven properties in its portfolio with additional properties scheduled to open in the next three years. Raffles Hotels & Resorts is owned by Fairmont Raffles Hotels International, a leading global hotel company with 91 hotels and resorts worldwide under the Raffles, Fairmont, and Swissôtel brands. The company also owns Fairmont and Raffles branded Residences, Estates, and luxury private residence club properties.

The travel industry has been heavily affected by the current economic downturn. How much of an impact have you seen on the market in Beverly Hills and, specifically, on L'Ermitage?

Beverly Hills is an iconic city and remains a strong travel destination, though some visitors have shortened their stays and cut back on extravagant spending in the stores. Like everyone in the hospitality business, we have



seen a dramatic shift, particularly in the corporate segment, as businesses are becoming more conservative in their spending and more conscious of where their travel dollars are going.

How do you work to protect your rate integrity in such challenging economic times?

The core of our business is derived from travel agents and corporate travel planners with a heavy concentration in the entertainment and fashion industries. We view these travel professionals as our partners and continue to build on our relationships. We appreciate their loyalty and understand the challenges they are facing. Therefore, a key part of this relationship is listening to their specific needs that may have changed of late and responding with an innovative plan that fits their parameters but still gives them the highest level of service and the most advantageous rates. For instance, by working with our contacts at a major airline, I was able to create a room package for clients that included airline tickets and premium rental cars at an attractive price. We can also protect our rates by offering value-added options like guaranteed upgrades and personal amenities – it's all in the details.

In cities like Beverly Hills and New York, where there are so many good stand-alone restaurants, is it a challenge to have a successful hotel restaurant?

In New York and Los Angeles especially, you have to pick the right fight. Though in a hotel, you do have a captive audience, we strive to provide a different dining experience than most LA restaurants. We offer guests an intimate, quiet setting ideal for conversation, and occasionally negotiation – much like a dining room in a fine private residence. People can sit in our 'Living Room' by the fireplace and enjoy drinks and something to eat, or they can choose al fresco dining on our restaurant patio, or for something more casual, poolside at our rooftop pool. It is not a matter of competing but of providing a comfortable and convenient alternative.

What types of meetings are most appropriate for L'Ermitage?

Due to the intimate nature of the property,

we don't have large social events. However, we do cater to smaller meetings with a number of venue options. Actually, the changing nature of business today has worked to our advantage as meetings are indeed smaller and require more intimate surroundings – moving out of the traditional cavernous meeting rooms into more flexible locations. Recently, we had a boutique legal firm buy out our restaurant one night and serve vintage wines from our cellar, while a fashion house had a dinner under the stars on our rooftop terrace. The smaller size of the meetings allowed for more dramatic yet intimate venues.

This business has always been described as a people business. Is it challenging to offer all the expected technology while making sure you don't negate the personal side of the business?

I always say I used to communicate with pigeons and smoke signals. Never forget our business is about reaching out to and understanding people. Technology is for the convenience of your guests, not for the convenience of your staff. Though the technology facilitating online check-in, messaging, in-room controls, and room service should be available, it should not take the place of interaction between the guest and the staff. In many hotels, the staff is purely reactive, like robots. Again, we stress the importance of relationships and personal interaction as the key elements to service at any fine property. Technology is simply one of many useful hospitality tools.

Did you know very early on that this was the industry you wanted to be in, and how did you end up in the business?

Though I was trained as a civil engineer, I always enjoyed working with a wide variety of people and found myself drawn to the hospitality business. I have been at Raffles L'Ermitage Beverly Hills for more than 17 years and I credit my longevity and the many honors the property has achieved to the excellent personnel I have worked with. Though I may be the coach, it is always teamwork that earns the victory. Of course, sometimes I dislike the job when I'm going home, but I can't wait to come back the next day. ●

The pool at Raffles L'Ermitage Beverly Hills