

The Flagship of Taj in the Western Hemisphere

An Interview with Heiko Kuenstle,
General Manager, The Pierre

EDITORS' NOTE Heiko Kuenstle assumed his current post in 2005. Kuenstle spent four years earlier in his hospitality career at this landmark hotel on New York's Fifth Avenue. Previously, Kuenstle was General Manager at The Lowell Hotel, New York, beginning in June 2001. He began his career in Germany where he apprenticed at the three-star Michelin restaurant, Schwarzwaldstube, oversaw the one-star Michelin restaurant at Moench's Posthotel, and served as Manager of Hotel Domizil before coming to America. Kuenstle began at The Pierre in 1994 as Assistant Manager in housekeeping and rose to Guest Service Manager and Front Office Manager before leaving for the Hôtel Plaza Athénée, New York where he served as Rooms Division Manager.



Heiko Kuenstle

PROPERTY BRIEF Built in 1929 in the style of a French chateau, The Pierre (www.tajhotels.com/pierre) is situated on Central Park at Fifth Avenue and 61st Street. In 1938, J. Paul Getty acquired the hotel and subsequently sold some of the property's original 714 guest-rooms as cooperative apartments. Operations changed hands several more times until Trust House Forte acquired the hotel in 1973. In 1981, the lease was taken over by Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces is the current lessee and operator of The Pierre.

Established in 1903, Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces is one of Asia's largest and finest groups of hotels, comprising 56 hotels in 39 locations across India with an additional 17 international hotels in the Maldives, Mauritius, Malaysia, Seychelles, U.K., U.S., Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Africa, and the Middle East. The Indian Hotels Company Ltd. (IHCL) operates Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces, which is part of the Tata Group.

Following your re-launch of The Pierre under the Taj banner, will you give us an overview of the renovations and the status of the property today?

For Taj, this is a hotel we don't own, but lease. To come in here and invest \$100 million is a sizable investment. But such a commitment was justified, because The Pierre is the flagship of the Taj Group in the Western hemisphere, only comparable to the Taj Mahal Palace & Tower in Mumbai.

It is a fairly large property. Originally, it comprised of over 650 rooms and suites, but because many years ago roughly 80 apartments were created that occupy almost two-thirds of the inventory, the hotel now features less than 200 rooms and suites – and one of the best and largest banquet spaces in the city.

One of the major renovation goals was increasing the bathroom size in the guest rooms, an area where The Pierre had always lagged behind the newer properties that were built from scratch. When this hotel was built

in 1930, people traveled differently, requiring more space to store their luggage, so an emphasis was placed on closet space. By utilizing some of that space, we were able to increase bathrooms space without decreasing the size of the rooms or changing the rooms layout.

We took over in June 2005, with the idea to renovate this building, but it wasn't until December 2007 that we completed surveying the entire building and were finally able to start the renovation. But then it only took us 18 months to get this entire hotel completed, which is quite remarkable for New York.

In renovating the property, was it important to not lose some of the personality The Pierre is known for?

Very much so. But Taj has been known to manage, operate, and care for real palaces in India and other parts of the world, so we have a tradition of being a caretaker of properties. There were three guiding principles for the renovation: we wanted to maintain the heart, the soul, and the spirit of the property; we wanted to gently nudge it into the 21st century, in terms of decor and technology; and we wanted to bring subtle hints of India to complement our Taj presence and heritage.

In a city like New York with so many great stand-alone restaurants, what restaurant concept made sense for The Pierre?

We had a choice when we closed the hotel to look for a three-star concept or something that would work in this neighborhood so patrons on the Upper East Side could come two or three times a week for lunch or dinner – that is what I wanted.

I have been very fortunate to have found a partner with Caprice Holdings, particularly with the owner Richard Caring. He was very interested in expanding what is a fantastic



brand in the U.K. that hadn't been moved anywhere outside of London. So the concept has a proven track record, and even throughout the recession, is still looked upon as a great value. People don't mind spending money if they feel they're getting value for it – they don't want the feeling they're being taken advantage of right now. We have great service and great food at reasonable prices.

How did the restaurant concept lead you to the bar concept?

Le Caprice restaurant features an eat-in bar, where people, especially if they travel by themselves, feel more comfortable rather than sitting alone at a restaurant table. Previously, The Café Pierre had the bar in the front and the restaurant in the back and, having to incorporate both spaces into the new Le Caprice, we realized that we needed to find space for a bar elsewhere in the hotel. There has always been a wonderful room right off the lobby that used to be the executive office for many years, and it maintains some of the original details and moldings, so it was an easy choice to put a bar in there and enhance the feel of the lobby. It was meant to be a lounge/bar where people during the day can meet with friends for coffee, and in the evening, have a wonderful bar atmosphere.

With so many loyal guests over the years, how critical has it been to retain the talent that has been with The Pierre for many years?

Very important. In the end, it's all about recognition and having the sense of homecoming for many of our loyal guests. If you have an organization like this – and Taj is an organization that is definitely going to grow further in the states and in the Western world – it's great to not just keep talent but also to develop talent for new positions and challenges at The Pierre or in the other properties we have. ●

The Pierre exterior from Central Park