

Hospitality

Putting The Surrey on the World Map

An Interview with
Shan Kanagasingham, General Manager, The Surrey

EDITORS' NOTE In 2011, Shan Kanagasingham was appointed to her current post. Prior to this, Kanagasingham was with the Viceroy Hotel Group where she was most recently Area General Manager for both Viceroy Miami and the Tides South Beach. Prior to working with the Viceroy Hotel Group, she worked with brands such as the Mandarin Oriental in Hong Kong; Raffles L'Ermitage in Beverly Hills, California; and The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Group. Kanagasingham holds a bachelor's degree in hotel management from the Swiss Hotel Association.



Shan Kanagasingham

PROPERTY BRIEF Built pre-war in Beaux-Arts architectural design, The Surrey hotel evokes the ambiance of a residential town house. It is situated on the Upper East Side with direct access to Madison Avenue's upscale boutiques and restaurants, Museum Mile, and Central Park. The property (www.the-surrey.com) features 189 guest accommodations, including 30 suites, a Penthouse, and Presidential Suite. It is also home to Daniel Boulud's Café Boulud, Cornelia Spa at The Surrey, and a 2,200-square-foot Private Roof Garden with views overlooking Central Park.

What excited you about the opportunity to come to The Surrey?

When I joined Viceroy, it was Kor Hotel Group and we re-branded the company name. As a young company, it allowed me to hone in on many disciplines and have more of an entrepreneurial spirit. Unfortunately, the business was affected by the economy and we lost the Tides South Beach flag.

What attracted me to The Surrey was a similar opportunity in that this luxury hotel was virtually unknown. It would allow me to make my mark.

When you came in, were you happy with the product?

The design of this hotel is exceptional; it's reminiscent of a classic Upper East Side home with both modern and traditional elements.

Is your competitive set primarily within the midtown area or throughout Manhattan?

We have two competitive sets: the aspirational set, including the Four Seasons, The Ritz-Carlton, and a select few from this geographic area; and our core set, which includes The Carlyle, Hôtel Plaza Athénée, The Mark, and The Pierre.

I added a question on our guest satisfaction survey that asks where else our guests would stay if they were unable to stay at The Surrey. After 14 months, it's always The Carlyle or The Mark – once in a while, you will get something in midtown or another brand. But the guest coming to The Surrey is definitely coming for the Upper East Side.

Where is the market today? Is business coming back?

That is a tough question to answer. We feel the business has always been there for the taking, but now we have the resources to meet our owners' expectations.



How critical is the food and beverage component and what distinguishes you in this regard?

In November of last year, we became affiliated with Relais & Châteaux. This was instrumental for us with Daniel Boulud being a Relais & Châteaux Grand Chef and hence, there is excellent synergy with our partnership.



The Surrey entrance (above); rooftop lounge area (center); the Penthouse Suite living area (bottom center)

When I make sales calls, especially in Europe, that affiliation is powerful. For us to be associated with a world-class operation like Café Boulud is truly exceptional. I know we used to have guests stay with us because of Café Boulud, but I would like to see even more guests going to Café Boulud because it is at The Surrey.

Has the new spa product been well received?

It's an exquisitely designed spa; the partnership with Cornelia Spa at The Surrey has been in the works since October 2011. There were opportunities in the space for us to be more profitable and with a reputable brand like Cornelia, we will be able to further benefit from Cornelia's return to New York.

How do you offer today's technology without losing the personal touch?

It's a balance of high-touch and high-tech, and the guests of The Surrey are more high-touch than high-tech. Having said that, you do need to modernize by utilizing new technology in efforts to not miss a generation. Our recently upgraded television system allows you to download an app onto your smart phone where you can communicate directly with the television. However, it is our genuine service delivery that continues to be the backbone of our success.

How has the role of GM evolved?

It's a hybrid. I spend as much time as I can on our human capital because without engaged and connected team members, the hospitality aspect is lost. The role of serving our guests continues to be a focus with every decision we make. The business side of it is relevant as well but, in the end, it is a balance among the three.

Why are there so few female general managers? Are there sufficient opportunities available for women in this industry?

Gone are the days of that old school boys club. I am one of three female general managers in our company of 14 assets. I'm not sure why there aren't more in our industry, but the opportunities are definitely there. So I look forward to being a role model. ●