

Hospitality

The Lowell Lifestyle

An Interview with Ashish Verma,
General Manager, The Lowell



The Garden Suite (above); a sample of The Lowell's luscious amenities (below)

EDITORS' NOTE Ashish Verma previously held positions with Orient-Express Hotels, Millennium Hotels and Resorts, Hyatt International Corporation, and Oberoi Hotels & Resorts International in Asia, Europe, and North America. Verma was born in the Punjab, India and received a B.A. with honors in political science and economics from Punjab University, Chandigarh, India; a graduate degree in Hospitality Administration from the Oberoi School of Hotel Management, New Delhi, India; and a Master of Business Administration from IMHI Cornell-ESSEC in Paris, France. Verma has been committed to several social, educational, and environmental causes and serves on boards of various nonprofit organizations.



Ashish Verma

PROPERTY BRIEF A 1927 landmark building, The Lowell is situated off Madison Avenue on New York's exclusive Upper East Side. The hotel (www.lowellhotel.com) dotes upon its guests with unique personalized service and attention to detail, maintaining 49 individually appointed suites and 23 deluxe rooms. Guests will appreciate complimentary beverages upon arrival, Voss water at turndown, and a selection of Bulgari amenities, and most suites have wood-burning fireplaces, some have terraces, and almost all have fully equipped kitchens.

Is this a time for hotels to grow in the New York City market?

Absolutely. We have seen some gradual but good growth – it's not significant but incremental, and it has been consistent from 2009.

I don't think we should get ahead of ourselves, but we should remain cautiously positive that we'll continue to grow.

Is there a good understanding of the quality of your product and its placement in the market?

Yes, because we have a niche, which caters to the most elite – the most sophisticated but, most importantly, the ones who want to be understated.

Therefore, paid advertising or being out there too much is counterproductive. While we always aim to grow in terms of our quality performance, we realize that the model is about being under the radar.

We get a lot of PR and reviews, but more from the angle of people curious to learn about us and publications and Web sites wanting to talk more about us. Beyond that, people share their secret only by

word-of-mouth with their trusted friends, who tend to be in our market base, which is truly the elite as we are the highest average daily rate hotel in New York City.

Is The Lowell competing mostly on the Upper East Side?

Hospitality in the New York area has changed over the past four or five years. Today, you might find the classic hotel downtown or you might find a more contemporary hotel uptown.

However, when it comes to service, it comes from the details and the personalization. Be it uptown or downtown, people are looking more for that and The Lowell provides it.

Geographically, we might compete directly with the Upper East Side hotels, but I feel we compete with every hotel in New York.

Is there a common feel among the accommodations or does it vary from room to room?

As a landmark hotel, at the size which permits personalization and detail, the uniqueness within our accommodations is both by default and by design, which comes from our origin as an apartment building, so we have grandfathered terraces, kitchens, large bathrooms, and fireplaces.

Given that, we try to uphold the integrity of the building and the uniqueness of the accommodations. Design-wise, we have created some themed suites, like the Manhattan Suite, the Hollywood Suite, the Garden Suite, and the Penthouse.

People ask for these specific suites but we have several that are similar because the design elements are consistent with the feel Michael Smith brought about as our designer.

What are the challenges to being successful in the food and beverage part of the business?

In any business, you have to recognize what your core is – we are a hotel and we have one of the best accommodations in the U.S. and the world.

Food and beverage is an integral part of it – we have some of the finest room service menus,

specialty menus, health menus, and amenities in our operation.

The Post House at our lobby level is successful as a neighborhood destination restaurant because it has a niche as a steakhouse with great seafood.

We have everything it takes for a hotel's food and beverage to be at the very top: The Pembroke Room has brilliant brunch menus and classic afternoon tea, and a healthy pre-theater menu. While rooms revenue is our bread and butter, the food and beverage experience is the jelly on top.

How tough is it to balance rates when you need to drive occupancy?

To maintain our profitability, we cannot realistically fluctuate the rates much.

However, we need to look at our positioning and ask, if the competition is dropping its rates, how much can we really flex ours?

Being the hotel with some of the highest rates across the U.S., The Lowell recognizes that we'll flex in off-season, but we won't follow the competition because we have always been leaders with rate integrity.

We protected our rates even stronger through the downturn, and we always knew that when things began to get better, we would be the first ones to recover. It's easy to drop rates, which we never did, but it's very difficult to climb back. We knew that, with our experience in terms of value offers, we always price right.

How have you maintained a consistent service experience?

It's the passion of our owners – they focus their energies on backing us in being the best we can in terms of product, amenities, style, decor, and design.

Also, the team I have understands what excellence is – it's a journey, not a destination; we are not taking it easy based on our reputation, because to be and stay at number one, you have to work even harder.

Starting with me, everybody truly enjoys what we do. It's not a job; it's a lifestyle, a choice, and the passion we collectively exude hopefully convinces our guests that once they experience The Lowell, they'll feel that there is nothing quite like us. ●

