

# Hospitality

## The Dorchester Collection Difference

An Interview with Christopher Cowdray,  
Chief Executive Officer, Dorchester Collection



The Hotel Bel-Air tower at night

**EDITORS' NOTE** In 2007, Christopher Cowdray was appointed Chief Executive Officer of Dorchester Collection. His vision is to create the ultimate hotel management company, which now comprises nine hotels in Europe and the Americas. He has an extensive international career managing hotels in Africa, Asia, Australia, the Middle East, and London.



**COMPANY BRIEF** Dorchester Collection ([www.dorchestercollection.com](http://www.dorchestercollection.com))

Christopher Cowdray manages a portfolio of some of the world's most celebrated hotels including The Dorchester and newly opened 45 Park Lane in London, Coworth Park in Ascot, Le Meurice and Hôtel Plaza Athénée in Paris, Hotel Principe di Savoia in Milan, Le Richemond in Geneva, The Beverly Hills Hotel, and the recently reopened Hotel Bel-Air, which underwent 24 months of extensive renovations.

### How is the hotel and hospitality business faring today?

It's a challenging market but in key cities, we have experienced good growth – we have had some record results.

Luxury travel is on the rise. Although it may take a little time to fully recover, there are definitely good growth signs.

### What is the link among the properties under the Dorchester Collection umbrella? Is it challenging to find the level of property and iconic feel you look for?

The big link is the clientele in that it's like-minded people who stay in all of our properties.

Trying to find properties to add to the collection is challenging, as there aren't many out there.

We have to be selective when we are looking for acquisitions.

### You have a strong presence in Europe, as well as the U.S. Are you looking to grow within those markets or to expand the brand into other markets?

We're looking to expand into other markets – key U.S. cities, key European cities, and key Far Eastern cities.

### You have always been focused on providing a luxury experience. What does true luxury in hospitality mean today and has it become more challenging to define it?

It's not any tougher to deliver luxury service than it was previously. It is different and the expectations of the travelers have changed. But essentially, the key component is friendly service versus what was often arrogant, inflexible service in the past.

People are looking for more relaxed and engaging but highly efficient, friendly service.

The quality when it comes to restaurants, the guest rooms, and the physical ambiance of the hotels is critically important and has to show signs of luxury – that comes from space, the size of the rooms, the quality of the furnishings, and the integrity and personality of the design; those are all important aspects.

Location is also critical. Our clientele want to be in locations that are appropriate and safe – they want to be in the right areas. So location plays a vital role.

### How important is it to have metrics in place to confirm that you're meeting service expectations?

We have a clear focus throughout the company. Our mission is all about our people: how critical leadership is and how important our people are to the organization.

We put our people first, because if we get that element right, we can recruit the best people and motivate them to a very high level; we can then deliver consistent service through the right leadership and the right training.

It's about maintaining consistency but also recognition.

### Will you avoid growing so large that you risk possibly losing that intimate feel?

That is our intention. We will not grow to a size at which we can't maintain the intimacy.

We will never be a large hotel organization. But we have the opportunity to grow in key centers and we will continue to do so.

### Is it challenging to be successful in food and beverage? What defines a successful operation?

It varies. London, Beverly Hills, and Italy are where it's easier to make profits in food and beverage.

Paris is a bit more challenging, which has to do with labor costs. So you have to work

hard at making sure your product offering is relevant.

But food and beverage does play an important role in all of our hotels and always will.

For many years, hotels shied away from good food and beverage, but it's an integral part of the luxury business, so one has to be committed to making it a success.

### Are spas a major part of your business?

The spas are in demand by travelers today as well as by the local communities. For both food and beverage and the spas, we want to be relevant to the local communities. It's not only travelers that are coming into the cities and staying in the hotels who want to use the spa and restaurants; we want to make sure that in both cases they appeal to the local communities and visitors to the city.

### What makes for a successful hotelier today and how does one ensure that client interaction isn't lost in light of financial pressures?

In all of our hotels, the entrepreneurial leadership ability is crucial. In most cases, hotels are large businesses that have to be led effectively. So we encourage the entrepreneurial spirit among the entire management team.

The hospitality side varies slightly in that, at the smaller hotels, the general manager can play a greater role in terms of hospitality. In bigger hotels, GMs don't necessarily have as much time, but the emphasis within the company is to ensure they have the personal contact to as great a degree as possible, and that they make sure the teams they have are able to demonstrate that hospitality.

### How important is entrepreneurship to the success of the Dorchester Collection?

The value of the assets that the general managers are leading is high. You also have the people asset, which is so critical to the business that it now takes a greater proportion of time than it ever did in the past.

It's ensuring that all components of the business are intertwined effectively. We don't have to give the returns that a public-listed company has to, but we need to be responsible in how we invest our money into new projects so there are satisfactory returns for our ownership. ●