

Hospitality



Timeless Elegance

An Interview with
Franka Holtmann, General Manager, Hotel Le Meurice



Franka Holtmann (front) with designers Philippe and Ara Starck (left); model on a Le Meurice bicycle at the property's entrance (above); Salvador Dali at Le Meurice (below)

EDITORS' NOTE Franka Holtmann has worked at some of the finest addresses in Paris, from *Le Meridien Etoile* and *The Ritz*, where she was Director of Sales and Marketing, to the *Hôtel Plaza Athénée*, where she was Hotel Manager and a key figure in its repositioning. Before joining *Le Meurice* in 2006, she was General Manager of *Hôtel de Crillon*. In September 2008, Franka Holtmann was named "Hotelier of the year" by *Virtuoso's* more than 6,000 member travel advisors, as well as the editors of *Virtuoso Life* for the top spot in the 2008 *Virtuoso Best of the Best Awards*.

PROPERTY BRIEF The original Parisian palace hotel since 1835, *Le Meurice* (www.lemeurice.com) is a member of the prestigious *Dorchester Collection* and is perfectly positioned in the heart of Paris, minutes from *Place Vendôme* and *Rue Saint-Honoré*. The five-star property is an elegant combination of 18th-century architectural splendor and elegant modern comfort and has played host to international royalty, fashion designers, and numerous public figures for centuries. The hotel offers 115 rooms, 23 full suites, and 22 junior suites, including two Presidential Suites, and the *Belle Etoile Royal Suite and Terrace*. Guests in all rooms have access to high-speed Internet, multiple telephone lines, a direct line, a fax machine upon request, and cable television.

How has Le Meurice fared during this time of economic turbulence?

We were very fortunate in that, in 2007, I planned a new refurbishment program, and asked Philippe Starck to work on the redesign of our public areas and lighting. A year later, I asked Charles Jouffre – the French artisan-designer who created the sumptuous drapes and hangings of the Grand Foyer at the *Opéra Garnier* – to envision a warmer atmosphere for *Le Meurice's* rooms and suites. *Le Meurice* became more welcoming with a touch of glamour and humor. By the time the financial crisis started, we had a brand new offering, extremely attractive to new and existing guests. We had to adapt swiftly, yet needed to be sensitive to the global market. We applied a flexible strategy offering a new pricing policy. It turned out to be a good move as many new guests who came to try out our beautiful property became regular visitors. At the same time, high potential markets were emerging – affluent Mexicans, Russians, and Brazilians starting to visit Paris and stay at our property. It was perfect timing for us.

What is your outlook on growth for the property?

We are standing at the crossroads of two eras when we need to throw the old book away and write new rules. At *Le Meurice*, one of our major assets compared to other Paris properties are our recently refurbished rooms and suites. Another major asset is our team. In order to deliver excellent service, staff must feel confident, understand the big picture, and know our guests' wishes and needs intimately in order to anticipate them. Nothing should ever be taken for granted and we will continue to work hard to maintain the highest standards and improve our offerings. After achieving the "Palace Label," the highest deluxe hotel accolade awarded by the French Ministry of Tourism, we have to set the highest standards and continually excel.

Would you touch on some of the former and current projects for the property?

Modernizing needs to be handled with care so as not to become "fashionable" and "trendy" to the detriment of the timeless elegance and luxury we deliver. That is what led me to revamp the hotel in 2007. My starting point was the property's archives where I discovered that Salvador Dali and his wife Gala had played an important part in the property's modern history. Philippe Starck was my first port of call but it was not a coincidence; his understanding of Dali's surrealism enabled him to successfully bring out *Le Meurice's* true personality and grandeur. Early in 2012, we also completed the renovation of our Presidential Suites on the first floor, creating the most spectacular succession of suites to be found in any Paris hotel, which include Salvador Dali's former suite. The rooms and suites' refurbishment, started in 2008 by Charles Jouffre, is now complete. We also worked on a revitalizing facelift for our "Spa Valmont pour *Le Meurice*." We are also now working on a new project for our spectacular *Belle Etoile Royale Suite*.

How challenging is it to be successful with the food and beverage component, especially in Paris with so many great stand-alone restaurants?

It's still important to have a gastronomic offering that meets our clientele's highest expectations. When I arrived in 2006, I decided to

focus on Yannick Alléno. We initially worked closely to make sure his food concept fit the new environment and matched with the tastes of a female clientele. True to his passion and creativity, Yannick has continually delivered.

How much of a focus has your spa product been?

At *Le Meurice*, the brand new "Spa Valmont pour *Le Meurice*" offers three luxurious treatment rooms including one double suite. We chose to partner with Valmont for its most avant-garde skincare products and treatments. A sauna, hammam, fitness center, and the expertise of our therapists all contribute towards making our guests feel their best.

How do you maintain consistent service standards at the property?

Communication is key and I value the conversations I have with my team and our guests to continuously improve on our already exacting standards. Regular audits allow us to identify and immediately rectify what

could become issues if unattended. With the tremendous support of *Dorchester Collection*, we benefit from a global evaluation program that enables us to measure guest satisfaction. Our last score showed that 90 percent of our guests are extremely satisfied.

Le Meurice is part of Dorchester Collection. What kind of value does this bring to the property?

Being part of a collection where individuality is cherished is a real plus. *Le Meurice's* 200 years of history, grandeur, and panache pairs nicely with *Dorchester Collection's* unparalleled experience and resources in owning and operating some of the greatest iconic hotels in the world. In our industry and especially in Paris, competition is growing fast. Each property has to define its DNA and tell its own story and *Dorchester Collection* supports that.

What is the key focus for the property in 2013?

In 2013, our priority is to offer our guests the best experiences ever: the best location, the best views, the best Art de Vivre, the best rooms and suites, the best cuisine, the best heritage, the best spa, and above all, elegance. ●

