

Hospitality

The Heart of Nob Hill



An Interview with Gail R. Isono,
General Manager, The Huntington Hotel & Nob Hill Spa

The Huntington Hotel facade and lobby (right and center);
the Mulholland Suite living area and bedroom (left and below)

EDITORS' NOTE In 1990, before assuming her current post, Gail Isono joined The Huntington Hotel as a Sales Manager and soon advanced to Director of Sales and Marketing. With more than 27 years of experience in the hospitality industry, she is the first woman to serve in the top post of the 89-year-old property.



Gail R. Isono

PROPERTY BRIEF Built in 1924 as one-bedroom apartments atop San Francisco's coveted Nob Hill, The Huntington Hotel & Nob Hill Spa (www.huntingtonhotel.com) offers 136 guest rooms and suites decorated in an understated, yet elegant, style and includes amenities like complimentary chauffeured transportation to Union Square and the Financial District and access to Nob Hill Spa and the spa's indoor pool, whirlpool, and eucalyptus-infused steam rooms. The Huntington Hotel also features the award-winning Big 4 Restaurant. The luxurious hotel is a member of Preferred Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, and Small Luxury Hotels of the World and is owned by Grace International Consortia Inc.

What is the status of the property today and are you satisfied with the different component offerings?

The property is constantly changing as travel needs change. It has been important to keep up with what the guests want, like the technology, but we retain the warmth and understanding that the guests need to be coddled and taken care of – that is the biggest point of all.

Even with all of the technology, the most important element this hotel delivers on is the warmth of the employees – we're so fortunate to have the best employees here.

There are so many travelers going after a similar market. How challenging is it to differentiate in the space and what helps The Huntington stand out?

This little hotel on Nob Hill has 136 rooms – we don't have the help of a big chain flag to bring reservations in, and yet, it amazes me how word of mouth and positive postings about our property on TripAdvisor fuel the desire to book our hotel.

The biggest positive for us is that we are taking care of the guests so well that they want to spread the word about their experiences.

Have the corporate and leisure travel markets in San Francisco fully recovered from the economic downturn?

We're getting closer – we're not there yet. The great thing for San Francisco is that despite big corporations like Bank of America, Wells Fargo, and Charles Schwab going away to secondary cities, newer and upcoming technology groups have found a home here.

So we have different target markets and yet each of them has their own criteria of what they need for their management teams and their customers; all need to be taken care of when they're in San Francisco.

What is the mood you are trying to create with your accommodation offerings?



The Mulholland Suite, for instance, was produced three years ago and we continue to have people who love to stay in that suite because, as much as it has the elegance of leathers from the Mulholland brand and the consistency and upscale feel of the The Huntington Hotel, they still feel at home. It's not a suite you're afraid to sit down and relax in.

Our accommodations offer the feeling of being in your own apartment versus being in a hotel room.

With so many great stand-alone restaurants in the city, how have you maintained a loyal following at Big 4?

The consistency of food and beverage product and the service are the biggest assets we have.

Having a place like the Big 4 bar where people can escape from the daily grind and relax and talk to the other patrons, who are often our neighbors here on the Hill, lends itself to a Cheers-like atmosphere.

People enjoy being comfortable with the residents of San Francisco as well as finding a new place to bring their friends, listening to a pianist, and indulging in hearty California cuisine that our chef has created.

How much of an offering do you need to have within the spa area?

The Nob Hill Spa is 13 years old – it's amazing how we thought it would be an amenity for the hotel but instead, it has become about fulfilling a need for people to take care of themselves and it now acts as a wellness center. Whether it's the guest who is staying with us or the neighbors down the street,

everybody is so busy in today's world that they need a place where they can relax and say "ahhh." The Nob Hill Spa fulfills that need, whether it's through new treatments or finding new ways to help the guests relax or as a place for people to get together – it's a social spot as well. It's the perfect getaway for any day of the week.

How do you ensure that there is a consistently high-level guest experience?

It all begins with the hiring process and

for an applicant to be here, he or she has to meet the number-one criteria, which is to have "heart."

People can learn which buttons to press or which procedures to take care of while working at the hotel, but the one thing we cannot teach is to have "heart" and be genuinely caring; it's what we look for in all of our applicants.

Has the word "luxury" lost some of its meaning?

The word is overused. I try to remember that luxury is about a person's state of mind and how he or she feels – people have to feel taken care of like they have never felt taken care of even at their own homes. It's about giving them a warm and caring experience that's more than what they're accustomed to. ●