

Hospitality

Renovating an Icon

An Interview with
Gary Budge, General Manager, The Algonquin Hotel



The recently renovated Blue Bar at The Algonquin Hotel

EDITORS' NOTE In May 2008, Gary Budge was appointed to his current post. Prior to joining The Algonquin Hotel, Budge served as General Manager of the Sheraton Parsippany Hotel. Previous positions also include Hotel Manager of the Sheraton New York and Manhattan Hotel, General Manager of the Sheraton Russell Hotel, General Manager of the Westin Central Park South Hotel, Corporate Director of Food and Beverage at Princess Hotels International, Vice President of Food and Beverage at Medallion Hotels, and Corporate Director of Food and Beverage at Hyatt Hotels Corporation. Budge earned a master's degree from New York University's Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism, and Sports Management and graduated from Pennsylvania State University where he earned a bachelor's degree.



Gary Budge

PROPERTY BRIEF The Algonquin Hotel (www.algonquinhotel.com) is located in the heart of midtown Manhattan on Club Row at 44th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, just steps from Broadway's theaters and world-class shopping. Home to Dorothy Parker's famous Round Table and birthplace of The New Yorker, The Algonquin Hotel, which opened in 1902, recently unveiled a \$15-million renovation. Changes include upgrades of the historic lobby's furnishings, the Blue Bar, the renowned Round Table Room restaurant, and all suites and guest rooms.

The Algonquin has such a storied history. What has been renovated and how did you modernize the property without losing that heritage?

That was the primary concern as we prepared for this renovation. The hotel needed to be 21st century facing in terms of features and amenities, yet had to make a statement that it has been here for 110 years.

It started with the ownership group, Cornerstone Real Estate Advisers, who appreciated that they were involved with an icon. It also involved securing a design team and helping them understand the mission and the delicate balance.

Is there a consistent feel throughout the rooms and can you highlight the suite product?

Our design theme is consistent throughout the building. There is some variation in a few specialty areas. However, a sophisticated and residential feeling exists through the guest rooms.

Some people would use the word luxurious; I'm cautious to use that word because we're not a luxury hotel. But it is upscale in how it looks and feels.

It's a fitting tribute to The Algonquin as she has been rehabilitated from guts to décor, which included going back into the walls in the bathrooms, pulling out historic plumbing, and starting fresh.

How challenging is it to compete from a food and beverage perspective in an area so populated with good stand-alone options?

Food and beverage in hotels is not what it once was, so we need to be sensitive about what we're doing to appeal to the transient guest and to a local market. That has always been the backbone of food and beverage operation at The Algonquin.

So through the transition of our five-month closure, the importance of the lobby has remained as a great meet-and-greet spot, a place to do business, a place to have your first date, etc. The Blue Bar, which has always been a popular watering hole, got bigger and is more modern in its appearance. Some people are taken aback by that. But it was done to prepare for tomorrow as much as it was to take care of the asset.

Our restaurant serves as a terrific three-meal venue. Breakfast has a local following and we are catering to a select number of in-house guests; lunch has primarily a local following; dinner is an amalgam; and that space works well for cocktails.

We used to operate the Oak Room Supper Club, which was a great institution for 32 years – many big names were born in the Oak Room, but that space has been repurposed. In the mornings, we use it as an elite breakfast venue for Marriott Reward guests who are of Gold or Platinum status. This room was outfitted with a new sound and light system, a grand piano, and in the future, we will have opportunities to do special events.

Did you update the fitness component and do you need a spa today to be considered a certain type of hotel?

You might need a spa to be considered a luxury hotel; we don't feel we need one to be upper upscale.

We did expand the square footage of our fitness center by repurposing existing space. For 181 guest rooms, the amount of square footage we have is a positive ratio.

It was done at the expense of banquet and meeting spaces where we were no longer able to compete.

We realized if we made some strategic moves with spaces that exist, we could repurpose those spaces and turn them into guest rooms.

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

It comes from the philosophy that our associates are the most important component of our business.

If our team is not responsive and committed to creating an experience, we're in big trouble. All the bandwidth in the world isn't going to compensate for the fact that we have missed moments.

However, since I've been here, we've increased our bandwidth four times. Our WiFi and Internet access is free to guests throughout the hotel and that has always been a competitive advantage for us.

You can also find a clock radio that holds something as big as an iPad for docking, as well as finding ample plugs for your devices; those things are integrated into the room but don't overwhelm the design of the room.

Is there a role for the travel agent today? How much growth have you seen in on-line bookings?

Online is our major booking vehicle, especially through the power of Marriott.com.

A travel agent is now more of a travel specialist and the successful travel agent specializes in creating experiences for his client base.

On the other hand, the professional travel department plays a key role for many of our customers because they're booking through their company's mandated travel partner.

How critical is the relationship with the Marriott brand to the success of the property?

We became affiliated with Autograph Collection two years ago in its infancy.

Autograph saw the value of this iconic asset as a part of that collection. It was Bill Marriott himself who said he associated Autograph Collection with The Algonquin.

Marriott.com is one of the top 10 Web sites in the world as far as activity goes, and Marriott has a great customer loyalty program and global sales system – those are the three things we saw as advantages.

The Autograph Collection is structured to allow the independent product to be the independent product, with the infrastructure to support it. ●