

Hospitality

Timeless Elegance and Smart Luxury



The lobby of the Conrad Algarve, which opened recently in Portugal's premier resort destination and serves as the first Conrad Hotels & Resorts property in the region

An Interview with John Vanderslice,
Global Head of Luxury & Lifestyle Brands, Hilton Worldwide

EDITORS' NOTE John Vanderslice, who joined Hilton Worldwide in September 2009, oversees the Conrad and Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts brands. Before joining Hilton Worldwide, he served as President and Chief Executive Officer for Club Med Americas and as Chief Executive Officer for Miraval Spa in Tucson, Arizona.



John Vanderslice

COMPANY BRIEF Hilton Worldwide (www.hiltonworldwide.com) is a leading global hospitality company, spanning the lodging sector from luxurious full-service hotels and resorts to extended-stay suites and mid-priced hotels. For 93 years, Hilton Worldwide has offered business and leisure travelers the finest in accommodations, service, amenities, and value. The company's brands are comprised of more than 3,800 hotels and time-share properties, with 630,000 rooms in 88 countries and include Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts, Conrad Hotels & Resorts, Hilton Hotels & Resorts, DoubleTree by Hilton, Embassy Suites Hotels, Hilton Garden Inn, Hampton Hotels, Homewood Suites by Hilton, Home2 Suites by Hilton, and Hilton Grand Vacations. The company also manages the world-class guest reward program Hilton HHonors®.

What makes the Conrad and Waldorf Astoria brands unique?

At Hilton Worldwide, our vision is to be the fastest growing, most innovative luxury hotel company in the world. We have two brands with which to realize that vision: Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts and Conrad Hotels & Resorts.

Waldorf Astoria stands for timeless elegance, backed by three core elements: True Waldorf Service, inspirational environments, and room products and amenities that are better than home.

Conrad can be summed up in two words: smart luxury. With indigenous artwork, world-renowned architecture, luxurious amenities or unique experiences in the local market, Conrad delivers an experience that's intuitive, seamless, stylish, and above all, smart.

Do you try to create a consistent feel among your properties?

From a design standpoint, we try to reflect the guest we wish to attract – it's about appealing to people who enjoy terrific experiences. Bringing that out is not only about the design; it's about creating a feeling of service in each hotel. At our more than 20 Waldorf Astoria properties, this is reflected

in our True Waldorf Service and at the more than 20 Conrad properties – we call it the luxury of being yourself.

How important is it to offer consistent service? How are employees trained in that regard?

Two and a half years ago, we defined the standards for both Waldorf Astoria and Conrad Hotels & Resorts.

For Waldorf Astoria, we rolled out True Waldorf Service, and with that, we developed a bespoke tailored service aspect where each guest who books directly through Waldorf Astoria has access

to a personal concierge who will assist with all needs before, during, and after a guest's stay. During his visit, he will have the name and a cell phone number to contact his personal concierge at any time.

For Conrad, the luxury of being yourself isn't just a consumer idea – it's an idea for our team members. We pushed them not only to provide the highest level of service in the world but to do it with authenticity. We said, use who you are to understand guest needs. That has driven the growth of the Conrad brand.

How do you balance technology with the personal touch?

In the next five years, those who master the intersection of technology and service best are the ones that will win in the luxury space.

The hotel business is an asset heavy business – it's about rooms and staff. If we can have a conversation with our guest enabled by technology but with a real person standing behind that delivery, our satisfaction scores go through the roof – and that's true for both brands.

How do you define true luxury today?

People were saying luxury had passed its time. But despite the decline in personal incomes and higher unemployment, as well as increasing savings rates, I knew it was going to return but how it returned was going to be different.

So I reached out to leaders in luxury as part of our Luxury Manifesto Video Series where I conducted interviews with people like Steve Sadove, the Chairman of Saks; Tommy Hilfinger; Danny Meyer, New York restaurateur; Ferruccio Ferragamo, the icon from the Ferragamo family; the COO of Patron; and the former President of Audi of America. The videos and findings are available on our Waldorf Astoria and Conrad Facebook pages.

In talking with these people, the conclusion I came to is that luxury customers today are very

different than the luxury customers of 20 years ago. While they might be more casual in appearance and demeanor, they are more demanding in the service aspects they require. Authenticity is critically important but it's not a rote authenticity that you can put in a brand standard – customers want to have real experiences. It's about the stories they can bring back to their friends. It's different than making sure you have a nice hotel room in a nice location. The new luxury customers are set on making sure people are put first.

How do you get the message across that while a guest might be paying a higher rate, he can get more value in that experience?

Value is a great heading for what we're doing – it's definitely not about price. Value is what people bring home in memories. It's the story they can talk about at the cocktail parties or country club after they return from a luxury trip; it's the special dining experiences that they had at a Waldorf Astoria or at a Conrad hotel; it's about being sent on local excursions – those things define a value equation for the new luxury customer. It's not about the price or the size of the room.

What is your vision for food and beverage? How challenging is it to be successful in that area?

The start-up curve on restaurants is very difficult but our restaurant offerings are destinations unto themselves.

At the Rome Cavalieri, for instance, we have a three-Michelin star restaurant called La Pergola by Chef Heinz Beck that not only delivers the highest quality but is very profitable as well.

It's very important in a luxury hotel to have a local following. It provides another reason for hotel guests to stay at our hotels when they know that the restaurant offering is the best in the city.

How have you maintained your innovation edge?

My vision is focused on where technology meets service – that's where our innovation opportunities exist.

For example, you can now download our Conrad Concierge app on your smartphone or tablet. The app offers you the luxury of being yourself by giving you the freedom to customize the details of your stay before and during your visit. For example, you can choose your preferred bath amenities or order your dinner to be ready just as you arrive – it's literally luxury at your fingertips. This is a great example of how technology and service are coming together at the more than 20 Conrad hotels and resorts worldwide. ●