



Breaking the Barriers

An Interview with Cornelia Samara,
General Manager, Andaz 5th Avenue



EDITORS' NOTE Cornelia Samara accepted her current position in 2012. She has spent over 10 years with Hyatt Hotels & Resorts, where she has held managerial positions at properties such as Park Hyatt San Francisco and Park Hyatt Washington. A German National, Samara has pursued a life of world travel and has lived and visited numerous countries around the world. She once circled the globe in 30 days, making stops in Japan, Thailand, Taiwan, Korea, the Philippines, and more. She also spent one year living in and learning about Singapore. Samara graduated summa cum laude from Hawaii Pacific University with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and Travel Industry Management.



Cornelia Samara

PROPERTY BRIEF Perfectly positioned to experience the dynamic energy of the locale, Andaz 5th Avenue (www.andaz5thavenue.com) faces the iconic New York Public Library and is steps away from Bryant Park in the heart of Midtown. This Tony Chi-designed property features 184 well-appointed guestrooms starting at 322 square feet. The property boasts 47 spacious suites, many with private balconies or landscaped terraces. Andaz offers a range of on-site amenities, including 6,400 square feet of event space in Apartment 2E, complimentary WiFi and mini bars with nonalcoholic beverages and snacks, and a 24-hour gym. Guests can enjoy seasonal, farm-to-table cuisine at the shop and unwind in a convivial atmosphere at the bar downstairs.

What does the Andaz brand stand for and what differentiates it from the other brands?

The Andaz brand is more of a boutique lifestyle brand. The word "Andaz" is a Hindi word meaning "Personal Style." We cater to the professional bohemian or the creative class that is looking for an inspiring experience within the location of the hotel. Our promise to our guests is to make them feel like a true resident of the city they are in.

Is this why having the concept of a host works so well?

Yes. The concept of the "host" is to break away from the traditional hotel role. So rather than having a door attendant open the front door for you and a front desk clerk check you in, you're going to someone's "home" and the host of that home will welcome you in and help you with everything you need.

Are there certain common traits to each of the Andaz properties?

The common traits are environments free of barriers; ones that allow our guests to feel comfortable in their surroundings and experience some of the local art and food of the area.

Is there a common feel throughout the accommodations?

Each hotel will have a different feel that reflects the local architecture and design. The beautiful Andaz 5th Avenue building has been around since the early 1900s and the interior design was meant

to reflect the historic pre-war era in New York City. We have many different room and suite configurations with high ceilings and beautiful views such as the New York Public Library or the Empire State Building.

How difficult is it to be successful in food and beverage with so many great stand-alone restaurants in the city?

We are very successful in our food and beverage operation as we offer a unique concept within the midtown area. The shop brings local flavors that support the farm-to-table concept. It is also a place where you can find the best-of-the-best of New York City such as lox from Russ & Daughters served on an Ess-A-Bagel, sausages from Schaller & Weber or delicious coffee by Café Grumpy – all local favorites. Our speakeasy concept, the bar downstairs, serves hand-crafted cocktails that are changed seasonally.

For your clientele, is a fitness center enough and is a spa important?

Offering a 24-hour complimentary fitness center is a must. While we don't have a separate spa, we do offer an in-room spa option. For our location, a spa directly within the hotel is not as important as you have many great spas in the city that our guests love to venture to.

How significant are your meeting facilities?

Our meeting space is Apartment 2E as it's meant to encompass one of the pillars of Andaz: providing a residential space that is uncomplicated and barrier free, and that caters to creative meetings. It has an open kitchen concept, which draws people together just as it does at a house party.

How critical is it to have a common vision with the owners?

Very important. The overall vision for our company is to be the brand of choice for our guests, associates, and owners. We do this by

offering authentic hospitality that comes from the heart. If that is at the forefront, we will continue to be successful.

Is a GM more of a generalist today? How do you balance the complexity of the role with being with guests?

Spending the majority of one's time with guests is critical. The GM is the ultimate "host" and is responsible to spread and cultivate the hotel's service culture. The way to balance the complexity of the role is by being surrounded by a team of experts. So, yes, the GM does become more of a generalist that leads this team.

Why are there still more male GMs and more women joining the ranks?

I think the biggest reason for this is the challenge of balancing a family and personal life with the passion of working in a hotel. The opportunities for males and females are equal but the expectations of a woman on the home front is still somewhat traditional. For example, as relocation is prevalent in the hotel world, a man is still less likely to follow a woman than the other way around.

What puts young people on the right track to grow within this industry?

By finding a mentor in the industry that coaches and supports you and/or by working for a company that supports growth and development. From my experience with Hyatt, I was lucky enough to have both.

Are there projects on the horizon for Andaz 5th Avenue?

We are constantly working on projects at the hotel. One idea that we are toying with currently is a concept of offering lunch in the bar downstairs. As we see the success of the shop at lunch hour, we feel there's an opportunity to have another fun option in our bar.

Has occupancy in hotels come back to precession levels?

We have seen tremendous growth this year, including a slight increase in occupancy.

The year started off strong and we're hopeful for the remainder of the year.

Can you ever get away from the business and truly relax?

Of course one tries to make for personal time off but it's a type of a business that one can't really get away from. There is always a sense of responsibility for the staff and the guests that makes it impossible to completely "turn off." ●

Andaz 5th Avenue deluxe loft (left); the shop (right)