



## Defining Luxury

An Interview with **Stuart P. Johnson**,  
General Manager, **Rocco Forte's Brown's Hotel**



The Hellenic Suite bedroom (left);  
Brown's Hotel offers vintage car transfers (above)

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Stuart Johnson was appointed General Manager of Brown's Hotel in London, and assumed the role in January 2005. Earlier, he served as Publishing Director at Condé Nast Johansens. Before this, he was Director and General Manager of Cliveden from 1994 through 1999, and previously held the position of Resident Manager between 1986 and 1990. Between those two posts, at the age of 32, Johnson became the youngest ever Hotel Manager at The Savoy in London, a position he held for four years. He originally made his mark with The Savoy Hotel Group as Personnel and Purchasing Manager at The Connaught and as Assistant Banqueting Manager of Claridge's, having started his career as a management trainee. In November 2012, Stuart Johnson was named Hotelier of the Year by Caterer and Hotelkeeper. In 2013, he was named Hotelier of the Year at The European Hospitality Awards.*



Stuart P. Johnson

**PROPERTY BRIEF** *Rocco Forte's Brown's Hotel London, in the heart of Mayfair, is situated within walking distance of key shopping areas such as Bond Street and Regent Street, in addition to major theaters, art galleries, and all key central London landmarks. The hotel has hosted many distinguished guests since it opened as London's first hotel in 1837. Each room and suite is individually decorated, and many feature contemporary artworks. The Donovan Bar and HIX Mayfair celebrate British art and cuisine and The English Tea Room offers the award-winning afternoon tea, while an indulgent spa and state-of-the-art gymnasium offer guests a discreet sanctuary. Brown's Hotel ([www.roccofortehotels.com](http://www.roccofortehotels.com)) is also home to six unique private dining rooms for intimate meetings or extravagant celebrations. The property is comprised of 11 Georgian town houses offering 117 bedrooms, including 29 luxurious suites.*

### How do you maintain a consistent level of quality at this property?

I am a firm believer in empowering people. I started from very little, but I have been in the business a long time. I always tell my team to look at what you've done today and how we can do it better tomorrow. If you maintain that motto, you will continue to improve the standards.

We are a hotel that could rest on our laurels, but we continually look at how we can evolve and improve the customer journey. However, I can't do it on my own – I have to trust my team.

It comes down to hiring the right people, trusting them, empowering them, and letting them know they can delegate upwards and seek advice. By keeping an open door, and being available and accessible to communicate with everybody up and down the organization, you often find you get very good ideas from people you wouldn't have suspected to.

### In the hiring process, do you prioritize hotel education or personality fit?

They both play a part.

Although I trust my team, the senior people go through a number of people, including me. Anybody in a supervisory capacity that is front-of-house, I see.

I attend all hotel inductions, which occur at least every two weeks. These two-day sessions go through everything from hotel history to understanding our vision. It's important to have consistency at the beginning of the training.

I also believe in investing in people. You cannot ask someone to do a job if you don't give him the confidence and tools to do it.

### What defines luxury in today's hotel experience?

Luxury is all about anticipating guests' needs. It requires a seamless arrival and departure. Guests need to arrive in an establishment that has fabulous linens, and that's in tip-top shape. Luxury is about being able to connect with the Internet easily. It's about arriving in a guest room and being able to drop your iPod into a docking station. It's about the accessibility and appropriateness of the service.

Providing the best standard of service defines luxury.

### How do you avoid losing the personal relationship with guests while offering the technology they desire?

We are fanatical that when we address guests, we address them by their name. At Brown's, we try to be completely non-hotel in everything we do. We have house managers, so if you're talking to someone, they're not just someone carrying a set of keys.

We have a vocabulary of "Brown's Speak." It adds that aura of luxury, and gives our people

confidence to speak to guests from all over the world.

If our staff members don't know an answer to a guest's question, they are authorized to go and find that answer. Our staff knows if they make a mistake, they will be corrected and coached, but will not get into trouble for it.

### Are you happy with where the product is today?

We invested a huge sum of money in soft furnishings for the property this past year, so the hotel is in extremely good shape. We brought a huge amount of color into the rooms.

One area we have really invested in is suites – we have 12 full suites – and they have all had new technology added.

We have a very focused maintenance team and great housekeepers, so I'm very happy.

### How challenging is food and beverage in a city like London?

Hotels are often made great because of their location and this is so for a restaurant as well.

We are sitting in the heart of Mayfair where there is a wide array of fabulous restaurants, which makes the hotel a very charismatic place to stay.

With our quality of food and beverage, and the effort we have gone through in promoting it, we have been successful in creating a destination restaurant.

### How is running a property today different from your early days?

True hoteliers today need to have a three-pronged approach: they must be financially aware; they must be able to motivate their team members; and they must be happy to be out within the operations of the hotel.

### What is it about this industry that keeps it so fresh for you?

We strive to exceed our guests' expectations, and the ability to do that is rewarding.

Our reviews from guests always reflect the warmth of our team.

We are also honored to have contributed to the success of private occasions, since everyone's visit is private. This harkens back to our take on luxury and seamlessness.

### What is the right approach to building a career in this industry?

As a dedicated hotelier, it means so much to get experience even before university.

Come out with a sentiment that you still have a lot to learn, and be structured in how you build your experience. ●