

Hospitality



Gastronomy, Culture, and Design

An Interview with Balendra Nagesvaran,
Vice President Operations, Hotel Services, Sofitel North America,
and General Manager, Sofitel New York



Sofitel New York exterior (left); Gaby NY Restaurant (above)

EDITORS' NOTE In May 2014, Sofitel Luxury Hotels named Balendra Nagesvaran Vice President of Hotel Operations for North America, where he oversees operations for all of Accor's luxury hotels in the United States and Canada, as well as to his current role of GM of Sofitel New York. Nagesvaran was previously based in Miami, where he also served concurrently as General Manager of Sofitel Miami and Area General Manager with responsibilities overseeing Accor's East Coast luxury hotels. Nagesvaran has been with Accor for over 23 years in locations as diverse as New York, Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand, and Colombo, and Hikkaduwa, Sri Lanka. He spent his early career in Toronto, holding a variety of management positions at Westin, Sheraton, and Hilton hotels from 1987 to 1990. Nagesvaran attended the University of Massachusetts Hospitality and Tourism program and has attended the Cornell University executive programs over the years.



Balendra Nagesvaran

COMPANY BRIEF Sofitel (sofitel.com) is the only French luxury hotel brand with a presence on five continents with 120 addresses in almost 40 countries (more than 30,000 rooms). Sofitel offers contemporary hotels and resorts adapted to today's more demanding and versatile consumers who expect and appreciate beauty, quality, and excellence. Whether situated in the heart of a major city like Paris, London, New York, Shanghai, or Beijing, or nestled away in a country landscape in Morocco, Egypt, French Polynesia, or Thailand, each Sofitel property offers a genuine experience of the French art de vivre.

Is the quality and level of service that Sofitel offers well-known and how do you define what Sofitel stands for?

In 2007, Sofitel had 206 hotels in the portfolio, but people would ask, where is the brand positioning?

We took 85 hotels out of the network from 2007 until 2013. As we were taking some out, we were bringing in a lot of new hotels. Over the past five years, we have brought about 50 brand name hotels into the network. We have since moved from RevPAR 146 to 185. This shift shows that the brand is picking up.

Sofitel New York has been here since 2000, and we have had a good reputation. We are in the process of looking for new investors for this hotel and we are looking for a major renovation of the lobby, the bar, and the restaurant.

Sofitel is built on three pillars: gastronomy, culture, and design. We work with a lot of major designers: we just opened Sofitel Singapore, which Karl Lagerfeld designed; we opened Bangkok with Jean-Paul Gaultier; and Takada designed our Mauritius property.

Under the Sofitel umbrella, we have three brands: Sofitel Legends, where we have six locations that go head-to-head with the likes of Four Seasons in the traditional luxury segment.

The bulk of the Sofitel hotels are in the Resorts and Hotels portfolio, which are business hotels or resorts.

Then there is a lifestyle brand, which is Sofitel So. Here we have trendy Morgan-type hotels – unique and usually designed by well-known designers and located in great areas like Ipanema, Brazil.

We haven't done a good job of marketing this brand in the U.S. so that's one of my jobs coming into this new role.

How challenging is the gastronomy aspect and what makes it successful?

French food and wine go hand-in-hand, so food and beverage is one of our brand pillars. At Sofitel, we don't look at food and beverage as a hotel amenity; it's absolutely a stand-alone business.

At Sofitel New York, we have very talented chefs who understand the brand quite well. We don't depend on our in-house guests, so there is a lot of outside marketing.

In our restaurant, we increased the topline quite a bit and we ran P&L's day-by-day. Many people said we would not make it in New York, so it was rewarding when we were able to take the management team out and celebrate our success last year.

How important is it that you maintain a diverse workforce to appeal to your diverse customer base?

We have a lot of French, Spanish, and Brazilian guests, so we need to have the language skills to start with. When you walk in, you can find staff who speak five or six different languages in the front-office area alone.

Sofitel, as a brand, is trying to develop rituals for its guests, so our ambassadors need to be able to understand each culture.

We have something we call Cousumain – it is the “wow” factor. We offer the personalized service which everyone gets, but Cousumain is a unique situation. For example, a bellman recently was taking a couple upstairs and the husband was telling his wife how he had forgotten his belt. The bellman heard it, went downstairs to take his belt out, knocked on the door of the guest, and said, we cannot get a belt at this hour but I can offer you my belt. There is no written procedure for it – it comes from the heart. We empower our ambassadors to take these kinds of actions.

What has kept you with this company for all of these years?

It's a dream job. When I look at a hotel company, I evaluate its values first – if the values aren't aligned with my own, I know I will struggle.

I found a home at Accor. Here, we don't have limiting job descriptions. I may come in as a GM, but find myself working on an acquisition with my boss. I can have the opportunity to experience that, as long as I make sure my job is taken care of.

Over the past 24 years, this has held my interest – I'm a businessman/entrepreneur. I cannot just sit at a desk and do one thing. I like to do different things. This company allows me to do that. I got to open some of the best hotels in the Far East.

Of course, I also stay because of the great people here.

Many GMs say hospitality is being diminished because it's become more about asset management. Does it have to be more one or the other?

When I first started, I spent 80 percent of my time talking to ambassadors and guests. Today, a lot of the hotels are owned by investment firms so you have to be very savvy with numbers.

You cannot achieve the numbers without the guests coming back; you cannot have the guests coming back without taking care of the ambassadors. So if I take care of employees and make them understand the vision, they will care for the guests, and the ROI will come about automatically.

We look for GMs who can manage guests, employees, and shareholders. ●