



Reshaping an Icon

An Interview with Ronen Nissenbaum,
Managing Director, Waldorf Astoria New York



The Waldorf Astoria New York Park Avenue Lobby (left) and entrance (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Ronen Nissenbaum was named to his current post in June of 2014. He formerly served as the President and CEO of The Plaza Group including overseeing the Plaza Hotel in New York as well as development of the Plaza hotel brand. Prior to this role, he held extensive leadership positions at properties around the globe including Senior Executive Vice President of Operations at Marina Bay Sands Singapore. Nissenbaum's other global hospitality positions include senior management roles with Forte hotels in London and Euro Disney in Paris. Nissenbaum also had a successful 13-year tenure with InterContinental Hotel Group holding various roles from General Manager in Tel-Aviv, Berlin, Paris, and Atlanta to Regional Vice President of Operations for North America where he was responsible for 16 owned and managed Intercontinental Hotels. His hospitality career began with positions in the front office and food & beverage departments at properties in Belgium, Switzerland, and Israel. Nissenbaum earned an executive M.B.A. from the renowned Goizueta Business School at Emory University. He is a graduate of the Swiss Hotel School "Les Roches." He is also a veteran of the Israeli Air Force and an officer of the Israeli Defense Forces as IDF Spokesperson.



Ronen Nissenbaum

PROPERTY BRIEF The most legendary landmark on Park Avenue, the Waldorf Astoria New York (waldorfnewyork.com), has occupied its current location since 1931. Originally opened on Fifth Avenue in 1893, the Waldorf Astoria is one of New York's premier luxury hotels, and offers a choice of 1,413 rooms and suites. This includes the Towers of the Waldorf Astoria, an intimate, richly appointed luxury hotel, which occupy the top 14 floors of the property, featuring 101 suites and 79 executive guest rooms, with exclusive entrance steps off Park Avenue in the heart of midtown Manhattan. One can experience refined cuisine at the legendary Bull & Bear Prime Steakhouse and the gem of the hotel's lobby, Peacock Alley, along with personalized pampering at the Guerlain Spa.

How did you know that this role would be the right fit and what excited you about the opportunity?

There are very few iconic brands and hotels where you say the name and everybody knows exactly what you mean.

The Waldorf Astoria New York is at the pinnacle of the hotel industry in terms of property size, revenues, and profits. I enjoy big properties with enormous development potential. This is the only full city block hotel in New York with 1,413 guest rooms. Even though there are hotels with more rooms, the size of their rooms are relatively small in comparison and the buildings typically occupy one-third or a quarter of a block. Our diverse meeting facilities are exceptional and host the most prestigious clients in the city. The Waldorf Astoria has unique room configurations and historic facilities – it's a landmark hotel, which has hosted an extraordinary array of royalty, dignitaries, and celebrities.

The fact that it is currently owned by Hilton and will be managed by Hilton for 100 years is an important element in the decision process. In my opinion, it has always been about working for people rather than companies and finding the right industry leaders to follow, learn from, and associate with. The opportunity to work with the Hilton leadership team was very exciting.

I was also attracted to Hilton's tremendous growth – it has more hotels in the pipeline than any other hotel company in the world. This is a result of the incredible energy, enthusiasm, and culture of Hilton's leadership, which is truly palpable.

The opportunity to be a part of reshaping the Waldorf Astoria into the next century was instrumental in my decision to pursue this role. The result of future investments will ensure that the Waldorf Astoria regains its rightful position as "the greatest of them all."

How important is the communication to reassure your people that some of the tradition and history will be maintained as you bring the property into the future?

The passion and love that the Waldorf Astoria Team members have for this hotel has resulted in a culture unlike anywhere else in the world.

For most people, change can be unsettling and the best way to alleviate their concerns is through honest and sincere communication.

Hilton has signed a management contract for 100 years – that's a first in the industry, and a clear statement to our team members that we are here to stay. Communicating that we envision a multiyear project that will bring the Waldorf Astoria to its rightful place has generated a lot of excitement within the team, and we all look forward to being a part of this legacy.

The Waldorf brand was born in this building and it will continue to be the flagship of 27 Waldorf Astoria hotels around the world.

Even if the rooms come down to 800 or so in number, at that size, can you still offer luxury and personalized service?

Part of luxury is personalized experience. We have hundreds of customers who communicate to us that they are amazed with the personalized service they receive – that is today, in a 1,413-room hotel. Our most loyal and frequent guests enjoy a level of personalized service that most 150-room properties don't achieve. With potentially fewer rooms in the new Waldorf Astoria, one can expect an even higher level of personalized service.

Irrespective of the hotel's final design, our commitment to creating inspirational environments where events of extraordinary importance occur will be part of the Waldorf moving forward. Our commitment to True Waldorf Service and developing the authentic moments that the rich and the famous, as well as the general public, experience at the hotel are equally important. Those three factors are most important to me – inspirational environments, where authentic moments occur, delivered with true Waldorf service.

With inspirational environments like Peacock Alley, the restored Park Avenue lobby, Silver Corridor, Starlight Roof, Vanderbilt and Empire Rooms in the main building, and The Towers residential and historic apartments, we have created an extraordinary experience in the city. We provide authentic moments through ultimate dining experiences at Bull & Bear and Peacock Alley, a "Meet me at the Clock" moment as a prelude to events of significance, and roof-to-table dining and spa treatments. To top that off with true Waldorf service that is genuinely delivered by our staff, one can only have but a single destination in the city: The Waldorf Astoria and Towers New York. ●