



Luxury With a French Touch

An Interview with Vincent Vienne,
General Manager, Sofitel New York



The exterior of the Sofitel New York (left) and its lobby fireplace (above)

EDITORS' NOTE In 2015, Vincent Vienne returned as General Manager of Sofitel New York, having previously served in the role of Hotel Manager from 2006 to 2009. Before his current post, he held the role of General Manager of Sofitel Philadelphia for five years. Vienne joined Sofitel's parent company, Accor, in 1998 and has held several positions for both Accor's Sofitel and Novotel brands in the U.S. and Europe, including Front Desk Manager at Sofitel Brussels, Front Office Manager at Sofitel Philadelphia, and Director of Operations at Sofitel New York. Vienne is a graduate of Hotelschool Ter Duinen in Koksijde, Belgium.



Vincent Vienne

PROPERTY BRIEF Sofitel New York (sofitel.com) is situated conveniently near Rockefeller Center, Times Square, Broadway theaters, world-famous restaurants, art museums, and corporate headquarters. The elegant, 30-story Midtown Manhattan hotel makes a contemporary statement in limestone and glass, and offers 398 spacious rooms spread over 30 floors, including 47 suites, four Prestige Suites with private terraces, and one Presidential Suite, all featuring Sofitel's luxurious feather-top and duvet sleep system, SoBed. The sophisticated hotel also offers a unique dining experience at Gaby Brasserie Française, which serves French fare in a stylish setting.

What qualities define why you have chosen to make your career at Accor?

Accor is a unique company because of its culture. I feel strongly that the values that Accor puts forward are truly something to live by; the culture is alive.

At Sofitel, we interpret that culture through our brand philosophy of "cousu-main," which translates to "hand-tailored service from the heart." It comes through in how we relate to guests and also in how we in the Sofitel family relate to each other.

The fact that I could move to different hotels and take on responsibilities internationally within the Accor organization also made it the right fit.

Is it well understood what the Sofitel brand offers from a luxury standpoint?

It is better understood today than it was five years ago. We have an opportunity to make our message even clearer today.

At Sofitel, we offer a luxurious experience to our guests, bringing in French touches in elegant and clever ways. We identify the best of the cities in which we operate and link that with our French heritage. We're constantly searching for those specific touches that define and communicate who we are.

Is Europe your key market?

The European market is very important for us and we continue to work hard to ensure that this market feels at home at Sofitel New York, and that those visitors have the best

possible experience.

At the same time, we look at emerging markets such as China where we are well-known thanks to the service we render. Other important markets range from the Middle East to Brazil and South America.

It is important to understand the needs and culture of each guest.

How critical is the suite product and can you touch on those specialty suites?

We have a few suites that have tremendous outdoor space. On the 24th floor, there are different vistas of the city, including views of some iconic New York buildings. The spaces are unique and large enough to entertain.

Another differentiator for us is our bathroom product. All suites and guest rooms have marble bathrooms with a separate tub and rain shower, which is not typical of many hotels.

What focus has this property put on food and beverage, and does it provide an opportunity for revenue?

Gastronomy – along with design and culture – is one of the three pillars of the Sofitel brand. At Sofitel New York, we treat food and beverage as if it were an independent business.

It's a fine line to walk because we have hotel guests who come in hoping to see certain staples on the menu. At the same time, it is essential to court a local following, which behooves us to cultivate a distinct identity and keep our menus fresh and inventive. There is some balancing to be done.

Do you need to have a spa offering in a luxury space?

There are so many great spas that do a fantastic job just blocks away from our property. The key is to have great concierges who know these places and the people there who can take care of our guests. Depending on the guest's

needs and expectations, our people can identify which spa is the best fit.

How critical is it to empower your people to take action when certain circumstances call for it?

It's critical, and it may be one of the most difficult aspects of our business. It's about coaching and having discussions with people, and giving them the tools they need to assess the situation to figure out the best way to respond. We have certain standards of service to ensure every guest's stay meets Sofitel standards. We do encourage our ambassadors to be creative in problem solving and creating an unforgettable guest experience.

With all the supply coming into the New York City market, do you worry about pressure on rates?

New York is a unique city and I believe we will absorb that supply over time. In the meantime, we need to focus on our most loyal guests and continue to deliver the Sofitel experience that keeps them coming back. The brand loyalty we've created is based on the personal connections we forge with our guests. The more personal and memorable the experience, the more likely a guest is to return.

Would you touch on your approach to rate integrity and how important it is to you?

Rate integrity ensures that the value proposition offered to the guest is the right one.

Rates are market-driven and seasonal, but there needs to be a value that makes sense for the brand, and the guest decides if the property is worth the rate that's being charged.

How critical is the owner relationship in this role?

The general manager's relationship with the hotel's owner is vital to the success of the property. Owners put their trust in us to operate the hotel in the most successful and profitable way possible. It's important to have an open line of communication.

Is the role of the GM more financially focused today, and how do you maintain the hospitality side?

Responsibilities change in all roles so we have to change with the times. The relationship with the owner is of key importance, as is the relationship with the guests and the ambassadors who work at the hotel.

The GM has to stay connected with all of the stakeholders, responding to their needs. ●