

Hospitality



The New Hotel Californian

An Interview with Carlos Lopes,
Managing Director, Hotel Californian



Renderings of the Hotel Californian Spa (left) and property (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to assuming his current post, Carlos Lopes was Managing Director and Vice President of the Hotel Bel-Air; Executive Vice President of Rock Resorts; Senior Vice President of Rosewood Hotels & Resorts; and Senior Vice President of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts.

PROPERTY BRIEF One of the most anticipated hotel openings in 2017 was Santa Barbara's Hotel Californian (thehotelcalifornian.com). Featuring Spanish Colonial Revival architecture and a modern Moorish vibe, this unique coastal retreat caters to the Hollywood elite, locals and international visitors alike. On the site of the original Hotel Californian, this State Street seaside destination has been meticulously crafted by developer Michael Rosenfeld featuring paseos, gardens, fountains and open plazas. A unique rooftop pool and an event deck provide unobstructed views of both the coastline and the Santa Ynez Mountains. Featuring a luxury Moroccan-inspired spa, fashion boutique and casual dining options, the 121-room Hotel Californian is located adjacent to Santa Barbara's vibrant Funk Zone and one block from the Amtrak Station. Interiors from celebrity designer Martyn Lawrence Bullard enhance the quintessential California Spanish Colonial architecture with Bullard's unique Moorish inspired details.



Carlos Lopes

What is the history of the Hotel Californian and what should guests expect from the new Hotel Californian?

The hotel was originally built in 1925 but there is nothing left of that hotel because we took down the existing building, and we put up a new Hotel Californian in its place. The only thing that was kept was the façade of the building.

Today, the completed building is exceptional. We also have two other buildings and control three city blocks in downtown Santa Barbara within steps of the waterfront.

The facilities include two restaurants, an amazing spa that is Moroccan-inspired, and a rooftop pool with 360-degree views of the waterfront and the mountains.

We also have a ballroom and a rooftop deck for about 250 guests and an additional restaurant.

It's very comprehensive. The interior design is Moroccan-design influenced. We have a large array of different tiles that have been

designed for this hotel in 18 different patterns. It's unlike anything else in Southern California.

Would you highlight the accommodations?

The guest rooms here are very comfortable and perhaps some of the largest in the city – they range anywhere from 425 to 650 feet.

We have a large presidential suite at 2,400 square feet and we have three additional suites at the property. We also have an array of junior suites throughout the property.

What is the focus on food and beverage offerings?

California is one of the most bountiful markets when it comes to food products. We have contracted with about 50 local fishermen who provide our fish daily, as well as with meat product purveyors and local farms.

We want guests to literally have a California experience. We have Alex La Motte, our executive chef, who is an amazing talent.

We also have a smaller restaurant, Goat Tree, which is more of a market type destination using all local products, and we balance that with retail. Guests can take a picnic to the beach or on their wine tours.

Will you discuss the effort you put into assembling your team and the talent you have been able to bring in?

Service is paramount to this hotel. We interviewed over 600 people for spots at this hotel and we hired just 100 that we felt were qualified. We don't just look for individuals with hotel experience. We also look for individuals with experience in similar industries, and we hire for attitude and demeanor because, at the end of the day, it's all about service.

Before we opened our doors, we had about six weeks of in-depth training with each employee, regardless of position.

We also contracted with Forbes, which has a renowned training division to deliver consistent, five-star level service.

Training is not something done once; it has to be done every day to make sure the consistency of delivery is there when it comes to the guest experience, because this is the most crucial element to success.

How far have you gone on the technology side and how do you avoid losing the human touch?

The technological advancements over the past 10 years have been amazing, and we are doing something interesting in this hotel with technology. By the time the guest arrives at our hotel and is about to check in, we have everything they wanted to do during their stay planned.

The guest is immediately taken to their guest room upon arrival, and we have been able to accomplish this through technology.

We have designed the services to make sure we heighten the guest experience while guests are here, and technology enables this.

How critical is it to have a spa offering?

If we are promoting ourselves as a resort destination, individual travelers, be it a man or woman, all lead stressful lives, and to have a spa component in this hotel is very important because it's part of the experience when one comes to a first-class hotel.

We make sure ours complements the facilities and amenities that one would have at a four-star or five-star hotel.

What excited you about the opportunity to get involved in this project?

Over the years, I've opened many Four Seasons and Rosewood hotels, but this is special because Santa Barbara is a very special destination. It's one of the most beautiful places in California, with a population of less than 100,000, a very friendly community, and it's easy to get around. When it comes to social events and weddings, this is where many people like to come.

I decided that if I ever had a chance to open a hotel in Santa Barbara, I would take it, and this is why I'm here.

What attracted me the most was the developer, who I have worked with in the past. He has opened other hotels, but this hotel is different because it's independent. We have created an interior design that is somewhat edgy, and there is nothing like this in Southern California. I wanted to be part of that and put together the right team.

We've been very meticulous in every aspect of the development – the design, the services, the staffing, and the culture we're creating long-term for this hotel.

Is this industry still all about hospitality?

Things have changed as ownership has changed, but there are still individual owners who have a vision of what they want their hotels to become. Our owner has an amazing sense of pride in this hotel and it is all about hospitality. ●