

The Ritz-Carlton Service Experience

An Interview with Damien O’Riordan,
General Manager, The Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota

EDITORS’ NOTE Damien O’Riordan accepted his current post in 2013. He had been the General Manager at the chain’s Powerscourt, Ireland, property. A graduate of the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, O’Riordan spent eight years working for the Ritz-Carlton brand in Virginia, California, Washington, D.C. and Jamaica before joining the Adare Manor Hotel and Golf Resort in Ireland as Assistant General Manager. In May 2008, O’Riordan was named General Manager of the G Hotel in Galway.



Damien O’Riordan

PROPERTY BRIEF The Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota (ritzcarlton.com/sarasota) is a luxury hotel in Florida redefining personal service with a personal passion in a city that hums year-round with a bold and contemporary spirit. Located in the heart of Sarasota, it has easy access to the Gulf Coast and downtown where the guests of the hotel can enjoy bay or city skyline views from guest rooms and suites; contemporary waterfront dining at Jack Dusty highlighting fresh coastal cuisine and handcrafted cocktails; a spa that paves the way to well-being; and exclusive use of The Ritz-Carlton Golf Club in Bradenton and The Beach Club at Lido Key, the perfect way to experience one of the best beaches in America.

Has the Florida travel market been strong and have you been able to achieve growth for The Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota?

We’ve been fortunate to see year-over-year growth over the past few years and 2017 has been no exception, so we continue to see strong opportunities for growth. However, we are experiencing shorter-term booking windows in terms of both transient and group guests making a decision to come and stay.

How challenging are the shorter booking windows from a forecasting point of view?

These things are constantly evolving. We used to look out three years in terms of our booking platforms, but in the summer of 2016, we started to see that our booking pattern was shortening. Every year is different, but we do see this trend has continued for the past year and a half.

It makes forecasting a bit more challenging, but we understand this is the mindset of our customers and guests – they currently prefer to make decisions more in the short term. After Thanksgiving, for instance, we often see a big push for the festive

season. Then, after the New Year, we start to see a big push for spring break and Easter.

Oftentimes, when families get together, they’re discussing and planning what they’re going to do to reconnect for the next holiday.

As a property that went through a massive transformation a few years back, are you happy with where it currently stands or are there additional changes planned?

Since we did our re-imagination in 2015, the feedback has been fantastic. It’s probably even better than I would have hoped for, especially from our repeat guests who have been staying with us since the property opened 16 years ago.

We have also seen the same perspective from our group guests because we included those facilities when we did the re-imagination. We recently redid our beach club pool and, in 2017, we just opened a new restaurant at our Beach Club called Ridley’s Porch.



How important is the suite offering at The Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota?

We have a total of 266 rooms and we have 30 suites, so our suite mix is very important. The design flows very well through the resort from the ground floor through to our guest rooms to our suites and specialty suites, as well as to our club lounge. There is a lovely continuity of design.

When we have families visiting, we have a nice mix of interconnecting rooms as well as specialty suites. Those are very popular with our guests.

What is the key to being successful in the food and beverage component for the property?

Our Ritz-Carlton restaurant should be a community restaurant. We developed Jack Dusty, which



The Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota (above); The Beach Club at Lido Key (below)

opened in 2013, and 60 percent of our business there is from the local community. This allows us to answer the age-old question from our guests who ask us where the locals go – the answer is Jack Dusty.

Ridley’s Porch is only available to our members and guests, so we have created a unique, innovative concept that is going to keep our guests and members coming back.

We also don’t want to just be a special occasion restaurant – we want to be a place where people are comfortable visiting regularly for a casual cocktail or a full dining experience.

We have seen huge growth in freestanding restaurants in our area, so it makes me proud that so many local guests come into our restaurant.

How important is the spa offering in the luxury segment and is the focus today more on overall wellness?

We have a big spa following here from hotel guests, but we also have a strong local following. Given that, there is an elevated focus on wellness and well-being and how the spa experience ties into that.

Are the advances in technology today helping enable the personal touch or taking away from it?

Our guests want technology today. A year ago, we launched the Ritz-Carlton app and it has been hugely popular with our guests. It’s a big part of how we will innovate our guest experience in the future, but we also focus on how we continue to give the Ritz-Carlton service experience to all our guests.

How important is the meeting and banquet business for the property?

We’re very fortunate with our resort as we have three wonderful destinations for group and special events at the hotel. We also have The Beach Club as well as our Tom Fazio-designed, 18-hole championship golf course at our Members Golf Club, which will be undergoing a renovation in January 2018.

The group business is very important to us and we continue to see that grow year over year.

Is hospitality still at the core of the General Manager role or has it become more of a financial/business function?

We are running a business, but it’s still about hospitality and delivering luxury service to our guests.

We have the most fantastic owners and have a great partnership with them. They really understand the experience we deliver to our guests. If we get our service right and drive our guest loyalty then, from a business perspective, it all falls into line. ●