

Hospitality



People, Product, Service

An Interview with Maria Zec,
Regional Vice President, USA East Coast,
The Peninsula Hotels; General Manager,
The Peninsula Chicago



The Shanghai Terrace (left); Deluxe Suite living room (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Since March 2002, Maria Zec has served as General Manager of The Peninsula Chicago and assumed her current post with The Peninsula Hotels in May 2007. Prior to this, she served as Managing Director and Hotel Manager at the New York Palace Hotel. Zec holds a B.S. in business management and a B.A. in French from Purdue University.



Maria Zec

PROPERTY BRIEF The Peninsula Chicago (chicago.peninsula.com) has been recognized as a premier property with Forbes' Five-Star and AAA Five Diamond awards since its grand opening in 2001. The property boasts 339 luxurious guest rooms and suites, and offers a 15,000-square-foot spa and fitness center, as well as three distinctive restaurants and a bar, 24-hour room service, a ballroom, and seven additional meeting and event rooms. The Peninsula Chicago is managed by The Peninsula Hotels (peninsula.com), which operates luxury properties throughout Asia, Europe and the United States.

What have been the keys to The Peninsula Chicago maintaining its leadership position in the market since its opening?

People, Product, Service are among the key reasons the hotel has maintained our leadership position in Chicago.

With regard to People, we are fortunate to enjoy a very low staff turnover. Our employees have come to truly know all of our repeat guests and have built genuine relationships with them. They know their likes and dislikes and are able to anticipate service requests well in advance. Our employees also strive to convert first time guests into being repeat guests through creating memory-making experiences.

In speaking to the Product component, we continue to make improvements throughout the hotel on a regular basis. Last year, we completed a renovation of our guestrooms with new decor and a significant investment in technology. This year, we will embark on a complete makeover of our lobby restaurant. We strive to continuously reinvent the hotel's offerings with regard to product and service experiences so we stay fresh, relevant and remain an industry leader in our market.

And, finally, for Service, we define our service style as "Midwestern Hospitality combined with Eastern Graciousness." This approach is evident through the warm, genuine, friendly,

caring nature one would find among Midwesterners combined with a discreet, reserved, refined, subtle approach found among service professionals in the Far East.

Would you discuss the current state of the property and your plans for renovations and changes for The Peninsula Chicago?

Last year, we completed an extensive renovation of our guestrooms and suites that showcase a silk chrysanthemum art wall that was influenced by Chicago's rich artistic culture. The

color blue was used throughout the contemporary rooms as a nod to Chicago's important connection to Lake Michigan and the Chicago River. Introducing Peninsula's signature technology to the United States, the new rooms feature all essential functions now available in 11 languages. All room functions are just a touch away using bespoke tablet technology, including lighting, temperature controls, restaurant menus, hotel services, city information, attractions and TV channels. An added benefit is that all domestic and international calls made via VoIP from the guest room phone are complimentary.

We are constantly improving our property. In January 2018, we will be renovating our Lobby restaurant and the surrounding areas. In the first quarter, our meeting space and boardroom will get a fresh new look.

The Peninsula Chicago is building a rooftop lounge overlooking Michigan and Superior Avenues. The lounge is expected to debut in the summer of 2018. It will have interior and exterior seating, exceptional views, a fire pit and craft cocktails in a sophisticated setting providing an experience unlike anything in Chicago.

How important is the strength of your suite product?

Following the hotel's complete guestroom renovation this past year, The Peninsula Chicago's suite options define the premiere suite products offered in the city. The suites are among the largest in the city and offer the most technologically advanced and intuitive features. Each suite features a hand-embroidered silk chrysanthemum art wall, along with hand-painted artisan glass elements by artist Michael Glickman that provide a decidedly chic yet residential feel.

Our first suite category is the Executive Suites, which are located on three corners of the hotel and feature three unique views, deep soaking

tubs and picture windows separating the living and bedroom area. Our next suite type is the Junior Suite, which offers Michigan Avenue views and features a spacious living room with sofa bed, and a hand-painted artisan glass wall that separates the bedroom. The Deluxe Suites are extra spacious with sliding doors connecting the bedroom with the living room. They feature a full bathroom and a powder room and beautiful western city views. The Grand Deluxe Suites overlook Chicago and Michigan Avenues and offer spectacular views of the historic Water Tower Park. These suites also offer a picture window over the deep soaking tub and an extra spacious living room and bedroom.

Our newest redesigned suite, The Lake Suite, offers stunning views of Lake Michigan and the city and features an impressive design including a private dining area with a beautiful blue wall of hand-painted cherry blossom branches. The entry way is intimate and impressive, welcoming guests with a variety of room options to explore, from the living and dining areas in an open floor plan to a private office, second bedroom, the master bedroom and more.

Finally, The Peninsula Suite is a 3,600 – 4,700 square foot suite (depending on one to three bedrooms) with a dining room for 10 guests, living room with a grand piano and fireplace, informal family room, a study, workout room, master bedroom, and a private 2,000 square foot private Terrace with Jacuzzi.

How critical is it in today's competitive hotel environment to customize the guest experience and how is The Peninsula Chicago ensuring that it maintains the personal touch with its guests?

It is critical to customize a guest experience at the luxury hotel level. Recognition and prior preparation with guest preferences anticipated in advance are keys to success.

Creating memorable moments is critical to what we offer and this is what differentiates our hotel from our competitors. We look for opportunities to create wonderful memories for our guests.

Our Peninsula Priorities guest relations team's sole purpose is to keep track of guests' preferences and customize guests' experiences. They provide curbside greeting upon arrival and departure, escort guests to their rooms, interact closely with our guests and are good listeners. They are constantly setting up special birthday celebrations, unique anniversaries, customized wedding proposals and family reunions. ●