

Executive Travel

A Collection of Iconic Hotels

An Interview with Christopher Cowdray,
Chief Executive Officer, The Dorchester Collection



EDITORS' NOTE Christopher Cowdray was appointed to his current post in November 2007, after serving as General Manager of The Dorchester in London since June 2004. He has 30 years of international experience in managing luxury hotels on four continents, including six years as Managing Director of Claridge's in London. A native of Zimbabwe, where he earned a diploma in hotel management, Cowdray is also a graduate of the executive program at Columbia University's Business School.



Christopher Cowdray

COMPANY BRIEF The Dorchester Collection (www.dorchestercollection.com) is the successor to the Dorchester Group, originally established by the Brunei Investment Agency in 1996 to manage its collection of hotels in Europe and the United States. The group's portfolio currently encompasses The Dorchester in London, The Beverly Hills Hotel in Los Angeles, Le Meurice and Hôtel Plaza Athénée in Paris, and Hotel Principe di Savoia in Milan.

What is your mission for The Dorchester Collection?

The company now has five luxury hotels, and we have new opportunities coming along in the near future. We envision The Dorchester Collection as the ultimate hotel management company, with a passion for excellence and innovation that honors the individuality and heritage of its iconic hotels.

What makes a true luxury hotel?

When it comes to differentiating between true luxury hotels and those that pretend to be luxury, it's actually quite easy. The customer understands what luxury hotels are and what they're not. The physical product of the hotel has to be true luxury, but the clientele who frequent the hotel – those who know luxury – want to be seen with people who are like-minded. The term "luxury" is significantly overused by people who don't really understand what it's about. They think that, because it's expensive, it's a luxurious product.

The Dorchester Collection's hotels are located in sophisticated markets, with many fine dining establishments available to its guests. With this in mind, how do you ensure the success of your hotels restaurants?

It can be challenging, but if you have a product that appeals to clientele within both the hotel and the community, you can achieve fantastic results. The restaurant has to be able to be effectively seen and perceived as a stand-alone entity and, therefore, must meet all of the criteria of a restaurant outside a hotel. All of our hotel restaurants do very well, because they have very strong identities. People want to be seen in those restaurants.

Are you focused on specific markets for the growth of the collection?

Our focus is predominantly on Europe and the U.S. We're not looking at the Middle East or the Far East. We're looking for hotels that will complement the range of hotels we already have.

Are you more interested in building brand awareness for the overall Dorchester Collection or the individual properties themselves?

We're embarking on a significant drive to develop The Dorchester Collection brand awareness. Later this year, a major advertising program will be launched, promoting the collection around the world. That's important, because, although the hotels have their own special identities, this is a great opportunity to get them to work closely together to create an identity that is internationally recognized.

In an industry known for high employee turnover rates, how challenging is it to retain your people?

If you look after your people properly, it's possible to retain them. It goes back to how effective leadership is within the hotels. The industry does lose top talent to other industries, but I also find that many people try something else and come back.

Over the course of your 20-plus years in the hospitality industry, how has the role of a hotel's general manager changed?

Today's successful general managers have to be entrepreneurial and have a thorough understanding of all aspects of the business. They have to be visionary. They have to be very strong leaders and inspire the people who work within their organization. They have to know about finance and the impact their decisions have on the bottom line. We, however, must never lose sight of the fact that general

managers play a vitally important role as far as the guests and staff are concerned. They have to excel in multiple disciplines.

Has your experience in leading The Dorchester Collection lived up to your expectations so far?

It has been more than I expected. I saw a group of five iconic hotels that were waiting to be picked up, brought together, and taken forward to create a truly luxurious international management company. I've had the opportunity to build the right team, in terms of sales, marketing, and finance, and bring the general managers into the future of the company and how it's run. There's a lot of cohesion, and it's going very well.

In your corporate-level role, do you miss spending as much time in the hotels as you did during your time as a General Manager?

I do. You get a lot of energy from walking around the hotel and talking to the staff and guests. In the corporate role, it's not as available. But I've always looked at the hotels I've managed as businesses, and I apply the same leadership skills and vision to my role with The Dorchester Collection. That gives me a great thrill.

What would those who have worked closely with you say of your management style?

I think they would say that I give them a real sense of purpose. They know exactly where the business is going, and they're totally included in that journey. It's not my journey – it's our journey. They have the opportunity to grow and develop themselves and be recognized for it.

Do you ever think about slowing down and taking it easy?

I suppose it goes through my mind occasionally, but I very much enjoy what I do, and I see such great opportunity ahead to build a truly fantastic company. We have incredible owners, and it's nice to be able to work for a company that really wants to see progress.

How important is the owner/operator relationship to the success of this venture?

It's exceedingly important. If the ownership and the managers or operator don't have a good relationship, it's very easy to derail progress. So you have to establish that understanding right at the beginning, and then it's a matter of maintaining a strong partnership. ●

Hôtel Plaza Athénée (left) in Paris and Hotel Principe di Savoia (right) in Milan, both part of The Dorchester Collection