

# LEADERS IN *Hospitality*

## Sophisticated and Understated Luxury

An Interview with Ashish Verma, General Manager, The Lowell

**EDITORS' NOTE** Prior to assuming his current post, Ashish Verma successfully led post-Katrina recovery efforts that enabled the Windsor Court Hotel in New Orleans to become one of the first hotels to reopen after the devastating hurricane. Verma was elected president of Greater New Orleans Hotels & Lodging Association, and served as a board member of New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation, Arts Council, and Horizon Initiative. Ashish Verma



Verma previously held posts with Oberoi Hotels & Resorts International, Hyatt International Corporation, Millennium Hotels and Resorts, and Orient-Express Hotels in Asia, Europe, and North America. Verma was born in The Punjab, India and received a B.A. with honors in political science and economics from Punjab University, Chandigarh, India; a graduate degree in Hospitality Administration from the Oberoi School of Hotel Management, New Delhi, India; and a Master of Business Administration from IMHI Cornell-ESSEC in Paris, France.

**PROPERTY BRIEF** The Lowell, a 1927 landmark building, is delightfully situated off Madison Avenue in New York's exclusive Upper East Side. The hotel ([www.lowellhotel.com](http://www.lowellhotel.com)), which reflects discreet aristocratic and understated European elegance, dotes upon its guests with uniquely personalized service and attention to detail, maintaining 47 individually appointed suites and 25 deluxe rooms, all of which are decorated with exquisite antique furniture and upholstered in fine fabrics. Guests will enjoy complimentary beverages upon arrival, Fiji water at turndown, and a selection of Bulgari amenities, and most suites have wood-burning fireplaces, some have terraces, and almost all have fully equipped kitchens.

**What initially excited you about the opportunity to come to The Lowell?**

It was the reputation of The Lowell, and the opportunity to guide it to the next level of providing the very best in a hotel experience. It is the quintessential luxury hotel in Manhattan and we are committed to keep improving and upping the standards. It was a natural fit for me in terms of managing yet another world's premier hotel and to return to New York, which is home. The Lowell's ownership is phenomenal,

and we're in sync with what I also personally believe luxury hospitality should be and what The Lowell is, which is a very sophisticated and understated luxury hotel.

**As a result of the current recession, how much of an impact have you seen for the property, and have you seen stabilization in the business?**

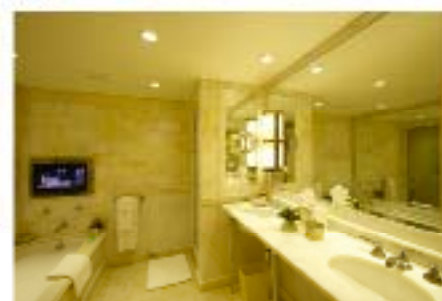
Compared to 2008, in terms of occupancy and the average rate, we were a bit lower in 2009. Compared to the competition, we are higher, so we have

actually improved vis-à-vis our position in the marketplace. We are seeing further improvement now. Apart from the recession, the supply factor also plays a role in New York on the Upper East Side. The Pierre and The Mark were closed for a while, and now they're back. However, we still have a lot of our repeat guests. More supply does deluge the market while demand is not increasing during the recession. Nonetheless, from September 2009 onwards, we began to see a pick up, and hopefully this trend will continue.

**Is it important to have a different feel from room to room within the property?**

Absolutely. We have about 47 suites and 25 deluxe rooms, and most of our decor has been done by the famous designer, Michael Smith. He is a great blend of the classic and modern, and provides a comfortable ambience so our guests can feel at home. We also have an interior designer on staff who works closely with our owner to make sure we are constantly updating and improving our room product. Several suites of ours are specialty suites like the Hollywood theme, Manhattan theme, and the Garden theme. We also do complete renovations regularly. We do soft refurbishing as needed, and for the past five years, we have taken a few suites or rooms each year and completely redone them in terms of construction. We enlarge and reconfigure the bathrooms and kitchens – we now have deep soaking bathtubs, separate showers, and his and her sinks. We also offer wood-burning fireplaces and terraces – one of the few hotels in Manhattan to do so. These unique elements combined with the first rate service make us one of the favorites.

**How critical is it to the customer experience for a return guest to see the same faces, and how have you retained your employee base in an industry with generally high turnover?**



Any luxury hotel aspires for the repeat factor, it's easier to acquire new guests but harder to have the guests return. Our success over the years has been a combination of very committed and loyal staff, and I'm very proud and fortunate to have them on my team. Our staff retention is owed to principled and consistent management. We aim for a healthy work environment, thorough professionalism, extensive training, and teamwork. Actually, I address my staff as The Lowell family of employees.

**As you look to 2010 and beyond, what are the key areas of focus that you're addressing to make sure The Lowell keeps its quintessential luxury positioning within this market?**

First, we are not in the business of trying to make a statement and outdo competition; we let our guests determine that. We respect our competitors but we follow our own path. We are confident that the most discerning and sophisticated travelers understand and enjoy the discreetness of The Lowell. However, we never take this for granted. We have a very committed team and the level of service we provide for a 72-room hotel is something that guests consistently appreciate, and we will continue to perfect our guests' experience. We have plans to continue renovating, however, we don't shut down the whole hotel so everything is always smooth and there is no disruption of services or disservice to our guests whatsoever.

We are working on improving our food and beverage outlets. Our chef, our food and beverage team, and I work closely and we have provided our guests some unique aspects of dining, not just seasonal menus but within the concepts of fine dining, like for traditional afternoon tea, and weekend brunches. Our chef is growing his own herbs on the terrace at The Lowell, and he is very fond of kitchen gardening, and uses mostly local ingredients. We have incorporated healthier aspects of food into our restaurant and in-room dining.

From the guest aspect, we are improving personalization and making the stay of a guest at The Lowell even more unique so that we genuinely understand, anticipate, and exceed expectations of our guests consistently. ●

*The Lowell's welcoming lobby (left); Junior Suite Bed and Bath*