

A Storied History

An Interview with Dant Hirsch, President and Managing Director, Ocean House Collection

EDITORS' NOTE Dant Hirsch joined Ocean House Collection from Six Senses Hotels Resorts and Spas where he was General Manager of the New York property, leading the development of luxury guest rooms, condominiums, a membership club and food and beverage concepts. With extensive experience in luxury, Forbes Five-Star and AAA Five-Diamond properties, Hirsch served as General Manager at The Dominick in New York, Faena Miami Beach and Regional General Manager of the Americas for COMO Hotels and Resorts. Earlier in his career, he was Hotel Manager and Director of Operations for St. Regis Hotels and Resorts in Miami and Kauai. In addition, he served in leadership positions at the Ritz-Carlton Sarasota and Tigh-Na-Mara Seaside Resort in British Columbia. Hirsch received his bachelor's degree from Penn State University, where he was a Schreyer Scholar. He also holds a higher education certificate from Cornell University.



Dant Hirsch

PROPERTY BRIEF Perched high on the bluffs of Watch Hill, Rhode Island, Ocean House (oceanhouseri.com) is an iconic New England seaside resort, and the first and only AAA Five Diamond and Forbes Five-Star hotel in the state. Ocean House's Ocean & Harvest Spa and COAST restaurant are also Forbes Five-Star rated, making Ocean House a triple Five-Star resort, one of only 14 resorts in the world with this honor. This Rhode Island luxury hotel was meticulously reconstructed to pay tribute to its storied past and offer exceptional personal experiences for guests, members, and residents. The beautiful grounds of Ocean House have made it a premier luxury wedding destination for those seeking an unforgettable experience. Open year-round, Ocean House's celebrated hotel and residential accommodations, uncompromising service, beachfront location and world-class amenities pay homage to New England's golden age of hospitality with timeless elegance and renewed civility.

Will you discuss the history of Ocean House and how the property has evolved?

Ocean House is the beloved "Grand Dame" of Watch Hill, with a towering presence atop an expansive bluff overlooking the Atlantic

Ocean worthy of its pedigree and positioning in the region. The storied history of this iconic building and its signature yellow façade dates back to 1868 when it first started welcoming wealthy northeasterners wishing to summer by the beach. By the early 1900s, it established itself as the quintessential summer home for distinguished guests and their families. In fact, Ocean House was immortalized in the silent film *American Aristocracy* starring Douglas Fairbanks in 1916, which resulted in the resort expanding

its footprint. The resort continued to welcome guests for 135 years, but over time neglect took its toll on the property and the hotel closed in 2003. A year later, a new structure replicating the original exterior was conceived and over 5,000 artifacts from the original building were lovingly salvaged and incorporated into its rebirth when it reopened in 2010 as the Ocean House of today.

With 49 guestrooms, 20 Signature Suites, and a growing Cottage Collection, Ocean House's evolution continues. We continue to honor the traditions of the original building while ensuring we remain relevant with the next generation of luxury travelers. So many of our guests have strong emotional attachments to and personal histories with Ocean House. This is humbling and very special. But in order to truly pay homage to our past, we must evolve and innovate in the future.

Will you provide an overview of the suite product at Ocean House and do you see the suite offering as a differentiator for the property?

Nearly half of our accommodations are suites, which is unique in the industry and a standout product offering. What's more, each suite has its own look and feel but all are reflective of Rhode Island's nautical, seaside nature. Guests will enjoy luxury appointments as well as conveniences that make any length of stay seamless, including in-suite washers and dryers and fully equipped kitchens which are ideal for family travelers. Couples staying with us for romantic getaways will enjoy fireplaces, deep soaking tubs, expansive ocean views, and personalized amenities. Suite guests will also have a personal butler available to them throughout their stay to ensure no detail is left to chance.

Our newest suite is the Bemelmans Ocean View Suite, a first-of-its-kind accommodation featuring more than 12 works from legendary artist Ludwig Bemelmans. These iconic pieces are accompanied by the works of Tug Rice, a later-day Bemelmans in his own right whose original work and decorative pillows bring the characters of Watch Hill to life. This suite is the perfect complement to the hotel's recently added Bemelmans Gallery which showcases the world's largest private collection of Bemelmans' works on public display.

Our most exclusive suite is our Penthouse Suite, and it also happens to be our most



Ocean House in Watch Hill, Rhode Island (above); Bemelmans Suite (opposite page)

spacious of our Signature Suite Collection. It is a popular choice for families as it features three bedrooms, several living and dining areas, and an open-style, well-appointed kitchen. My favorite feature of this suite is its expansive outdoor deck with an outdoor kitchen, bathroom, and “three-seasons” room with a temperature-controlled floor. And, of course, the views are spectacular.

What was the vision for creating The Cottage Collection and will you highlight this product?

Renting a “cottage” or summer house has always been a treasured tradition for vacationers visiting Watch Hill. Ocean House’s Cottage Collection is one way of preserving this tradition, as we are able to provide guests with the privacy, spaciousness, and convenience of a stand-alone cottage while also enjoying access to all that Ocean House has to offer. The collection includes eight cottages in total, ranging from two-bedroom cozy bungalows to our newest and most exclusive Oceanic cottage featuring nine bedrooms, ocean views, and a private pool. The extensive amenities, services, and unparalleled experiences at Ocean House that are available to all cottage guests while in-residence include private members club privileges as well as beach access and dining. A dedicated Cottage concierge is on-hand to assist with scheduling activities, making reservations, coordinating transportation arrangements and more.

How has Ocean House approached its restaurant/food and beverage offerings?

As a Relais and Chateaux property, guests expect our culinary offering to be elevated and aligned with what one would find at a premier dining establishment. We pride ourselves not just on the quality of our dining options, but the variety as well. In addition to The Bistro and the Five-Star COAST restaurant, we offer five inspired seasonal dining outlets. From French-inspired cuisine in winter’s whimsical Gondola Village, to classic New England seafood at The Verandah Raw Bar, to a traditional Mexican-inspired menu at Dalia, there’s something for everyone.

Another signature food and beverage offering are the hotel’s popular themed dinners on our private white sand beach. These include traditional Lobster Boils and inventive Mediterranean Night Markets. We also have a Center for Wine and Culinary Arts Education on-property where guests can interact with and learn from our culinary and beverage team. The complimentary In the Kitchen Series teaches guests how to cook holiday-themed dishes and dinner options, while the Vine to Wine series has our sommelier team conducting wine tastings and pairings.

Will you discuss Ocean House’s focus on health and wellness?

Yes, this is so important for many of our guests and we offer many services and amenities that allow them to maintain their healthy lifestyle when traveling. These include daily morning yoga and pilates classes offered complimentary, and our Forbes Five-Star



Ocean and Harvest Spa with its extensive menu of therapeutic treatments. A recent addition to the adjacent state-of-the-art fitness center is upgraded equipment with Technogym’s premier ARTIS product line now available. We also offer a movement studio with personal trainers available on request. When it’s time to venture outdoors, the white sand beach located just steps from the hotel provides the perfect backdrop for long walks or a quick jog. What’s more, wellness enthusiasts will appreciate the variety of healthy menu selections offered in all dining outlets, enhanced by the region’s freshest, organic ingredients.

How do you define a true luxury hotel experience?

Luxury hotels should provide a flawless experience from beginning to end. This means that guests receive what they want, when they want it, and how they want it. It may sound simple, but it is not. If it were, every hotel would be Five Star. We know that there are thousands of luxury hotels in the world executing at varying levels, and many of them have an exceptional rooms product, amazing locations, standout spas, sophisticated design elements, top-tier amenities, and other opulent offerings. But the best of the best focus on what really creates a true luxury hotel experience, which is connecting with guests on an emotional level. This is achieved by building strong work cultures where employees are trained and inspired to go above and beyond, connect with guests on an emotional level, and take initiative with every guest interaction to personalize their stay in a way that they will appreciate and remember. Luxury is in the details, and this is the sweet spot that makes guests remember how you made them feel.

Did you always know that the hotel business was where you wanted to spend your career?

To be honest, not really. From the age of three and all through high school, I grew up living in an upscale resort that my parents built on Vancouver Island. I spent many summers working at the resort but when I went off to college at Penn State University, I thought I was going to go to law school. After graduation from college, I took a year off to work for my family as the resort’s Assistant General Manager. It wasn’t until I held this leadership position that I came to understand my true calling was the hotel industry. Up until this point, I learned the “functions” of

many operational roles, including house-keeping, front desk, banquet server, stewarding, catering coordinator, maintenance, reservations, and PBX attendant. I guess you could say this was my equivalent of a paper route because from the age of 12, I earned money by doing all of these line-level jobs after school and during the summer. But once I shifted into a leadership role after graduation, I realized I loved the resort business. One year later, my parents’ investment partners approached me about taking over as the General Manager. My mother retired and, at the age of 26, I took over and led an executive committee much older and more experienced than I was. I used my intuition, work ethic, and enthusiastic drive to gain respect and build trust, and I had a great time running the resort over the next four years. We even earned several awards, including the Vancouver Island Hospitality Company of the Year. I knew I was never going to law school. Instead, I found myself enjoying the recognition and striving to be the best I could be. This is when I attended Cornell University’s Executive Development program for General Managers and met a seasoned Ritz-Carlton General Manager who saw something in me. He was surprised to learn about all the initiatives I had put in place at my family’s resort without any formal training or experience with a company like Four Seasons or Ritz-Carlton. He invited me to his resort, and I immediately recognized how much I loved the luxury hotel space. He then convinced me to take a role on the Executive Committee of The Ritz-Carlton Sarasota and my life in luxury hotels took off.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in pursuing a career in hospitality?

I often get this question and I always stress the importance of being willing to “learn” the business and prove yourself. Opportunities present themselves to those who shine in their roles. So whatever role you start out in, do it great and give 110 percent of yourself. I have promoted hundreds – if not thousands – of employees, supervisors and managers over the years. Opportunities come to those who are fully engaged at work and show they care. Demonstrate that you are committed and passionate about the hotel business and your coworkers and guests, and your professional growth opportunities are endless. At the same time, be willing to take and learn from feedback. And practice emotional intelligence which is much more important in the hospitality business than almost any other industry. Build your own “brand DNA.” Our industry may seem big, but it is not. In fact, it is quite small. It’s very likely that you will become known in the industry and it’s important that you start and finish every position with the same effort, strong integrity, and good character. Eventually, if you build a strong “brand” for yourself, new opportunities will come to you, and you won’t have to look for them. But be mindful that the opposite is also true if you don’t conduct yourself this way. ●