

# Executive Travel

## Keeping the Human Touch

An Interview with Luca Virgilio,  
General Manager, Baglioni Hotel London

**EDITORS' NOTE** A graduate in hotel management from the Les Roches School in Switzerland, Luca Virgilio has held his current post since October 2004. Prior to that, he served as the General Manager of the Hotel Carlton Baglioni in Milan.

**PROPERTY BRIEF** A member of the Leading Small Hotels of the World, the five-star Baglioni Hotel London is located opposite Kensington Palace, a short distance from landmarks the Royal Albert Hall and Harrods. With 68 rooms, 50 of which are suites, the boutique hotel offers 24-hour room service; a spa and fitness center; 24-hour concierge service; and fine dining at the Brunello Lounge & Restaurant, which has a wine list of more than 500 selections. Owned and operated by Milan-based Baglioni Hotels ([www.baglionihotels.com](http://www.baglionihotels.com)), the property can host meetings for up to 70 guests in the Kensington Suite, which boasts its own entrance.



Luca Virgilio

### Were you pleased with the Baglioni Hotel's growth in 2007?

Yes, 2007 was a phenomenal year. We are in the finishing stages of positioning the hotel in the high-style luxury market, and everybody is very happy with the results.

### What sort of clients do you target?

We're definitely operating in the top tier, and we're looking for clients who like luxury, but with an easygoing and upbeat feel. Our clientele is diversified, from entertainment industry leaders to CEOs of global corporations.

### London is home to many outstanding restaurants. How can a hotel restaurant compete in that kind of market?

We focus on being popular with the local community, because it gives us great visibility and drives word-of-mouth business to the hotel. It's the best publicity you can ask for. Hotels are not usually perceived as places to dine, and that is why many hotels are going with celebrity chefs. They think once you have a well-known name, all the hard work is done. However, celebrity chefs can also be prima donnas, so you need to know what you're getting into. For the Baglioni Hotel, we just wanted to provide good quality food in a beautiful environment. It was just a question of working hard and making sure that those who came to our door had



a fantastic time. Then, the word just spreads. We've been doing great, and Italian food is one of the most popular cuisines around.

### Is a spa a necessary amenity for a city hotel like yours?

Having a great spa is a great advantage for a city hotel. We can provide a resort feel in the city and start catering to a broader audience. Our spa is spacious – roughly 3,000 square feet. We have four treatment rooms, as well as shower, steam, and exercise rooms. Our spa is absolutely perfect for the size of our hotel, and a lot of people from the outside are using it.

### What kind of accommodations can guests expect at the Baglioni Hotel?

We have a total of 68 keys. We're a boutique hotel that is very focused on service. A majority of our keys are suites, and it's a perfect mix.

### Do you have a presidential suite for top-level executives who are looking for privacy during their stay?

Our Royal Suite is a three-bedroom apartment with a double sitting room, four bathrooms, and a balcony. It's over 2,500 square feet. Ever since it opened, the occupancy has been phenomenal. In fact, recently, the daughter of someone who owns a very important hotel company with two five-star hotels in London stayed in the Royal Suite. I asked her why she decided to stay with us and not in one of her family's hotels. She said, "A friend of mine in London told me this is the place to be." So, again, word of mouth is the best thing.

### How do you balance technological amenities with personalized service?

Nowadays, any hotel can be beautiful, as long as you put money into it. So the only way we can be better than anybody else is through service, and service means people. We don't want to push our clients away; we want to keep them close. So we don't rely too heavily on technology. We still want to keep the human touch.

### How have you managed to attract and retain the talented employees you need to provide that human touch?

It is very challenging, especially in a dynamic city like London that offers a lot of opportunities. So we need to recognize our talent and develop our people so they see a clear path for success with us. We can't take people for granted. While new blood is always good, we



need to have rock solid people in our key positions and retain them by letting them grow and teaching them new things.

### Does today's General Manager need to be a specialist in a variety of areas of a hotel's operations?

Truly, you need to know everything; you need to know how the machine works. Being a General Manager is like being the Mayor of a small city. For instance, your ministry of tourism is your sales and marketing department, which attracts people to your hotel. Your maintenance department handles your infrastructure, and you have a financial department, but you need to know those things too. The General Manager is very much involved in making sure all of those departments coordinate with one another. So you have to know how every single department works and then find the right people to delegate work to. I also have to entertain and be upfront with my guests, but there is a lot of behind-the-scenes work for a General Manager as well.

### What's your management style like?

I try to manage by example. I would never ask my staff to do something that I would not do myself. I believe in sharing information, creating common goals, and making sure everyone feels empowered to make a difference. I'm a good and fair person, and I believe in a nice and friendly working environment, but if there is a problem, you need to say so and tackle it. You can't just look the other way, because things don't get better if you do. I spend very little time in my office. I manage by "walking around." I am always looking, seeing, listening, and talking to guests and staff, making sure my presence and support is felt. I try to be everywhere and that is the way it should be. ●

The Brunello Restaurant at the Baglioni Hotel London (above);  
a junior suite (below)