

LEADERS IN *Hospitality*

The Reality of the Hotelier

An Interview with Marco Torriani,
General Manager, Mandarin Oriental, Geneva



EDITORS' NOTE Marco Torriani began his career in Switzerland at the Belvedere Hotel in Davos and the Hotel Drei Könige am Rhein in Basel. In 1978, he joined Canadian Pacific Hotels & Resorts as Executive Assistant Manager at Le Château Frontenac in Québec, followed by an Executive Assistant Manager position with Four Seasons in Montreal. Later, after five successful years with Regent International as General Manager in Chicago, he took charge of the extensive renovation of the Breidenbacher Hof in Düsseldorf, which became the first hotel in the newly formed Rafael Hotels in 1988. Torriani became legendary hotelier Georg Rafael's first partner. The following year, he moved to Geneva to become General Manager of the Hotel du Rhône. In 2000, the hotel was acquired by Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group.



Marco Torriani

PROPERTY BRIEF Mandarin Oriental, Geneva, is located on the right bank of the River Rhône, minutes from Geneva's financial institutions, premier shops, and galleries. The property offers 197 elegant rooms and suites; a fine-dining Indian restaurant, a brasserie, and a bar; a comprehensive fitness center; and conference and banqueting facilities for up to 350 guests. Mandarin Oriental, Geneva, is owned by Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group (www.mandarinoriental.com), the award-winning owner and operator of some of the world's most prestigious hotels and resorts.

Has the economic environment had a heavy impact on the Mandarin Oriental, Geneva, and is it now challenging to find growth?

Our market is traditionally very sensitive, even in good times. I've gone through this three or four times in my career as a hotel manager. This particular situation is quite different from others, but I'm hoping we'll get out of it sooner rather than later. So far, Geneva is not yet affected. The crisis itself is generating travel to Geneva because we are a United Nations city and there are meetings and conferences being held on the matter. But we expect to see the effects in a few months.

In a city that has many good stand-alone restaurants, how challenging is it to be successful in food and beverage?

If a restaurant is well designed and has a good concept and good quality, then the guest will always come to your restaurant. But what you really want is for the local community to tell the guest who is staying at the Mandarin about the great Indian restaurant there and make the suggestion to dine there.

With a luxury property like yours, how critical is it to offer a true spa experience and not just a fitness component?

In a city, you have to have a spa, as you have members from the city actively utilizing the spa. So it's very important. Today, I would go further than just a spa. The aspect of health and spa is combined with a very thin touch of medicine and expertise on certain problems that we live with in these stressful times. We are finalizing our concept project for Geneva, so we'll also have a spa within a year or two.

How do you offer the technology that is necessary, such as checking out on a TV, but make sure you don't lose the personal touch side of the business?

Nowadays, you have to do both, because everything works that way for the younger clientele, and you have to have it all available in the hotel so that they can make use of all that equipment. But you have to supplement this with people who smile, make eye contact, and exude friendliness and charm, because in a luxury hotel, people want to be personally recognized as a frequent and loyal customer.

How critical is it to retain your people when you have so many repeat guests who want to see the same faces?

It is extremely critical. The young kids typically want to have a good experience and further their careers, and that's the kind of people and talent we want here. On the other hand, we are lucky enough in this city to have people who are happy to live here and stay with the jobs they're doing and who don't necessarily want to move up the ladder. So they are very important because they are the life of the hotel; they know the guests, and people come here because of specific people, and that's wonderful.

Has the term luxury lost some of its meaning?

Luxury means different things to nearly everyone. Luxury is a pleasing rarity, an experience first and foremost. The moment you feel that you have something happening around

you, with you, that gives you a true sense of happiness and pleasure, and you find this is something that you would not have missed, that to me is a luxurious happening. The star rating is important when it comes to a certain level of your hardware that has to be in keeping within the tendencies of how people live today. But more important is the software, which is what you are offering people-wise – how you approach the guest, how you anticipate his needs, and how you accommodate his wishes.

Are you happy with where the property is today, and are there any major projects on the horizon that guests can expect?

We have just completed a major renovation of our whole ground-floor level, so we are now offering guests two new and exciting dining concepts and an authentic bar experience. We have partnered with Paul Bocuse and Jean-Fleury of Brasseries Nord-Sud in Lyon for our all-day dining, and with London based Michelin-starred chef Vineet Bhatia for our signature Indian restaurant, Rasoi by Vineet. We added six beautiful junior suites and one Oriental spa suite, with a massage room, a dining room, and magnificent terraces on the hotel's top floor. The next step is the restyling of 145 keys, altering the wiring techniques, updating TVs, and making other adjustments to align them to our public areas. This will take us the best part of a year to redo these rooms because we don't want to disturb the guests – we want to do it very cleverly, step by step.

Could you have imagined in the early days that you would spend so much of your career at the Mandarin Oriental, Geneva?

Absolutely not. This hotel has never stopped evolving. There have been several renovation projects since I joined as well as a re-branding with Mandarin Oriental. Each project has brought lots of excitement and motivation. I have had so much freedom in managing this hotel that it's been like a second best thing to running one's own business.

How challenging is it to turn it off the business at the end of the day?

Luckily I have always had lots of hobbies and interests. I am a fan of sports and culture, and I am a music aficionado, and Geneva very much caters to these interests. I have a large family with lots of beautiful grandchildren who keep me exceptionally busy – what else does one need in life? ●

The Mandarin Oriental bar