

LEADERS IN
Hospitality
Old World Charm
in a Modern World



An Interview with Kurt Wachtveitl,
General Manager, Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok

EDITORS' NOTE Kurt Wachtveitl has been General Manager of the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok since 1967. He is a graduate of the Lausanne Hotel School in Switzerland and also studied philosophy at the University of Madrid and the history of art and literature at the Dante Alighieri School in Rome. Prior to coming to Thailand in 1965, Wachtveitl worked at the Hotel Beau-Rivage in Lausanne, the Trois Couronnes in Vevey, the Suvretta House in St. Moritz, and the Hilton Hotel in London.



Kurt Wachtveitl

His first post in Thailand was as General Manager of the Nipa Lodge in Pattaya. In October 1967, at the age of 30, he was appointed General Manager of the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok. Wachtveitl is a recipient of Thailand's Royal Decoration of Fourth Class (Companion) of the Most Exalted Order of the White Elephant, as well as the Order of Merit, presented by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1987. He also won the French Distinction Internationale titled "Personnalité de l'année 1991" (Personality of the Year 1991) in the hotel industry; the 2008 Independent Hotelier of the World award by HOTELS magazine, USA; and the Hotel Investment Conference Asia Pacific Lifetime Achievement Award (HICAP) in Hong Kong.

PROPERTY BRIEF For more than 130 years, distinguished travelers have followed the legendary Chao Phraya River through the heart of Bangkok to the doors of one of the world's most luxurious hotels, the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok (www.mandarinoriental.com/bangkok). Their Oriental Spa has just been named "Best City Center Hotel Spa Worldwide" by Luxury Travel Advisor magazine. The property is owned by the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group, the award-winning owner and operator of some of the world's most prestigious hotels and resorts. Mandarin Oriental now operates or has under development 41 hotels representing more than 10,000 rooms in 24 countries, with 16 hotels in Asia, 14 in the Americas, and 10 in Europe and North Africa.

In your 40-year career at the helm of the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok, what projects are you most proud of?

The first project I am particularly proud of is Legends of Indochina: Discovering Indochina's Legendary Trails. Nostalgia is in vogue,

particularly among Western tourists and travelers, and no region is more popular with history seekers than the countries of Indochina and their neighbors. The region has a plethora of historic buildings and fascinating reminders of former times and cultures, making it genuinely interesting from a historical point of view. I recently revived what is called the Legends of Indochina, which was introduced in 1999. It is a collaboration with a dozen of the very finest resorts, hotels, trains, and cruises in the region to introduce a series of recommended and tailor-made itineraries to enable today's travelers to enjoy their own "Grand Tour" of this fascinating region.

Another project is the Southeast Asian Writers Award, which is more popularly known as the S.E.A. Write Award. It was born out of the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok's long-standing affinity with famous writers from around the world. Since we opened in 1876, great authors have either stayed in or visited the hotel. As a tribute to this literary tradition, the S.E.A. Write Award was established in 1979 by the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok in conjunction with the PEN Club of Thailand and the Writers' Association of Thailand. The winners come from 10 countries that compose the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. As part of their reward, they are treated to a week at the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok, culminating in a gala dinner presided over by a member of the Thai royal family. Every year, the gala event is graced with an illustrious guest speaker, whose inspiring speech is the highlight of the evening. The S.E.A. Write Award has become a most prestigious literary award in the region.

The third project is The Oriental Hotel Apprenticeship Programme [OHAP], which was set up in 1990 in response to the results of a survey carried out by the hotel, that discovered that the rank-and-file and lower middle management workforce had the biggest turnover. Various hotel schools have been set up in an attempt to address this problem, but in those schools, theories have received more attention than the practical training needed for operational level. OHAP was launched with an emphasis on practical training within the standard of the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok. Theory is kept basic, and 70 percent of the instructors are highly qualified staff from the hotel. The rest of the instructors are specialists invited from various distinguished institutions.

OHAP is a contribution, a response, and an invitation. It's a contribution toward creating qualified personnel for the hospitality industry in Thailand, a response to wishes of a number of people, and an invitation to those who are interested in acquiring the art, skill, and refinement needed for this commendable profession.

Following the success of OHAP, in 2002 we established The Oriental Professional Thai Chef Programme to create professional chefs to take on Thai chef positions overseas and to ultimately become ambassadors of Thai cuisine. It is a three-month course that offers a combination of theoretical classes and practical training, with an emphasis on modern equipment usage coupled with our high standards. Students will be able to use the knowledge they learn here in their career in the Thai cuisine industry.

What makes the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok unique?

The staff members make this hotel unique, especially those who have dedicated their services for an average of 15 years. Repeat guests, who compose up to 50 percent of our clientele, look forward to seeing the same faces when they return. Guests feel that old-world charm can coexist happily with the modern world here, and we've been able to maintain and nourish that through the years with the personalized service we offer. Because of the close relationship between the hotel's staff and the guests, our guests feel at home here. They're relaxed, they have fun, and they find it an exciting place to be. The continuous maintenance and enhancements of the property are carried out following meticulous study of the competition and to preserve the hotel's unique character and 132-year history.

Do you still enjoy the business as much as you did in the early days?

We build our success on success. It's very difficult to retire because we've been so successful. I've been at my job for 41 years and have not lost a modicum of passion or enthusiasm. In terms of slowing down, a lot depends of course on the health one enjoys and the energy needed to drive oneself. I feel that I have reached full maturity, from instinct in my early years to experiences gained over the decades. I still enjoy meeting the rich and famous and every minute with all of my employees. For me, to give pleasure is the most serious business. ●

The lobby of the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok