

LEADERS IN  
*Hospitality*

## The Restoration of an Iconic Place

An Interview with Anthony Lee, General Manager, The Connaught

**EDITORS' NOTE** Anthony Lee has been a part of The Connaught for nearly three decades and is only the hotel's seventh General Manager in 110 years. He studied for a degree in hotel management for four years before joining The Connaught. During his studies, he gained experiences in several hotels including The Dorchester and worked on a number of functions at Buckingham Palace. He also worked at Hôtel de Crillon in Paris for one year.



Anthony Lee

**PROPERTY BRIEF** Extravagant luxury steeped in a wealth of history, The Connaught ([www.the-connaught.co.uk](http://www.the-connaught.co.uk)) is one of London's most prestigious five-star hotels. Located in the heart of stylish Mayfair, and ideal for art lovers and food connoisseurs, the property has recently benefited from a delicate restoration, coupling modern art and up-to-date technology with faithfully restored period features, providing visitors supreme comfort in a designer hotel in central London. The Connaught's exclusive restaurant offers guests Michelin-starred food from H el ne Darroze, one of France's most celebrated chefs, and luxury shopping nearby includes Balenciaga and Marc Jacobs flagship stores.

**How has the economic crisis impacted the London market and The Connaught specifically, and do you see any signs of recovery?**

It has certainly hit London, but luckily, the reputation of The Connaught ensures that guests are still willing to pay for the best. However, we are never complacent and ensure that all our guests feel they are getting value for money. The greatest casualties have been larger hotels that rely on a strong group and corporate base, because events and banqueting suffered badly.

The Connaught is very lucky. We just had more than \$140 million invested into this 92-bedroom property. All the pipes and wires behind the scenes have been replaced, but we worked to maintain The Connaught identity. The restoration of this iconic hotel after 112 years of history, has allowed us to weather the storm better than many other properties in London.

Our location in Mayfair is great. Adjacent Mount Street, in particular, has seen an enormous resurgence with stores like Christian Louboutin and Lanvin, offering very high-end and exclusive shopping.



Our size is also perfect. We don't have hundreds of rooms to sell. The existing building will have 88 rooms, and a new Mews extension, which connects at the back of the hotel, will give us an additional 31 new rooms and suites, including a second Penthouse. It will also give us some event space and a small ballroom for up to 120, where guests can enjoy cuisine from H el ne Darroze's Michelin-starred kitchen. There will also be a swimming pool and a spa – the only Aman spa in Europe – as well as an extremely well-

equipped gym with a design that is interestingly contemporary. We offer all-day dining through Espelette, The Coburg Bar designed by well-known Paris-based designer India Mahdavi, the David Collins-designed The Connaught Bar, and what is called The Apartment, which is literally a world-class penthouse at the top of the hotel. We also have had award-winning, Chelsea-flower-show gardener, Tom Stuart Smith, design The Moon Garden, a luxurious area outside the new wing.

We are leading the way in London at the moment. We have high occupancies and an incredible room rate, and the high-end leisure travelers and other high-net-worth individuals are still spending the money.

**In an industry where technology has played such a major role, is it challenging to make sure you don't lose the focus on hospitality?**

The difference here is that The Connaught is not just a beautiful hotel; it's a beautiful home. We have a ratio of three and a half staff per room; it's very personalized. The kind of people who love The Connaught are those who tend to come in under the radar screen. They are people who are very well known in their particular field, but who may want to almost disappear. They don't want any fuss or publicity, and this is one place where, as soon as they're inside the front door, they can truly relax. It's small and intimate. They can go into the bars or the restaurants, and no one is going to bother them. It's like walking through their own home.

What we provide is quite unique, but in a very relaxed way. We like to talk about an intuitive side of service, where the staff almost predicts what you would like before you even have to say it. We empower and support our staff. We have systems in place that ensure that,

if our team is about to make a mistake or if something has been overlooked, it's corrected before it hits the client. That requires that we keep a high level of service and consistency in play.

**Given the history of the property, how challenging was it to find a balance during restoration between bringing in a modern feel and yet not losing some of the traditional elements?**

The balance was key. Most of these iconic hotels on the world stage can become too clinical, leaving them with an incredible product that is completely sterile. It takes three things to make a great hotel: a building, good food, and good service. That is why we kept all of our staff on full pay throughout closure. We did this successfully, because the relationship between the staff we have and our guests is very important. It's definitely still The Connaught, but it's changed, and for the better. All of the old paintings have been beautifully restored, cleaned, reframed, relit. Everything that was good about The Connaught before has been kept. We got rid of anything that was meaningless, and we then mixed in a much more contemporary design with black and white photography. The blend of the contemporary and the original traditional has worked very well.

My most important role at The Connaught is, as the custodian of the soul of the hotel, to keep in touch with our significant guests, especially throughout the transition. I had a blog that I kept going throughout closure so they could log in and see what was going on. I also sent key staff around the world to get best practices experience at other legendary properties, so that when we reopened, we could deliver the top levels of service that people are expecting today.

In September, we opened up the first of the rooms in the new wing; and the private event space, as well as the spa and pool, followed shortly afterwards. But early in the process, we had already impressed our regular clientele. We have also attracted new, younger guests who have come to adore The Connaught. The rejuvenated Connaught is now out there on the world stage for everyone to see, and we're definitely going to gain momentum as we move into the future. ●

*The Connaught in the heart of Mayfair Village (left); Espelette restaurant (top right); apartment sitting room (bottom)*