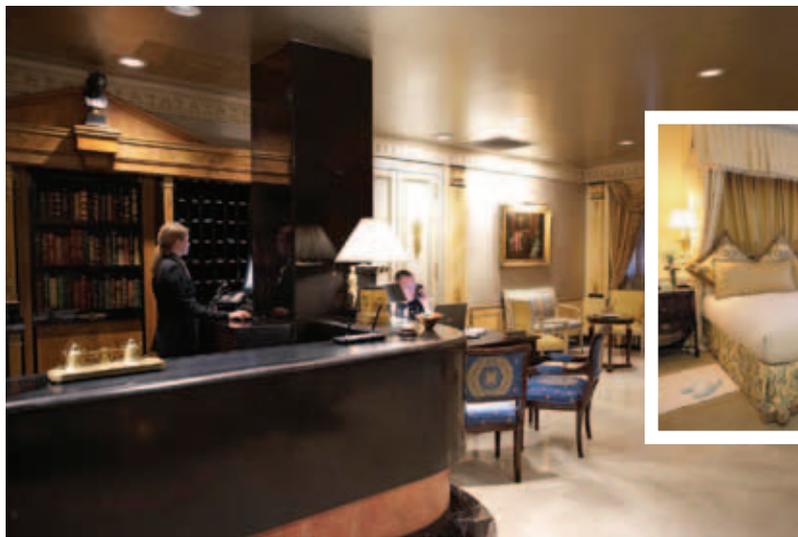


Hospitality's Global Impact



Enhancing the Experience

An Interview with Ashish Verma,
General Manager, The Lowell



EDITORS' NOTE Ashish Verma is a dynamic hotelier with an accomplished background in luxury hospitality. He has previously held positions with Orient-Express Hotels, Millennium Hotels and Resorts, Hyatt International Corporation, and Oberoi Hotels & Resorts International in Asia, Europe, and North America. Verma was born in the Punjab, India and received a B.A. with honors in political science and economics from Punjab University, Chandigarh, India; a graduate degree in Hospitality Administration from the Oberoi School of Hotel Management, New Delhi, India; and a Master of Business Administration from IMHI Cornell-ESSEC in Paris, France. In addition to his numerous professional successes, Verma has been committed to several social, educational, and environmental causes. He serves on boards of various nonprofit organizations. Verma's diverse interests include sports, yoga, philosophy, languages, travel, and the guitar.



Ashish Verma

PROPERTY BRIEF The Lowell, a 1927 landmark building, is situated off Madison Avenue in New York's exclusive Upper East Side. The hotel (www.lowellhotel.com) dotes upon its guests with uniquely personalized service and attention to detail, maintaining 47 individually appointed suites and 25 deluxe rooms. Guests will appreciate complimentary beverages upon arrival, Voss water at turndown, and a selection of Bulgari amenities, and most suites have wood-burning fireplaces, some have terraces, and almost all have fully equipped kitchens.

Would you discuss the impact you saw on New York City broadly over the past 24 months and how did The Lowell's business hold up during this time?

Initially, there was concern for the luxury segment because people were wary of being perceived as extravagant. But as things began to even out, people understood that helping our industry is helping employment by supporting the industry at large.

At The Lowell, we have a high percentage of regular guests, and the impact, compared to the competition, was less because of our earned reputation over the decades.

Some of the hotels on the Upper East Side that

were not in operation when the recession started slowly returned, and when they opened, they were offering some very low rates. Perhaps, the rate was not a focus for them – they were just trying to reintroduce themselves in the marketplace.

That diluted the average rates a little late last year and early this year, but people quickly figured out the difference in terms of hotel experience.

So we've been challenged, but we continue to be the best in the marketplace and in our competitive

set because of our level of service, attention to detail, personalization, and our product getting better each year with refurbishments and added touches.

Would you talk about your food and beverage offerings and have they been welcomed by the community?

For a hotel of our caliber, essentials in food and beverage are room service and the mini bars, which must provide the very best selections. We also have an excellent chef who looks after both the room service and The Pembroke Room restaurant.

Room service for us is an extension of the dining space because we have large suites, terraces, and wood-burning fireplaces. So the ratio of hotel guests who order breakfast, dinner, or afternoon tea through room service is higher than it would be in an average luxury hotel. Our room service menu offers a lot of signature preparations, an extensive wine selection, and an overall very high-end dining experience.

We've raised the level of The Pembroke Room to where our breakfast is cited as one of the best in town. We have incorporated a health menu with numerous fresh juices and smoothies in addition to organic offerings and the latest in healthy dining. We have a fantastic brunch menu and it remains one of the most exclusive meal periods in town. We also recently started pre-theater dinner in The Pembroke, which is most convenient for our guests who like to avoid traffic and commuting from another restaurant to a Broadway show or the opera.

Our lobby level restaurant, The Post House, remains a local favorite offering great lunch and dinner classics. Managed by a great restaurateur, it remains a destination restaurant.

Is there a consistent feel from suite to suite?

We have exploited our location to take advantage of the natural light and unobstructed views. We are also in an area of Manhattan that is rather quiet.

There is uniqueness in the suites in the details of design and decor. Since we are not a major corporation, we don't undertake economies of scale projects. We maintain unique aspects to our accommodations and we have several specialty suites. Our themed suites like the Garden Suite, Manhattan Suite, or the Hollywood Suite are in high demand. For example, the Garden Suite has two spacious terraces with a fountain, where our guests enjoy entertaining friends for cocktails, dinner, or brunch, personally catered by our Chef de Cuisine, Michael Fred, and his team.

Indeed, our suites have a distinct flavor and style, and a lot of our guests ask for those suites by name and routinely book them up to a year in advance.

How much do you focus on new technology when you have such a human element to your property? Is it hard to find the balance?

We want that human interaction – our guests expect it. Our base is not a rushed corporate traveler. We offer features like express check-out, but we do it in a personalized way – it's not technology based. We don't extend services measured by milliseconds, but we aim for seamless efficiency weighed by millidetails. Our guests appreciate the personalized attention, so technology is incorporated but is never a substitute for the human touch.

In luxury hotels, how critical is it to have a good professional understanding with ownership?

It's paramount, because if ownership and management pull in different directions, it's not a partnership and won't work.

Fortunately for us, our owners are focused on the long-term and The Lowell is their crown jewel; the fact that we are their only hotel makes us special. They're also very knowledgeable and they understand the environment and needs of our property.

When one owns or manages a luxury hotel, it's critical to believe that it's all about enhancing the guest experience, and our owners consistently have led us with input to forge in that direction. We have always been supported on our ideas and initiatives, which they know will only make us more unique and ultimately create for all our guests the most memorable of visits. ●

The Entrance to The Lowell (left); Lobby (center); King Room (right)