



Dorchester Collection's Expansion

An Interview with Christopher Cowdray,
Chief Executive Officer, Dorchester Collection



EDITORS' NOTE With more than 30 years of luxury hospitality experience across four continents, Christopher Cowdray was appointed Chief Executive Officer of Dorchester Collection in 2007. Prior to that, he was General Manager of The Dorchester following a six-year stint as Managing Director of Claridge's, London. Cowdray is a native of Zimbabwe, where he earned a diploma in hotel management and is also a graduate of the executive program at Columbia University's Business School.



Christopher Cowdray

COMPANY BRIEF The prestigious Dorchester Collection (www.dorchestercollection.com) is the successor to the Dorchester Group, which was originally established in 1996 to manage a portfolio of some of the world's most celebrated hotels. Dorchester Collection's portfolio currently includes The Dorchester in London, Coworth Park in Ascot, Le Meurice and Hôtel Plaza Athénée in Paris, Hotel Principe di Savoia in Milan, The New York Palace, The Beverly Hills Hotel, and Hotel Bel-Air.

Coming off a challenging 24 months where are we in terms of recovery today and have you seen the market coming back?

We have seen the market coming back in all of our destinations in both Europe and the U.S. The U.K. and France are particularly positive. So I'm optimistic about 2011.

Do you foresee growth for the brand mainly coming from new properties in those two regions or do you envision broadening into other regions?

We see the majority of our growth in those two regions, but we're also looking at key cities in Asia.

In certain markets where you have multiple properties in a destination, how do those complement one another?

In the case of Paris and Beverly Hills, the properties are very different and they have a slightly different following. The hotels are iconic so they have a certain level of clientele who frequent them and prefer that type of property. That works well. It's not as though they're competing directly in all segments.

We have a similar situation in London where we have a smaller hotel – 45 Park Lane,

which is opening summer 2011. It will have 45 rooms and a penthouse. That will complement The Dorchester, which is more traditional, because it is going to have a more modern twist to it. It will open following the success of the launch of Coworth Park in Ascot, our new country house hotel and spa only 45 minutes from London.

Is there a consistent feel to the properties within Dorchester Collection or are you focused on the specific property?

We're focused on the specific property, although we provide a consistent service and operational umbrella over that, which lets the guests know that they are all part of the same collection.

But the individuality of the hotel is very important to us and we don't want to lose that aspect of our brand.

Your properties in cities like Paris, London, and New York are all located in areas flooded with great stand-alone restaurants. What is your view on how to be successful in the food and beverage area?

It's looked at differently at each property, but whatever restaurant we develop has to appeal to the local community. It has to have its own standing and not rely purely on the hotel guest. We use them as tools to bring the community into the hotels.

In Paris and London, each of the hotels have restaurants that are three star with Michelin chefs. Then we have China Tang at The Dorchester, which is a far more informal experience and is extremely popular.

How much of a focus has developing a true spa offering been for you and are you working independently or have you chosen to partner?

We don't have a generic brand that goes across the company. In London, we have been very successful in running the spas ourselves. At the Hotel Plaza Athénée we partner with Christian Dior, and in Los Angeles at The Beverly Hills Hotel and Hotel Bel-Air, we partner with La Prairie. But it is about individuality – what is going to work best for that property within the market.

What are your targets for property growth within the collection?

We are targeting 15 to 20 hotels because we want to make sure the hotels that we bring to the company are iconic and will complement

the rest of the brand. So it's a small exclusive collection of hotels.

Is it challenging to maintain consistent service standards throughout the group?

It is more challenging in some areas than in others. But we're focused on the delivery of a service standard, and we use different types of measurement to ensure that. The feedback we're getting is that we're the top of the market, which is where we want to be. But there has to be a relentless pursuit of those standards.

Has the role of GM become more focused on business and less on hospitality today?

Yes. With this competitive environment, you have to be entrepreneurial in the way you run the hotel. However, we are focused on providing an exceptionally high level of service, which is genuinely warm and natural. This in itself impacts our business results positively and has featured high in our guest feedback.

How do you drive corporate responsibility throughout the organization?

Corporate responsibility is very high on our agenda. We have a team in each hotel that drives initiatives, which are coordinated also on a corporate basis.

Within new hotels we're developing or refurbishing, the focus is on sustainability. For example, the hotel we just opened at Coworth Park has a high level of sustainability, from biomass boilers, to growing our own willow trees, to ground source recovery pumps to drive the air-conditioning. Additionally, each hotel contributes to numerous charity initiatives.

In leading Dorchester Collection, was it challenging to go from leading specific properties to a broader, more corporate role?

I have always enjoyed business so the new role is something I moved into easily.

The principles of whether you're running an individual hotel or a company are the same, and if you get those basic principles right and apply them and stick to them with a clear vision of where you're going, it's quite easy to attain your goals.

We are incredibly focused on further developing Dorchester Collection through strategic growth, enhancing our iconic properties, and innovative brand developments while maintaining the individuality of each legendary hotel and anticipating our guests' needs. ●

Hôtel Plaza Athénée Eiffel Suite (left); Coworth Park Exterior (right)