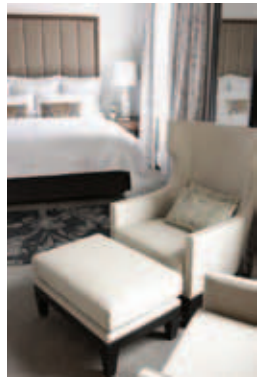


Hospitality's Global Impact



Staying Ahead of the Curve

An Interview with Spencer H. Wadama,
General Manager, The Surrey



EDITORS' NOTE *Spencer Wadama spent 18 years with The Ritz-Carlton at locations including, most recently, Osaka, Japan and Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt before joining The Surrey. Hotels under Wadama's management have achieved some of the most prestigious awards in the industry, including the Mobil Five Star and AAA Five Diamond. He has also overseen the hotel openings of the Bulgari Resort in Bali, the Sharq Village & Spa in Doha Qatar, and 11 Ritz-Carltons around the world. He majored in business at San Francisco State University.*



Spencer H. Wadama

PROPERTY BRIEF *The Surrey hotel was built pre-war in Beaux Arts architectural design and evokes the ambiance of a residential town house. It is situated on the Upper East Side with direct access to Madison Avenue's upscale boutiques and restaurants, Museum Mile, and Central Park. The property (www.thesurrey.com) features 190 salons, including 30 suites, a Penthouse, and a Presidential suite. It is also home to Daniel Boulud's Café Boulud, as well as The Spa at The Surrey, a fitness center, and a 2,200-square-foot English roof garden overlooking Central Park.*

With the challenges we've seen over the past 24 months, is the New York market coming back and how has the business fared for The Surrey?

When I'm talking to my counterparts, it sounds like business is ramping back up.

For The Surrey, it's getting better on a daily basis. Obviously, with the city getting busier, we firmly understand that the Upper East Side is a destination within New York City so it's based on the volume of business in the city overall.

You also have two very special suites, the Penthouse and the Presidential. Can you talk about those offerings?

The 2,800-square-foot Presidential suite has a balcony and mirrors an Upper East Side apartment. We have a baby grand piano in the room, along with a dining table for 10, separate his and hers bathrooms, and a sauna. So it's very lush and comfortable, but livable.

The Penthouse is a 1,200-square-foot room with an 1,100-square-foot private patio. It offers a drop-down projection screen TV, beautiful sunken baths with Jacuzzi jets, and a large living space. It's great for a couple

or a special occasion, and the ability to have a nice dining experience on your patio is second to none in this neighborhood.

Both rooms have a full kitchen, and with Café Boulud in the hotel, it's always fun to have the chef or someone come up and prepare a private meal for you in your suite.

How critical has that relationship been with Daniel Boulud and Café Boulud?

Daniel Boulud has an incredible draw and a great reputation in the city. But to have Café Boulud as your hotel restaurant is fantastic. The food quality and the presentation, and the amount of repeat business you get every time, is not like anything I've ever seen, especially in a hotel restaurant, because it doesn't feel like one. It's very much a freestanding restaurant.

For us, it's a great relationship because of the in-room dining and our roof garden – all the food comes from the Boulud kitchen, so it's always a great selling point for us.

All in all, the relationship is great. They want to see us successful and we want to continue to support their success.

And with Bar Pleiades?

The bar has become a neighborhood bar, so it's nice to have a steady flow of regulars. Our guests love it because the style is fantastic, it's a comfortable space, and they have great music. And it's great having Cameron as our master mixologist with his imagination for drinks.

As part of re-introducing the product to the market, how important was the spa component to the overall changes to the property and how have guests received it?

Today, any time you are going to position yourself as a luxury hotel, you need to have a wellness offering, be it a salon or a spa.

We opted to go with The Spa at The Surrey because we wanted people to come in and relax. The Upper East Side is a different destination in the city – people come here to vacation or have what they call a staycation and get away in the city.

The unique and completely customized spa offerings have helped position us as a luxury hotel. We manage and run it, and it has been well received in the community and by our visiting guests.

As you've re-launched the property, have you been happy with the team you've put in place and how important is it for repeat guests to see the same faces?

That is the advantage of having some of the older doormen, bellmen, and room attendants and having staff that has been here since the reopening in November of 2009 – it makes a huge difference for the guest by creating a level of comfort that you can't replace. Nobody wants to feel like they have to get to know a hotel over and over again.

In regard to staff, we've been fortunate to hold on to a majority of them. With any re-launch or reopening, you're always going to lose some, but for us it has been minimal, and of those that have left, most of them have gone onto promotions at some of our sister properties.

The management we have promoted since we've opened have all been re-opening employees. So they dedicated a lot of time and effort to the property. The emotional tie they have with the success of this hotel can't be replaced with somebody that is brought in after the fact.

How much has the role of GM shifted? Is it more business than hospitality?

It can be. It depends on business levels, ownership, and the management company, as well as on expectations.

The best hotels will have good people who keep an eye on the business side and keep their finger on the pulse of what's going on, but never forget the customer; at that point, business takes care of itself.

Did you know quickly this opportunity was the right fit?

When I saw this property, I had another opportunity in hand, but the chance to work in New York City is hard to compete with, and the company has a lot of great people; they cared not only about the project, but for me as a person. You can't get into a people business if you don't care about people. Denihan cares about their people.

How have things turned out? From a service standpoint, I'm very happy with where we are. As the customer's expectations change, we need to stay ahead of the curve, taking care of our repeat customers and winning over new customers. So far, we have been successful achieving this. Business levels? Well, I want more. I wanted business to ramp-up faster, but I am excited to say we are now hitting our stride. ●

Penthouse Suite Bedroom (left); Lobby (center); English Roof Garden (right)