



## A Grand Hotel

An Interview with Eric O. Long,  
General Manager, The Waldorf=Astoria

**EDITORS' NOTE** Eric Long has been a Hilton veteran for more than 30 years and held key management positions in New Jersey, Florida, and the Midwest. He moved to The Waldorf=Astoria in 1994.

**PROPERTY BRIEF** The Waldorf=Astoria ([www.waldorfastoria.com](http://www.waldorfastoria.com)) has occupied its present Park Avenue site since 1931. Originally opened on Fifth Avenue in 1893, it is one of New York's premier luxury hotels and offers a choice of 1,246 rooms and suites. The Waldorf Towers features an additional 101 suites and 79 executive guest rooms and employs a separate entrance and staff. The property is owned by Hilton Worldwide (NYSE: HLT), based in McLean, Virginia.



Eric O. Long

**New York City is known for its resiliency. How has travel and tourism fared coming out of the global economic crisis and with the continued economic volatility?**

In a word, it has been challenging. It is a mixed story. While citywide occupancies are close to the historical peak, rates are just now beginning to return to 2008 levels. Today's customer is more value conscious; the timeframe for booking larger group programs has been compressed. On the other hand, the luxury market is seeing a stronger rebound and our premium accommodations are enjoying great demand.

**Would you highlight some of the current projects taking place at the property?**

We continually reinvest in this property. This year alone, we invested in well over 40 different projects, from core infrastructure to upgrades to a wide range of accommodation types and two completely restored historic ballroom spaces. We have a large design and architectural team in place, mapping out an exciting restoration plan for every square inch of this hotel. With each passing year, the dramatic changes taking place will be impressive.

**You have a wide range of accommodations with the main hotel and The Waldorf Towers product. How do you define your target market based on this broad offering?**

We are the last remaining grand hotel in the city. Our market is, by design, quite diverse. Our international customer base represents almost half of all rooms sold. With over 350 suites in our inventory and a group market that ranges

from incentive programs to financial to entertainment and diplomatic gatherings, our wide variety of accommodation types is a real advantage for us. And with our collection of dramatic ballroom spaces, we are well positioned to remain the preferred venue for New York's highest profile social gatherings.

**The Waldorf Towers has some of the nicest suites in the market. Would you highlight some of these suites that have so much history?**

Everyone has their favorite: the Royal Suite and its lineage to the Windsors; the Presidential Suite having been the preferred home of every U.S. President dating back to our hotel's opening in 1931; the Douglas MacArthur Suite; the Cole Porter Suite, which was also the New York residence of Frank Sinatra; and The Penthouse. The Waldorf has the largest collection of luxury suites of any hotel in North America – the majority are individually and uniquely decorated. So we are often asked by clients to change their personal profile based on their most recent stay, as they have just discovered a new "favorite" suite.

**You have placed an emphasis on offering a great spa product at The Waldorf. What are your plans for the spa and how critical is this offering for the property?**

Our spa is the most appealing facility in New York. We offer 16 treatment rooms, each with its own private dressing and bath facility. Almost 50 percent of our market is external, providing us with yet another opportunity to showcase this facility for the local community. Many of our group programs are incentive-based – and there is no better amenity to end a day with than a luxurious spa experience. Weddings are also a key element of our business, as this facility is appealing to a bridal party.

**Peacock Alley has a long history and tradition. Are you happy with the way the restaurant has fared and how challenging is it to be successful in a city like New York with so many high-end stand-alone restaurant offerings?**

This restaurant was designed to be a centerpiece of each customer's visit – from power breakfast and lunch to a wide variety of small plate offerings with live entertainment each evening, the restaurant has achieved what we intended it to. And don't overlook our dramatic

center lobby Sunday brunch – it is without rival in New York.

**The Waldorf is known for its ability to host meetings and events of all sizes. How critical is this part of the business to the property and how broad is the range of your facilities?**

The building's original design was brilliant; from the Grand Ballroom to the Starlight Roof and Executive Meeting Center to our totally restored Vanderbilt and Empire Ballrooms at our Park Avenue entrance. There are three distinct locations within the building – each operating without intruding on the other – and providing a sense of privacy and exclusivity that is unrivaled in New York. Our facilities offer a client the ability to enjoy a larger "luxury" experience or a smaller and very private social gathering – something that no one else is able to provide. To accentuate that advantage, our service team has been segmented to support what we call our Specialty Markets – high-end entertainment and celebrity clientele, as well as our international diplomatic business. We provide levels of customer support that no one else in our industry does today.

**You have led The Waldorf for many years and have been able to maintain consistent service standards. How have you been so successful in this area and what kind of training process and programs have you implemented?**

We are maniacal about selection – it is the foundation of great teams. We have clearly defined service standards for every role in the building – each carefully written out so as not to "define" how to provide customer service, but to inspire you to create and provide your personal interpretation of a great service experience. We get better every single day and that is inspiring to me.

**You speak about the property with such passion and excitement. What makes it so much fun for you after all these years and why has The Waldorf been a place where you have chosen to spend so much of your career?**

Operating two very distinct hotels under one roof with a very large team of professionals to support us, enjoying near capacity business levels, hosting some of the highest profile personalities and events on the international stage today, and the sheer passion of this group of men and women to be the very best at what we do – what more could you ask for? ●

*The Executive Suite in the Waldorf Towers (left); entrance lobby of the Guerlain Spa (center); the Silver Corridor (right)*