



Debrah Dhugga in PJ Lounge (above); DUKES LONDON's entrance (top right)

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to joining DUKES LONDON, Debrah Dhugga was Director of Retail and Spa at hair and beauty brand, ghd. Previously, she spent four-and-a-half years as CEO of Tom's Companies, a Durham, UK-based hotel, and restaurant and spa group with holdings including The Samling and Seabam Hall hotels. Much of Dhugga's experience on the way up was in sales and marketing, getting her start in 1981 with Swallow Hotels and subsequently becoming Director of Sales of Malmaison Hotels from 1996 to 2005. Dhugga, who holds a fellowship with the Institute of Hospitality, was recognized as one of the top 100 U.K. females in hospitality and transport in 2012 and is a member of the Institute of Directors, the SPA Advisory Board, and Business Women Leaders. She is also a trustee for the hospitality charity "One and All" where she was tapped as a keynote speaker at the House of Lords. In 2011, Dhugga became a founding member of the Leading Ladies of London, an organization comprised of female general managers of five-star hotels whose mission is to bring more women leaders into the hotel industry. Dhugga earned a Marketing Degree from Newcastle University and is often out supporting the industry as a speaker at hotel schools and conferences. She is a mentor to many young people in the industry and personally challenges herself to raise funds for an industry charity each year.

PROPERTY BRIEF Recognized as "Europe's Leading Boutique Hotel" and the "World's Leading Classic Boutique Hotel," DUKES LONDON (www.dukeshotel.com) is a hidden gem in the heart of St. James Mayfair, where quintessential British charm and fine luxury merge to create a timeless atmosphere for all guests. The property features stunning bedrooms that offer outstanding comfort, the legendary DUKES Bar, and THIRTY SIX restaurant featuring Michelin-star chef Nigel Mendham so guests may experience the culinary excellence that has been awarded three AA Rosettes. There is also the option of true English style with champagne afternoon tea in the Drawing Room or PJ Lounge, as well as The Health Club featuring an Italian marble steam room, a modern gym with the latest Technogym equipment, and a beauty treatment room.

What is the secret to the consistent success of the DUKES LONDON property?

It's "a hidden gem," tucked away among the most beautiful little courtyards where it has been trading as a hotel for more than 100 years. DUKES has continued to raise its standards and we have

A Majestic Feel

An Interview with
Debrah Dhugga, General Manager,
DUKES LONDON



developed the property as the years go by. But we have kept a lot of the culture and service levels, and everything about what makes DUKES truly special.

DUKES Bar is one of the oldest bars in London and we get many people coming into the bar because of its historic nature.

Many hotels lose the old-school attention to detail. My management style is to focus on luxury service standards. I like good old inn-keeping quality standards.

Is it more challenging today to show what makes a property unique?

It depends. A hotel that is prestigious like DUKES and has a historical aspect is different from the traditional, contemporary hotels that have come onboard.

The hotels that have been around for a long time also already have an audience, but it's important that you maintain consistency in standard, allowing the tradition to continue throughout the hotel's history but moving forward on service levels and products.

The hotel also has a very majestic feel to it – it's indulgent. We offer a variety of fabulous complimentary amenities including 24-hour butler service; room service three times daily; a brand new in-room media system; Wi-Fi; an iPod system; espresso machine; and much more.

But the greatest service we offer is an important luxury in the hospitality field: we work to provide that home-away-from-home feeling so when guests stay in the hotel, they are as comfortable as they are when they're in their own homes.

The word "luxury" can sometimes be over-used. What is luxury? An important element of it is service levels and what you do for your guests. Luxury has different meanings for different people.

How has THIRTY SIX worked so well? Is it challenging to compete with so many great stand-alone restaurants?

Our food and beverage component is interesting. We have our fabulous DUKES Bar, which is renowned and has an audience that goes back for years. We have a fabulous reputation for serving one of the best martinis in the world – we serve a minimum of 400 a night there.

We didn't have a destination restaurant in the hotel until two years ago when Nigel Mendham joined us; Nigel's food is quintessentially English with a twist.

There is something new opening up in town almost every night, but as long as we can consistently offer award-winning fare, from first-class room service to unmatched dining at

THIRTY SIX, we will have continued success. In addition, Nigel is on staff – he is not just a name on the door – so that makes for an outstanding dining experience for our guests.

Are women still entering into this industry?

It's still a male-dominated industry, but I and other females are trying to encourage more women to come into the industry. Unfortunately, when it comes to middle management, it might require deciding to have a family and coming back to work afterwards. It's a challenge but I encourage companies to look at ways of helping more women enter and remain in the industry.

How critical is it to have an owner that engages you in all aspects of the hotel?

It's absolutely critical that you have a relationship and trust in each other. It's about running your business like it's your own. You should customize the business as if you're a self-owner, especially if you're a manager as well as an operator, which I am.

You need to have leadership skills and provide for and develop your team. This will help expand the business and customer service. You have to engage yourself in the business, more than you do if you were a GM reporting to an operator of a bigger brand, as the majority of the decisions come from you.

Would you also enjoy running a larger hotel?

I have managed larger properties and my engagement with the hotel always depends on what it is. Certain markets can be challenging. In key cities where you have larger hotels and brands to compete with and you have to adapt.

People sometimes think DUKES is smaller than it is – it has 90 bedrooms and is one of the largest independent hotels in London. However, when you walk in, it feels smaller because of the way the hotel has been created and with the old buildings joined together, it's very quaint.

We don't have large public spaces, but we do have a lot of small cozy areas around the hotel. DUKES is rather special. It is a large hotel with a boutique feel. I would not say I don't enjoy running larger hotels; it just depends on the property and not on the size.

What advice would you give young people entering this industry?

Live your dream and experience as many departments as possible. I worked at all different levels. Once you find your niche, concentrate on its development. Go in with your eyes open and be enthusiastic. You have to have it in your heart. ●