

Hospitality

A Singular Purpose



Lobby of the Four Seasons Hotel Guangzhou

An Interview with Christopher B. Hunsberger,
President Hotel Operations-Americas, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts

EDITORS' NOTE Christopher Hunsberger joined Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts in 1981 as a Management Trainee at The Pierre, New York (formerly a Four Seasons hotel); held various positions in Toronto, Chicago, and New York and served as General Manager in Houston and Aviara, in Southern California, and as General Manager and Regional Vice President in Washington, D.C.; was promoted to Senior Vice President, Operations for the Americas in 2008, then Executive Vice President of Global Product and Innovation in 2011, and President Hotel Operations Americas in 2014. Before joining Four Seasons, he worked at The Boca Raton Hotel and Club. Hunsberger graduated from Cornell University in 1981. He has also taken summer classes at the Wharton School of Business and Cornell University School of Hotel Administration.



Christopher B. Hunsberger

COMPANY BRIEF Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts (fourseasons.com) offers guests highly personalized 24-hour service combined with elegant, high-quality surroundings for those who appreciate the best. The company opened its first hotel in 1961, and has grown to 96 properties in 40 countries with an exceptional culture of service. The company was taken private in 2007 by its long-term shareholders.

What makes Four Seasons so special?

We're very singular in focus, which means we're intent on being best-in-class as the leading luxury hotel operator around the globe. For many years, that has been our singular purpose. We're not a brand that is trying to do lots of different things and we're not a part of a bigger global brand that has multiple brands underneath it.

This gives everybody in the organization – from the teams that are on the ground providing the experience to our guests at each and every one of our 96 hotels and resorts around the globe all the way through to our chairman and our founder – real clarity and purpose in terms of what we're doing. We don't have what could potentially be distractions that many others have to worry

about as they think about managing a broader, more diverse portfolio of hotels.

The other thing is that we continue to recognize the value of our people. The people and the culture we still have within the organization, 50-plus years later after our chairman founded the company, is as strong today if not stronger.

There is great alignment among our founder, our new CEO, and our shareholders. This helps leverage and harness our extraordinary culture that is so unique.

How do you define luxury today? Is it more today about personalization and customization of the guest experience?

It has continued to change and evolve. We realize that in order to stay relevant to our current customer base and to the modern luxury traveler of today and tomorrow, we need to understand in a very thoughtful way what those customers are looking for. The focus on personalization, customization, and recognition all are critically important in our minds, and they are a place where we feel like we have a unique competitive edge.

Part of this is because of our scale; we don't have thousands of hotels spread out across the globe. This is a result of the infrastructure we put in place and the emphasis we have on supporting it. It's something we have evolved because it's not good enough that you just have a great physical product or that you have a great location.

People want us to be able to treat them right as they travel from one hotel to the next, and there is the expectation that if they've stayed at the Four Seasons in New York and are next going to stay with us in Paris, or Baku, or Thailand, that we're going to have the ability to transfer their preferences. Our guests have a greater ability today to share with us those things that are important to them and we're going to get the preferences right when they go to that next location.

Additionally, there are constant updates on the physical side. We spend a lot of time and energy on developing a vision for things like the guest room of the future. We have a renewed focus and evolving point of view about what we think is important to

guests in using their rooms that is based on looking at what is going on in the market and spending a lot of time talking to our customers, and understanding how they use the room. It's a bit different from a city hotel to a resort hotel. This process has changed how we think about the design of guest rooms and other elements of the hotel.

We're not unique in this regard but we put a lot of time and energy into making sure that the hotels we have, whether they have been in our portfolio for 30 years or are new hotels that are opening up, include a connection to the local sense of place and community. Much of that comes about through what we do with food and beverage in the hotels. This is our outreach to the local community wherever we operate. We know our hotel guests like being in a vibrant, relevant, and connected bar and restaurant, so we spend a lot of time and energy focusing on that.

Also, we're trying to be very thoughtful about how technology plays into the guest experience, be it in the guest room or in mobile access – we're launching our mobile app in the first quarter of 2015. We're not the first to market but we've spent a lot of time surveying the competitive landscape, and looking at how other company's mobile apps work, not only in the hospitality space but in others as well. We believe that when we bring our mobile app to the marketplace, it will be best-in-class and another important way for our guests to engage with us.

This is not to say, however, that it's prescriptive and that every guest is only going to use that in the future to check in and check out, and to make a reservation. What we do know is that modern luxury travelers want options in how they engage with us. The same guest who on one visit might be traveling for leisure and might like a bit more of the personal connection with staff, perhaps on a business trip, staying at a different hotel, he might like the simplicity of being able to check in and take care of his other arrangements through the mobile app rather than having to connect with somebody face-to-face.

So technology is a great enabler to give our guests yet another way to engage with us without it being the sole way. ●