

Hospitality

The Original Grand Hotel of Europe

An Interview with Duncan R. Palmer,
Managing Director, The Langham, London



The Langham, London Club Lounge – opening late February 2015

EDITORS' NOTE Duncan Palmer joined the hotel in February 2004. Prior to taking up this position, he was General Manager at The Sukhothai hotel in Bangkok. Earlier, Palmer was employed by The Savoy Group at The Connaught, London for four years, where he earned the hotel many awards. Prior to this, he was General Manager of The Savoy, London for three years. Palmer's career also includes 12 years with the Mandarin Oriental Group throughout Asia, which involved postings in Macau, Manila, Bangkok, and Jakarta.



Duncan R. Palmer

PROPERTY BRIEF Superbly located in London's West End, The Langham, London (london.langhamhotels.co.uk) continues to place a premium on the perennials of gracious hospitality while remaining enthusiastic about embracing the best of modern essentials. The property boasts impeccable five-star luxury accommodation; an exceptional dining room, lounge, and bar; an excellent health club; Langham Service Stylists, who are heirs to the role of the butler; comprehensive facilities for meetings, events, and weddings; Wi-Fi throughout public areas and complimentary high-speed Internet access in the business center, as well as 24-hour IT support. The Langham, London is one of the Leading Hotels of the World, and heads of state, celebrities, and tycoons have made it their choice among London luxury hotels since 1865.

What makes this property so special and how can you differentiate the hotel in such a crowded market?

The Langham in London is the original grand hotel of Europe, and with respect to the other grand hotels that are positioned in London, we have articulated within our facilities some unique propositions for the end user, like Artesian bar, which has been voted the world's number-one bar by some of the top bar magazines throughout Europe and the U.S. We have some amazing mixologists, which highlights the value in our people also because it's not just about product; the people have also produced an experience that is exemplary.

We have some wonderful key colleagues on the frontline with our restaurant The Landau where we partnered with the second-generation Roux family, and Palm Court, the original

place of afternoon tea in London dating back to 1865. Today, it delivers not just traditional tea but The Langham Afternoon Tea by Wedgwood, which is an iconic afternoon tea experience. In addition, we have a wonderful pastry chef.

It's not just about building something that is iconic, having a name, and marketing it well; we have the people to execute and deliver in what is a very discerning marketplace.

We have three additional projects where we will be earmarking more iconic aspects within The Langham, London.

One is the Sterling Suite, which is being created as of April 2015. It's going to be a 4,200-square-foot six-bedroom suite with the mark of refined living – a suite with a lot of indulgences and an expensive luxury residential-type feeling, a penthouse suite to top all of the other penthouse suites in London.

We did this a few years ago with The Infinity Suite, and we are evolving and innovating as we always have done.

The goal of the second innovation, an expansion, is to take a top lounge level to the next level. We're creating a 3,200-square-foot Langham Club Lounge, which will be very luxurious – a private haven within the hotel itself for the very highest level of guest that one can aspire to attract in this particular marketplace.

It will be one of the largest club lounges in London, fitted out in the most luxurious fashion.

The third innovative change is within our present accommodation offering 47 renovated rooms, which are going to be re-labeled The Regent Wing as they stand next door to the iconic Regent Street, and these will be an iconic accommodation offering a unique Regency style decoration.

Is there a consistent feel within all suites or do you individualize them?

At the very top level, they are quite iconic and strong in their style. When you get to the middle suites, it becomes a question of variation on size and appointments, and some people are traveling with families but they still want to stay in top luxury suites, so we're designing suites that cater to the business set, the leisure set, and families.

What's the secret to being successful in the food and beverage area, and do you need to cater to the local community as well as to the guest?

You do. The PR aspects for your bars and restaurants within local communities are important for driving that, so design and innovation are very important. It's also the end product, and what you're tasting and experiencing, be it a food or drink, has to be exemplary. Sophisticated environments like New York and London don't take any prisoners – you have to be at the top of your game if you want to charge and make a good profit.

You also need passionate people who know how to drive the business. Payroll and expenses can be high in these cities and you need a good turnover of the product to make a good profit.

You have to have the right designer on-board, as well as the right PR people and the right marketers. You also have to market the third-party sites and you have to offer different prices at different times since the old days when you set a price and stayed with it is not necessarily the game today. At different parts of the day and evening, you have to market to different markets and people, and as a result, you can drive your revenue streams to where you can make a decent profit.

The hotel operators are beginning to wake up to this idea and they're far more savvy today than they were 15 years ago; they understand the key drivers behind a good bar and restaurant.

As a restaurant, you make more money in bars and lounges than you do in restaurants, but restaurants are still important for your residential guests so you have to swallow a degree of normality in terms of the figures. But with the right products, you can still drive handsome profits to the restaurant, as we do, and we're proud of that. It drives a talk in the local community as well.

How critical is it to offer that true spa experience?

We have our own in-house Chuan Spa and the treatments we offer are based on Chinese medicine.

Fifteen years ago, spas were built quite large, but today, even in a luxury environment, you need to be careful of the size and facilities you build. They are useful to have in driving leisure business, there is a need for them, but there are operators out there that have built larger facilities than they should have and they're not necessarily getting the optimum return per square foot from that area. ●