

Hospitality

Delivering the Luxury Experience

An Interview with George Cozonis,
Managing Director, The Plaza, a Fairmont Managed Hotel



The Plaza Hotel at 59th and 5th in Manhattan

EDITORS' NOTE In July of 2013, George Cozonis was named to his current post. Prior to joining The Plaza, he was General Manager of W South Beach in Florida beginning with the highly successful opening in 2009. Cozonis began his career with Omni Hotels in 1983 as a management trainee and worked his way up the ladder to General Manager of three different properties including, Omni Independence Park, Philadelphia; Omni Colonnade, Miami-Coral Gables; and Omni Houston. After nearly 20 years with Omni Hotels, Cozonis joined Sonesta Bayfront Hotel Coconut Grove in 2004 as the Vice President and General Manager. He also served as General Manager of The Atlantic Resort & Spa, Fort Lauderdale, Florida and the W Retreat & Spa Vieques Island, Puerto Rico leading the pre-opening task force. A native of Greece, Cozonis holds a Bachelor of Science in Hotel Administration, Cum Laude from University of New Hampshire. He has also completed the General Managers' Program from Cornell University and is a Licensed Community Association Manager (CAM) in the State of Florida.



George Cozonis

PROPERTY BRIEF The Plaza (theplazany.com) is a true Urban Resort destination that offers guests every indulgence, featuring The Shops at the Plaza, La Palestra, Caudalie Vinothérapie® Spa, the flagship Warren-Tricomi Salon, and the Eloise Shop. The Palm Court provides a quintessential New York experience and the opulent Grand Ballroom continues to host the world's most memorable events. The Plaza is also home to the elegant Champagne Bar, the ever-stylish Rose Club, and The Plaza Food Hall, a 30,000-square-foot culinary experience anchored by The Todd English Food Hall. Designated a New York City Landmark in 1969, it is also the only New York City hotel to be designated as a National Historic Landmark. The Plaza is managed by Fairmont Hotels & Resorts.

What is the state of The Plaza today and how is it positioned?

The Plaza today is the best that it has ever been. We celebrated our 107th anniversary recently and just a few years ago, The Plaza was transformed from an 800-room, 100-year-old hotel into a complex that includes 282 very

luxurious hotel rooms. When they renovated, they combined smaller rooms into larger rooms, so now we have the largest rooms in New York City. With only 282 rooms, we can certainly deliver the luxury experience.

We also have 165 of the most lavish and expensive residences anywhere in the world and a great retail area, which is on our concourse level, where we have the Food Hall and the greatest vendors in New York City.

Are there more challenges to running a property with both a hotel and residential component, and are you delivering the same type of service to both?

When you operate in the luxury space, the experience that you have to offer is whatever it is that the customer wants – that is the difference between a smaller luxury hotel and a mass production house.

We deliver to everyone whatever it is they need. There is a lot of common ground between the owners of the residences and the guests who stay on the hotel side. They patronize our Palm Court and our Champagne Bar, and they enjoy the food downstairs. We also customize the experience to each. My focus is the hotel side, which is about 65 percent of the building including the hotel, the restaurants, and the function space.

What make your suite product stand out and is there a similar feel among the suites?

The Plaza has some amazing suites. We're currently taking 29 of our top suites and making them even better. Alexandra Champalimaud has redesigned the suites to give them a feel that balances the traditional heritage style of The Plaza with a contemporary feel, which is what guests are looking for today. We'll be unveiling this in April.

The suite is not just about the space and the decor, but also about the service and the amenities that go with it – things like the butler service, being picked up from the airport, and providing the specific coffeemaker the guest likes to have in the room; it's about customizing.

Is luxury today truly about that customization, and how do you obtain the necessary information to truly understand guest needs?

We have many repeat guests we get to know over time and we always keep records about what is important to them.

We have an outreach effort that is designed to collect as much information as possible and we use technology to keep those records very secure. However, much of what we know resides with our people and the personal connections they make.

We reach out to guests who have not stayed with us before as soon as the reservation is made – the experience begins then. Our guest relations department contacts them to find out what they might require in their rooms, what the purpose of their visit is, what assistance we can offer, and what is most important to them. We then use that information to help them plan for their stays.

Was it critical to preserve the 107-year-old history while modernizing the property?

We started in 2013 with the restoration of the façade, which was a project that took over a year to complete and cost millions of dollars. It brought the façade back to exactly the way it looked 107 years ago.

Many of the spaces have landmark status so they are the way they have been for 107 years and will always be that way. This means we ground our anchor in the past but we bring in brand new infrastructure.

Also, a very important part of the experience we offer to guests is the food and beverage experience. In that respect, we are truly at the forefront because we have a few outlets that are extraordinary. Our Food Hall has two components: a restaurant we operate, which is the Todd English Food Hall, and it is the only one that exists anywhere – it offers seven open kitchens and different types of cuisine from one menu, and everybody loves it.

We have also brought in the top vendors in every category from New York City – the best cookies, the best lobster rolls, the best chocolates, the best cakes, and so on.

The most current project we're extremely proud of is that we have just renovated the Palm Court by Thierry Despont, where we've taken something traditional and made it current.

We've also partnered with Geoffrey Zakarian, who has created an amazing new breakfast, afternoon tea, and evening concept with cocktails and small plates, and we are re-launching the Palm Court and we believe it will become the place that everyone wants to be. It's all about the fun, the activation, the music, and the food and beverage. ●