



An Upper East Side Icon



The Tata Suite living area (left); the lobby (above)

An Interview with
Heiko Kuenstle, General Manager, The Pierre

EDITORS' NOTE Heiko Kuenstle assumed his current post in 2005. Previously, he was General Manager at The Lowell Hotel, New York, beginning in June 2001. He began his career in Germany where he apprenticed at the three-star Michelin restaurant, Schwarzwaldstube and oversaw the one-star Michelin restaurant at Moench's Posthotel, and also served as Manager of Hotel Domizil before coming to America. Kuenstle began his career at The Pierre in 1994 as Assistant Manager in housekeeping and rose to Guest Service Manager and Front Office Manager before leaving for the Hôtel Plaza Athénée, New York where he served as Rooms Division Manager.



Heiko Kuenstle

PROPERTY BRIEF Built in 1929 in the style of a French chateau, The Pierre (tajhotels.com/pierre) is situated on Central Park at Fifth Avenue and 61st Street. In 1938, J. Paul Getty acquired the hotel and subsequently sold some of the property's original 714 guestrooms as cooperative apartments. Operations changed hands several more times until Trust House Forte acquired the hotel in 1973. In 1981, the lease was taken over by Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces is the current lessee and operator of The Pierre.

Established in 1903, Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces is one of Asia's largest and finest groups of hotels, comprising 56 hotels in 39 locations across India with an additional 17 international hotels in the Maldives, Mauritius, Malaysia, Seychelles, U.K., U.S., Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Africa, and the Middle East. The Indian Hotels Company Ltd. (IHCL) operates Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces, which is part of the Tata Group.

The Pierre is consistently recognized as one of the world's best hotels. What makes the property so special?

The Pierre embodies iconic, luxurious New York and is special for a number of reasons ranging from its superb location on Fifth Avenue just footsteps from Central Park to its proximity to both haute couture boutiques and Manhattan's famed Museum Mile, which combined make it a much coveted Upper East Side location. Our extremely high level of training and employees also differentiate us. Guests often comment on the level of detail that our employees provide to

them, which goes hand in hand with our being a Forbes Travel Guide Five Star and AAA Five Diamond property, and a member of Leading Hotels of the World. The Pierre was named one of *Condé Nast Traveler's* "Top 25 Hotels in New York City 2014" and also is among the "Top Large City Hotels in the United States" on *Travel + Leisure's* 2014 World's Best Awards list.

Many hoteliers today say true hospitality is defined by the level of personalized service provided. How is The Pierre leading in this regard?

Beginning with the hotel's white-glove elevator attendants who whisk guests up to 140 residential-style guest rooms and 49 spacious suites with unrivalled views of Central Park and Upper Manhattan, our team takes great delight in finding out the reason for each guests' visit with us and aims to please accordingly. Our employees delight in creating guest experiences to wow even the most discerning traveler. Our room attendants think nothing of spotting a missing button on a shirt during turndown service and having a replacement sewn on by our in-hotel tailor before its ironed and replaced to the guests' room or to personally jumping in a cab to hand deliver a misplaced theater ticket for guests just moments before the curtain raises. You cannot put a price tag on personalization like this.

Similarly, our Taj Royal Attaché, who service our 11 distinctive Grand Suites, have been trained to flawlessly fulfill guest's every whim. We take guest personalization very seriously at The Pierre.

Would you highlight your suites and how they help differentiate the property?

Our 11 one-and two-bedroom Grand Suites are the hotel's most premier spaces. The Grand Suites are designed with custom furnishings, hand-crafted finishes, and elegant details, such as rich silk and brocade fabrics, Murano glass chandeliers and hand-knotted carpets, and carefully integrated technology, including Bang & Olufsen audio and high-speed Internet connection. Subtle couture touches reflect the Indian heritage of the Taj Hotels: Striking jewel tones and traditional decorative motifs pay homage to the royal Rajput dynasties that created the authentic palaces in India that now welcome Taj guests. Contemporary artwork hand-selected by fine arts consultant Mortimer Chatterjee showcases the mastery of noted and emerging Indian artists. In addition, many of the suites feature

hand-colored wood engravings that depict various historic scenes of New York related to the suites' namesakes including The Getty Suite, The Hutton Suite, and The Charles Pierre Suite, which is contemporary in design and aesthetic, or our Presidential Suite, The Tata Suite.

Are there certain characteristics that link the three North American properties or is there more of a focus on each local market?

Taj hotels are always situated in the very best locations possible. All three U.S. Taj properties share a common goal of providing an exemplary experience to the sophisticated guest and in delighting them with service levels, experience, and atmosphere.

How has the role of the general manager evolved, and with the focus on asset management and financial results, how do you ensure that you don't lose the hospitality focus?

With real estate values ever spiraling upwards, particularly in Manhattan, the balancing act of a general manager's duty to prudently manage the asset while maintaining one's more traditional role of being the hotel's "First Servant" becomes even more vital. Due to the nature of our business, asset owners and managers need to set a longer-term horizon on ROI. One of the most important tools available to a general manager in order to maximize the value of the asset is pricing. In order to maximize a hotel's revenues, the GM must be extremely vigilant in judging the demand for his various products and services, while ensuring that the relevant employees charge a premium rate at peak periods to maximize revenues. While it is important for the general manager to increase rates when demand is high, it is equally important that he or she lower rates when demand is diminished.

What are your key priorities for The Pierre to ensure it maintain its market leadership?

Our key priorities are simple: to provide the premium hotel experience in New York City if not globally; to improve our core guest experience and service product, and implement new initiatives to maintain our iconic New York City status while remaining relevant and enticing to a younger demographic; to provide an excellent daily working environment to our associates, through training, education, and learning experiences; and, above all, to work together as a team to create the quintessential hotel experience in the city. ●