

Hospitality



Exactly Like Nothing Else

An Interview with
Julius Robinson, Vice President, Autograph Collection

EDITORS' NOTE In October 2014, Marriott International, Inc. named Julius Robinson to his current post. Most recently, Robinson served as Vice President of the Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott, a position that he has held for over three years. In addition to his leadership in the company's brand organization, he has held senior executive roles in global sales and operations.



COMPANY BRIEF The Autograph Collection (autographhotels.com) is part of the Marriott International global portfolio of 18 distinct brands. Launched in January of 2010 as a unique business venture, the Collection currently includes more than 60 extraordinary hotel experiences in the United States, Europe, Asia, the Caribbean, and South America. Further expansion is planned for the Middle East/Africa and Central America.

What excited you about the opportunity to join Autograph Collection?

I have worked for 22 years with Marriott as an organization. I started working in hotels while in college looking for spare money, and that turned into a hospitality career in the administrative world, so this is a neat time to be affiliated with the Autograph Collection.

There are so many different concepts converging in one space right now in travel and hospitality, and Autograph is the company's answer to that, so for me to have the opportunity to lead that collection globally is a great gift.

How do you characterize the mission for Autograph Collection?

Our tagline is "We're exactly like nothing else," so we want to make sure we have legs to stand on and that it tells a good story.

For us, it's all about unique experiences. We champion the independent traveler, but they're not the only ones who stay in our hotels.

For the community of Marriott customers – and we have 47 million Marriott Rewards customers now – we want them to have a different experience and give them something special in a city they have traveled to several times, but we also want to usher in independent travelers who are not enjoying chain hotels and give them a taste of what it can be like at a soft brand such as Autograph; it allows those two worlds to come together.

We also have a Baby Boomer population that has typically stayed in traditional Marriott products for work purposes. Now that they're retiring, they want to see the world, and maybe they don't want to stay in the same hotel they stayed in when they worked for a major corporation. So Autograph provides them a new look and feel in that space.

How hard is it to find hotels that have an iconic feel and a story to tell?

We start by identifying the markets we think make sense for the Autograph Collection. Then we reach out to existing hotels in that market.

What has been advantageous for us over the past year is the amount of new hotel development that has come in. When the collection started, it was about curating these great hotel experiences. Now we have a significant pipeline of folks who say, I want to build a new hotel and I don't want to put a brand name on it – I want to create my own identity for it and I'm going to bring it into the Autograph Collection.

How large can the portfolio grow?

In 2015, we'll be at 100 hotels and I don't think we've even tapped the surface of where we can play. There are so many markets that are well-represented in the hotel space, well-represented from Marriott, but that still need that unique, differentiated experience. What makes the Autograph Collection different is that we have hotels as small as 17 rooms and as large as 3,000. So I don't think we have pigeonholed ourselves into a specific category of hotel. As long as we can deliver on the promise but be flexible in the types of buildings we bring in, the collection is unlimited in terms of how large it can grow.

Are there certain markets where you feel you need to be?

The opportunity in the major gateway cities is important, but we have some unique hotels on the West Coast that provide an alternative to the traditional city experience.

We're still looking for some hotels in L.A., because we need to be there. We have two hotels coming into Paris over the next 18 months, but we're in most of the other gateway cities.

Is it more challenging today to be an independent property?



St. Ermin's in London (left) and the lobby of the Epicurean Hotel in Tampa, Florida, both Autograph Collection hotels

To be a small, independent hotel may not necessarily hurt as much in this economic environment, but there will come a time when the industry isn't as healthy as it is today and we're going to need to have something to fall back on. The diversity of customer that the big brands bring in is beneficial in good and bad times.

At any size, is top service truly possible?

In a 17-room inn, you can deliver a high level of human touch. In a 3,000-room hotel, you have to rely on technology, but the technology is just another hand in that service experience. There just might be more touch points with technology in the larger properties than in the smaller ones.

Consumers base their expectations on where they're going and what they're planning to do while they're there. So whether they're walking into a 3,000-room hotel or a 300-room hotel, their expectations might be a bit different, but not when it comes to customer service.

Is the Autograph Collection its own entity or do you leverage Marriott for certain things?

For now, we look at Autograph unto itself. Arne Sorenson is our new CEO and he likes to talk about this being the golden age of travel, because we have 100 million Chinese tourists beginning to travel – that generation wants to be in the U.S. You also have the Baby Boomer population, as well as a new generation of what we call the Millennial Mindset where big tangible things aren't as important as they were to other generations – they want experiences. They don't know where they're going to sleep that night but they will spend \$35 on a really cool Bourbon at a really cool bar.

When you think about all that coming together, the future of what we want to do is provide the balance. We have done the signature hotels, the Marriots, the Courtyards – and we have done them well. When you think about what the luxury and lifestyle portfolio has been over time with Ritz-Carlton and Renaissance, and now with Autograph and AC Hotels bringing in these other brands to complement that, we think that is the right balance for the next 10 to 15 years. So Autograph will continue to be the entrepreneurial leader of that, but it's a great gateway. ●