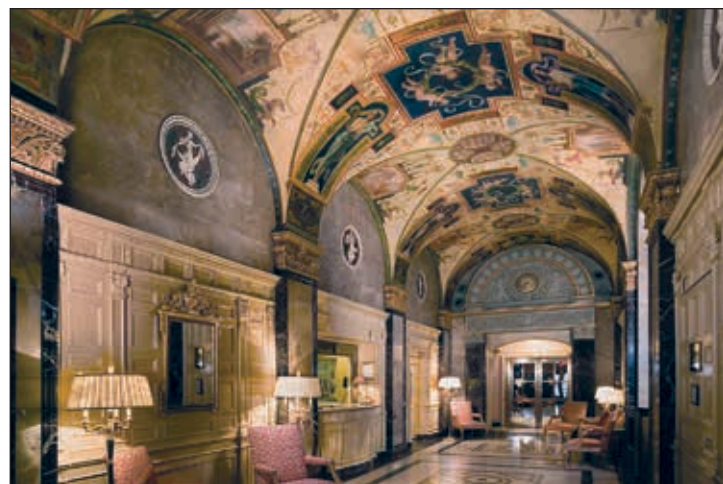


Hospitality An Old World Throwback



The bedroom of a suite (left); the lobby frescos (above)

An Interview with Michael J. Ullman,
Executive Vice President and
Chief Operating Officer, The Sherry-Netherland

EDITORS' NOTE Michael Ullman has held his current post since April 2010. Prior to this, he was an Asset Manager/Consultant for The Ronald Family Trust. He has also been a Managing Director/Partner for Rancho Valencia Resort and Spa, General Manager/Consultant for Hotel Ibilani Resort & Spa, Managing Director/Partner for The Auberge Collection, General Manager of The Beverly Hills Hotel, General Manager of The Regency Hotel, and Vice President and General Manager of The Helmsley Park Lane Hotel. He has a Master of Professional Studies from the School of Hotel Administration at Cornell University and a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Colorado.



Michael J. Ullman

PROPERTY BRIEF Elegantly situated on Fifth Avenue in the heart of Midtown Manhattan, The Sherry-Netherland (sherrynetherland.com) offers guests world-class service and exquisite accommodations in an iconic Central Park hotel. Topped by an elaborate Gothic minaret, the hotel adds a note of drama and history to the Manhattan skyline. From their exemplary European-style service – including full concierge assistance, elevator attendants, and valet parking – to their 50 spacious and individually furnished rooms and suites, a stay at The Sherry has been an expression of privilege since 1927. The property underwent a restoration in 2014.

What makes The Sherry-Netherland so special?

We have a fabulous staff, many who have been here from 25 to 40 years. They know everybody, they care, they have a wonderful attitude – they're just here to please, and they try to anticipate what the guest wants. Once guests have been here, our staff remembers what their particulars are and they make this a place that guests want to come back to.

How broad is your competitive set?

We're such a unique boutique property. We only have about 45 rooms, so there is a competitive set from a rate structure and a facilities structure standpoint. We appeal to a very specific clientele that are not looking for a large busy lobby – this isn't that kind of place. If guests are seeking an ultra-contemporary modern facility, this isn't it.

But for those seeking unique, highly personalized service in a wonderful location in a very secure building, we're perfect for them.

Is the accommodation offering primarily suites and do they have a similar feel throughout?

We have a unique situation because the entire building is a co-op. Everything is owned by some individual, and then we have a group of rooms that are put into the hotel pool.

We set standards that each owner has to maintain or achieve for the facility, but there is a broad spectrum so you won't find any rooms that are exactly alike in decor. We're an old-world throwback with large rooms that are clean and well-appointed, and the bathrooms, which were built in the 1920s, are much larger than your average bathroom.

How challenging is the food and beverage component and how important is the product?

The product is very important. We have a unique situation because Cipriani is our tenant. We don't have the pressure to make a profit in food and beverage; we just have the pressure of getting room service out on time and accurately, and those are our challenges.

In attracting talent, are you looking more for personality or experience?

You can train the job; you can't train the personality. If somebody comes in with no experience but the right attitude, you can teach them anything. But you can't teach the attitude, especially today.

Has technology taken away some of the personal touch?

Technology has changed everything for everybody in all facets of life. We try to stay away from that as much as possible, although you have to provide it all – the Internet and Wi-Fi have to work up to proper speeds or even your old clientele will be on your case. It needs to be up to today's standards but there is a fine balance.

How different is the role in leading a property like this when the ownership component is complex?

There are two distinctly different constituencies. One is the resident-owner – they're important customers to us because they don't

leave like hotel guests would. Guests come in short spurts and we want to make sure their stay is perfect. However, we also want to make sure our resident stays are always perfect. So it's an interesting play here and a different avenue than my career has taken in the past.

When this opportunity presented itself, did you know it would be the right fit and, coming from your background, was it different than what you anticipated?

I'm able to adjust to any situation because my background is service and I knew I could make the residents happy. I didn't think that was going to be an issue although, once I got into it, I saw the real nuances of it, which were eye-opening. There are distinctly different situations but one thing that was really new to me was that when an owner does construction in the building, the responsibilities that fall on that owner and on the corporation are very specific. There was a learning curve there.

I also didn't know what a proprietary lease or an alteration agreement was, so I had to learn quickly.

At an early age, did you know that the hospitality industry was where you would end up?

I grew up in the business – my parents were in it. I thought I would go to law school but that didn't work out.

Are you worried about all of the supply coming into New York?

There is always a cycle. I came to New York in 1978 and we were in a down cycle. Then things really picked up and the economy was good, and you had a five- to seven-year run. Right now, things look fabulous. We came out of the financial crisis, but there may well be an oversupply and we could see that same curve happen.

Coming out of the financial crisis of 2008, have you seen rates come back?

Yes, we have seen rates come back. The occupancy is definitely back as well. We have certainly seen a big increase in both.

Are you always looking for the next challenge?

You have to enjoy what you're doing at the time but this doesn't mean you can't be looking ahead. You just have to immerse yourself in what you're doing so you can give 100 percent on a daily basis. ●