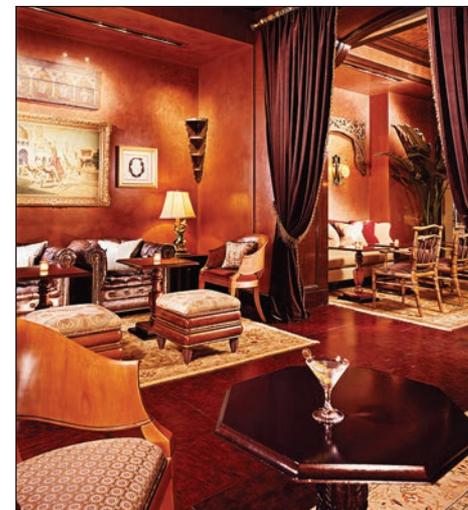




A Return to Greatness

An Interview with David I. Cohen,
General Manager, Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York



Spa suite (left); Bar Seine (above)

EDITORS' NOTE David Cohen was named to his current post in 2015. He began his career as a Four Seasons Hotel management trainee at New York City's Pierre Hotel in 1984. Prior to joining Hôtel Plaza Athénée, Cohen ran his own hotel consulting business and before this, he oversaw New York hotel operations for TPG Hospitality. Cohen also held General Manager positions at New York's historic Warwick Hotel and Le Parker Meridien, and was Resident Manager of the RIGHA Royal. In addition, he was a member of the opening team for The Ritz-Carlton Battery Park and The Ritz-Carlton Central Park South. Cohen received his Bachelor of Science degree from the Hospitality School at Rochester Institute of Technology as well as a degree from the Centre International de Glion in Switzerland. In addition, he holds an Associate's degree from The University of Hartford in Connecticut.



David I. Cohen

PROPERTY BRIEF The Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York (Plaza-Athenee.com) is steps from some of the city's most revered attractions, including Central Park, Museum Mile, and Madison Avenue shopping. This 143-room luxury boutique hotel has been the home-away-from-home for sophisticated travelers from around the world for over two decades. Owned by the TCC Group of Thailand, it is a member of The Leading Hotels of the World.

What excited you about coming to lead this property and made you feel it would be the right fit?

The owner has a vision of returning the hotel to its original greatness and that is the vision we're pursuing; 2016 is our renovation year and everything is being thought through very clearly.

What drew me to the property was the chance to return another hotel to greatness, which I have done a lot in my career and which I enjoy doing. We're now building one of the most successful management teams. I've never been more excited to lead, and the clientele at this hotel is very loyal and they are looking to see our future actions. We're creating a blend of the past with current technology and we're not walking away

from the guest experience and personal interaction, which is critical in an ultra-luxury property.

Many properties, unfortunately, have weighed more heavily on technology and less on personal contact. We're weighing heavier on personal contact, and having technology available but not seen as much.

How important is it to engage your people and have them come onboard with the change?

On day one, I met with the entire management team of the hotel and made the same speech I have given in every property I've been in. I explained where we were currently, where I planned for us to go, and my hope that they would want to come along for that ride. Some were willing to change and saw the challenges that needed to be addressed. There were some that were so caught up in the past that they weren't able to change.

I've been lucky that some of the key personnel at the hotel were just waiting for great change and new leadership. They decided to stay. Over the past several months, I've brought in new management people to senior roles.

I'm very strategic and always looking at what the guest and employee is experiencing. My first 30 days were about the employees, so we put a focus on them. My first project was renovating the employee cafeteria based on comments from the staff. I have yet to hear one complaint.

Do you look broadly at the luxury space in terms of where you want to take this property?

We have looked at all of our competitors and when the renovation is complete, in a year or so, I expect to be a leader in the market – in terms of rate and service, with the best management team the city can offer.

I always prefer to be on the cutting edge, and that comes from gathering a great team of people who have great insight and creativity.

This property was the quiet gem on the Upper East Side that had the best service and quality. It's a matter of returning to that. Our customers are very loyal and 98 percent of our staff is so entrenched in the guest experience that I'm pleasantly shocked on a daily basis. I'm lucky to have our employees

continuously introducing me to regular and new guests and giving me insight into what their expectations or disappointments are.

What is your thinking as to food and beverage?

For food and beverage in an ultra-luxury hotel, many have leased out their space and gone with celebrity name chefs, which is wonderful.

I always support whatever works for whatever property. For a luxury hotel I run and operate, I prefer to find upcoming chefs, that aren't known. They have more creative excitement, and I bring them onboard and give them support and the tools needed to create a menu that will excite our guests and also attract an outside clientele.

In a hotel restaurant, the chances of becoming profitable are very slim, but it's possible. Food and beverage at an ultra-luxury property is an important amenity and if we have a great restaurant, it can help drive the room rate. The rate we gain will offset the expense in the food and beverage operation.

We have a small footprint for catering, which is growing and, as it grows, it will get us to at least a break-even for food and beverage.

Would you touch on the value of the spa product?

We have a world-class spa – an exclusive with Valmont, which is unique in the city. We also added on a new exclusive relationship with Kevyn Aucoin makeup, which no other hotel in New York City has right now.

To have a sustainable career, how critical is it to gain deep knowledge of all aspects of the business?

The most successful managers, at least for the upscale or luxury market, need to pay more dues.

The smart people joining this industry should learn the heart and soul of the hotel business. They are continually focused on learning by asking questions and not assuming they know everything. School is a great foundation but it can't teach the full reality of the hotel industry.

The more exposure one has to more departments, the better leader one becomes. My success is based on doing a variety of jobs and having some really great bosses who I was privileged to work for. Now I can appreciate what they taught me. ●