



A Classic Experience

An Interview with
Debrah Dhugga, Managing Director,
DUKES LONDON and DUKES DUBAI



The Perrier-Jouët Lounge (left); DUKES LONDON entrance (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to joining DUKES LONDON, Debrah Dhugga was Director of Retail and Spa at hair and beauty brand ghd. Previously, she had spent four-and-a-half years as CEO of Tom's Companies, a Durham, U.K.-based hotel, restaurant, and spa group with luxurious properties including The Samling and Seabam Hall hotels. Previous to this, much of her experience had been in sales and marketing, including as Director of Sales of Malmaison Hotels from 1996 to 2005. Dhugga, who holds a fellowship with the Institute of Hospitality, and was recognized as one of the top 100 U.K. females in hospitality and transport in 2012, was named Business Mentor of the Year in 2013. Dhugga is a member of the Institute of Directors, the SPA Advisory Board, and Business Women Leaders. She is also a trustee for the hospitality charity "One and All" where she was tapped as a keynote speaker at the House of Lords. Dhugga is a founding member of the Leading Ladies of London, an organization comprised of female general managers of five-star hotels whose mission is to bring more women leaders into the hotel industry. She supports the industry as a speaker at hotel schools and conferences. She is a mentor to many young people in the industry and personally challenges herself to raise funds for an industry charity each year.



Debrah Dhugga

PROPERTY BRIEF Recognized as "Europe's Leading Boutique Hotel" and the "World's Leading Classic Boutique Hotel," DUKES LONDON (dukeshotel.com) is a hidden gem in the heart of St. James Mayfair, where quintessential British charm and fine luxury merge to create a timeless atmosphere for all guests. The property features stunning bedrooms that offer outstanding comfort, the legendary DUKES Bar, and THIRTY SIX restaurant, which has been awarded three AA Rosettes. There is also the option for true English style with Champagne afternoon tea in the Drawing Room or the Champagne Lounge, as well as a Health Club featuring an Italian marble steam room, a modern gym with the latest Technogym equipment, and a beauty treatment room.

Where is the London market today and, for a property like DUKES with such a loyal clientele, is there more opportunity for growth?

London is challenging, there are always refurbishments and new development happening, but DUKES is British quintessential classic and that's what is different. It is important to keep sharp and in touch with what is going on.

There are some gorgeous on-trend hotels out there, but we have refurbished DUKES as our owners continue to invest in the property. We have never taken DUKES down that on-trend route. It's about offering a classic experience. The American market likes that there is only a handful of hotels in London offering that and the current owners prefer to keep its roots. It's a hidden gem in the most beautiful location.

How critical is it to have a positive relationship with owners and a common vision for the property long term?

One of the key elements of good management and leadership is being honest with the owners and not just saying what they want to hear. I'm there to support the business for them. At day's end, we're a team and we have to work as a team. Sometimes there is a lot of investment that has to go into back of house areas and the customer doesn't see this. This doesn't drive revenue and many owners find that challenging, because they don't know or understand why we need a new piece of equipment that will be an expense to the business.

It's about having an understanding with owners and always being there when needed.

What does the word "luxury" mean today?

The first word that springs to mind is "service." It's about having a warm welcome when a guest walks into the hotel and a nice turn-down at night. Luxury elements, like flowers in the bedroom, are services guest don't normally have at home. It's about going the extra mile.

I'm an old-fashioned hotelier at heart and I invest a lot in the training of our team. It's easy to cut training from the budget because no one sees it but I'll always protect it. The more we invest in our staff and the more we invest in the grooming of our staff, the better the delivery of service for the guests and the more they will enjoy it.

If one stays in the best looking hotel in the world and the service is bad, that's what the guest remembers.

In a luxury hotel, is it critical to offer that restaurant experience?

Restaurants are a challenge. Today, dining is an experience. Food is so hot and on-trend. The interest in great food is growing, as are great food experiences. The fluff around food and the foam on the plate has had its day. People want to taste great food and flavors in a great atmosphere. It's important for a hotel to offer a great breakfast. It isn't right when a hotel doesn't offer breakfast. There should be an area for it within every hotel; it is part of that luxury element.

Is it the same for a spa when space is so valuable?

Fitness and well-being are valued by guests. In a city hotel, as long as we have a treatment room within a gym that is more than enough, and we have these at DUKES.

Is this role today more of a business job than a hospitality job?

I enjoy the commercial side of the business but I have to pay attention to what is delivered because it's about the people coming through the door and their experiences. Gone are the days when the GM was just a host. We have to know what is going on in our revenue streams as well as with our costs. We need to have relationships with our owners.

Is it harder today to forecast booking when cycles are so short?

It's almost impossible. Lead time is so short, especially in the corporate sector. The leisure sectors need time for breaks but it's still a smaller window than it used to be.

It's about hoteliers educating the market. The promotion of the advanced purchase isn't as strong yet. People think they will get a better deal to wait last minute.

What advice would you give to young women beginning their careers?

My top tip is that a woman must be organized. She must remember one cannot have it all. I missed out on attending school plays and such with my kids growing up because I was career minded. Women can't expect demands to be less on them because they're mothers. They still have to focus on their careers. That is the challenge. Stay focused, work hard, and live the dream. ●