



Creating Magic

An Interview with Gail R. Isono,
General Manager, The Scarlet Huntington
(formerly The Huntington Hotel)



Knob Hill Spas pool and fireplace (left); The Scarlet Huntington entrance (above)

EDITORS' NOTE In 1990, before assuming her current post, Gail Isono joined The Huntington Hotel as a Sales Manager and soon advanced to Director of Sales and Marketing. With more than 27 years of experience in the hospitality industry, she is the first woman to serve in the top post of the 91-year-old property.



Gail R. Isono

PROPERTY BRIEF Weaving together a vibrant Singapore Straits Chinese heritage with the high-fashion luxury of Nob Hill, The Scarlet Huntington (thescarlethotels.com) offers an uninhibited haven in one of the city's most alluring neighborhoods. Recreated as a sensual, chic, and discerningly different boutique hotel, The Scarlet Huntington maintains its timeless red façade, welcoming hotel guests with a new level of grace and glamour, while inviting indulgence and inventiveness at every turn.

How important was it to capture the heritage of the property and also make it relevant for today?

It has been a huge learning curve for us. As the travelers change, we find they are always looking for something bigger, better, and more exciting. It always comes down to whether the colors are brighter and if we have new furnishings that give a new look to the hotel. They love the bones of the building and they love coming back to our people. I'm amazed at all the friends and family we have created with our new guests as well as our ability to keep the family of return guests from the years past.

What can guests expect today at The Scarlet Huntington?

The biggest changes are in the decor. We're still a boutique hotel with a personal touch, but the colors now are very vibrant. It's like opening ones' eyes to a new hotel and yet keeping the tradition of what people have always looked for in The Huntington. We have created The Scarlet Huntington with a bold new look and presence with the charisma and established services of the older Huntington.

In a crowded market like San Francisco, how do you differentiate The Scarlet Huntington?

We have found that the guests of today are not as loyal as in the past. They are more willing to try something new, so our new decor has given us a new opportunity. Yet we're finding that people enjoy the intricacies of the building.

Our guests love the old mail slot that opened in the 1920s and still works where they can watch the letters go down from the shoot. Also, people really enjoy the staircase with the wood paneling, along with the young colors that are relevant for today's world.

Has the decor change been carried out throughout the property?

The lobby and public areas have the biggest change with the colors. When we get into the rooms, there is much flair from the Scarlet branding. This came from the designer's direction from Singapore, which has transformed the rooms. The furniture is more edgy and yet is definitely something that can be used for years to come.

In providing luxury to the guest experience today, how important has personalized service become to the heart of The Scarlet Huntington?

Other hotels have created brand new theories of what luxury is about but we have never stepped away from the feeling of luxury: it comes down to taking care of each individual guest one by one and making them feel they're the only guest at the hotel.

For us, it's not about coming up with brand new and improved theories but about keeping up with what has been tradition all along. It's about making sure they're part of our family and that they feel important because they are.

Where does the tourism market stand for San Francisco and what is your outlook for growth?

The market right now is booming. I hope it stays that way for a long time, but we're dealing with the reality of some changes within the city. The Moscone Center is our convention center here and they're going through upgrades in the next three years. We are concerned about the future so much so that we have even joined forces with some of the neighboring hotels as the Nob Hill Connection, which can work with larger

groups that are looking for meeting space and accommodations. Maybe the opportunity won't be there for the Moscone Center but we can provide another reason to come to San Francisco.

Was it important to maintain consistency in the food and beverage product based on the success it has had?

The Big 4 restaurant is heartfelt within the community and for all our guests. We had to close the restaurant and the hotel for four months in 2014 to renovate. We didn't have elevators and could not stay open while renovating.

But the restaurant remained intact – we changed the carpet and polished the wood, but the neighbors started a website that asked us not to close it. We had people literally crying at our doorstep because they thought we were going to do away with it. It was great to reopen and welcome our guests back.

How important is it to keep the employees and make sure the consistency remains?

I was worried that we would lose a large number of employees because of closing for four months. Everybody has their personal responsibilities, and as soon as they heard about it, we spoke with the employees. We talked to them one on one, and 98 percent said they had saved money in order to keep up with their lifestyle and return as our employees. What was surprising is the number of employees who decided to travel during the renovation period.

How beneficial is it to have ownership that is engaged long-term?

It's such a huge part of what we do here. We're so connected to the property, all the employees do a good job, and we hope the connection with ownership is strong. In today's business, things may not last as long as we want, but the employees here want to make sure they're successful.

What makes the hospitality business so interesting and exciting?

It's amazing to me that we create magic and we don't do anything other than take care of people. Guests who tell us via personal conversations, e-mails or letters just how special we made them feel. To have someone say that because of how we have taken care of them is amazing to me. This keeps me going. ●