



## Keys to the City

An Interview with  
**Maria Zec, Regional Vice President,  
 USA East Coast, The Peninsula Hotels;  
 General Manager, The Peninsula Chicago**



*Peninsula Junior Suite bedroom (left) and living area (above)*

**EDITORS' NOTE** Since March 2002, Maria Zec has served as General Manager of The Peninsula Chicago and assumed her current post with The Peninsula Hotels in May 2007. Prior to this, she served as Managing Director and Hotel Manager at the New York Palace Hotel. Earlier, she was Resident Manager of the Palmer House Hilton in Chicago and also held positions at the Chicago Hilton and Towers, the Waldorf Astoria in New York, and the Hilton at Short Hills (New Jersey). Zec holds a B.S. in business management and a B.A. in French from Purdue University.



*Maria Zec*

**PROPERTY BRIEF** The Peninsula Chicago ([chicago.peninsula.com](http://chicago.peninsula.com)) has been recognized as a premier property with Forbes' Five-Star and AAA Five Diamond awards since its grand opening in 2001. The property boasts 339 luxurious guest rooms and suites furnished in a contemporary yet classical style, and offers a 15,000-square-foot spa and fitness center, as well as three distinctive restaurants and a bar, 24-hour room service, a ballroom, and seven additional meeting and event rooms. The Peninsula Chicago is managed by The Peninsula Hotels ([peninsula.com](http://peninsula.com)), which operates luxury properties throughout Asia and the United States.

### What has made The Peninsula Chicago such a consistent leader in the market in Chicago as well as a leading global property?

Having a seasoned staff with 10 to 15 years tenure shows their commitment to taking care of our guests, as well as delivering consistent service. Over time, our employees have come to truly know and understand our guests.

We describe our service approach as "Eastern Graciousness combined with Midwestern Hospitality," which is shown with the warm, genuine, friendly and caring nature one finds from Midwesterners paired with the service style that Asia is known for, which is the subtle, reserved and discreet.

Maintenance and care of the hotel are also important. Our engineering and housekeeping teams work tirelessly with high standards to keep everything pristine and in good working order.

We offer a variety of dining options for our guests, including a wonderful, top Zagat's-rated Chinese restaurant; our Lobby restaurant features famous afternoon teas and a chocolate bar on weekends; and we have a European café, and a bar that serves great cocktails.

To remain competitive we have to continually look at what is happening in the marketplace and what type of services guests are looking to experience. We are always looking to elevate our service levels. It comes down to taking care of our staff so that they are also a part of the hotel's success.

### Would you discuss the plans for the renovation and what guests can expect from the new room product?

Drawing influence from the French Deco style of the hotel's public spaces, our new rooms are intentionally suited

for both the business and leisure traveler. The designer approached the design taking cues from luxury yachts, with fine wood finishes, luxurious fabrics, rich leathers, and a sense of purpose where everything has its place. Built-in desks and vanities in rich, dark wood create a luxuriously functional and interactive experience. The new environment reflects a spacious, residential feel.

A handcrafted floral art wall anchors each guest room, featuring the chrysanthemum, the official flower of Chicago and one of the four "noble flowers" of Asia. Bespoke chinaware featuring the chrysanthemum has been designed by French heritage company Bernardaud.

The signature blue and wave pattern on the custom-designed Pratesi linens are a nod to Chicago's very important connection to Lake Michigan and the Chicago River – just steps from The Peninsula. Another connection to the local community is the Chicago-based artist, Jean-Jacques Porret, who was commissioned to create sculptures for the guest rooms displayed above the vanity.

The main focus of the project was the introduction of Peninsula's upgraded guestroom technology throughout the hotel, including the ability to operate guestroom facilities via tablets (a minimum of three per room), that can translate the content on the tablet and all touch points throughout the room in 11 different languages at the touch of a button. Lighting, temperature controls, restaurant menus, city information, and weather updates are now all integrated into the room with touchscreen pads and LED wall panels.

New technology was also introduced in the form of PressReader, which features complimentary access to more than 4,000 publications, PenCities, which is an online city guide, streaming radio channels from around the world and, at the touch of a button, one can dim their bathroom lights and stream soothing spa music while they soak in a hot

tub. There is a printer/scanner/fax machine tucked in the desk, and there are complimentary international phone calls via VOIP.

The response to the new room product has been very positive.

In addition to the guestroom renovation, we have launched some new service initiatives that coincide beautifully with the new room product, namely "Keys to the City," which provides guests with special access to Chicago's most notable experiences, from art and architecture to dining and shopping; and a new texting service to communicate efficiently with the hotel staff.

### Would you highlight the art installation taking place at The Peninsula Chicago?

The Peninsula Chicago, together with Pearl Lam Galleries, arranged to showcase an art installation entitled "Alchemy" by Korean artist Choi Jeong Hwa. The installation, made from illuminated plastic bowls and steel, was in the hotel's lobby for six months. The installation, unveiled in mid-September, coincided with EXPO CHICAGO, the International Exposition of Contemporary & Modern Art, and its Art Week programming.

We expect that this collaboration will contribute to Chicago's position in the international arts community, and the growing perception of our city as an arts hub. Ultimately, we would like to realize a dream, which is to showcase pioneering public art that excites, challenges, and spurs dialogue.

### How critical is personalized service in providing a true luxury hotel experience today?

Consistent, personalized service is critical in providing a luxury experience. Over the years, our staff has come to know our guests personally, and their specific requests and preferences. This makes for a very seamless guest experience. This is what travelers have come to expect at a luxury hotel and is what makes a guest truly feel at home and comfortable at a hotel.

At The Peninsula Chicago, we look for employees who have genuine empathy and concern for the well-being of others.

We also offer an exchange program with our sister property in Shanghai where we send hourly and supervisory staff to China for two weeks for cross exposure in their same department. This provides our employees with opportunities to share best practices and get an inside look at how other Peninsula hotels operate. We have done this exchange program now since The Peninsula Shanghai opened. It's been a wonderful program for the hotels and the employees. ●