

A Jewel in the Heart of Manhattan

An Interview with Ashish Verma,
Vice President-Luxury Division, Hampshire Hotels Management LLC



The lobby of The Chatwal

EDITORS' NOTE Ashish Verma was previously with the Lowell Hotel in New York, where he served for seven years as General Manager. Prior to the Lowell, he served as General Manager at the famed Windsor Court Hotel in New Orleans and has held senior positions with luxury hotel companies including Orient Express Hotels, Millennium Hotels, Hyatt International Corporation, and Oberoi Hotels International. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree with honors in political science and economics from Punjab University in Chandigarh, India; a graduate degree in Hospitality Administration from the Oberoi School of Hotel Management in New Delhi, India; and a Master of Business Administration from IMHI Cornell-ESSEC in Paris, France.



Ashish Verma

COMPANY BRIEF Hampshire Hotels Management, LLC (hampshirehotels.com) owns and manages hotels in New York, Miami, the United Kingdom, Thailand, and India. Founded in 1986 by Sant Singh Chatwal, the New York-based company owns over 3,000 hotel rooms and oversees the development and expansion of both its luxury and lifestyle brands, including Dream Hotels, Time Hotels, Night Hotels, and The Chatwal, its flagship luxury property.

When the opportunity presented itself to join the Hampshire Hotels, what excited you about it and made you feel it was the right fit?

It was an ideal opportunity as it combines my expertise in tailoring luxury hospitality at the highest level of excellence by both overseeing a property in the heart of Manhattan and in taking Hampshire Hotels' Luxury Division into an expansion mode. It's a great expression for my knowledge and business acumen gained over the years by both formal education in earning an M.B.A. and having worked with great hotel companies.

You have referred to The Chatwal as The Jewel. Its most loyal guests refer to it as such, but how will you get that message out?

It's the kind of challenge I love about The Chatwal. The product itself is exceptional: its architect is the legendary Stanford White, and Thierry Despont is the ingenious interior

designer. The location is perfect. This is an authentic New York luxury boutique hotel. Upon opening in 2010 there was a buzz; however, it did not maintain that buzz over the past few years as effectively. We now have a new PR company, as it's important to let the world know that, in the heart of Manhattan, there is this jewel. Once guests have visited and experienced it, they will keep coming back again and again.

We are also part of The Luxury Collection and we need enhance that franchise relationship adequately.

Our objective is to reposition the property as a true New York luxury experience and offer a most thoughtful and stylish hospitality experience in a most central location of our great city. To that effect, we have been repolishing and repackaging this precious gem of a hotel.

How do you describe the accommodations and the suite offering?

What I love about The Chatwal, and what the guests love, is that it's so conveniently located and has a most residential feel. It has all of the features and amenities of a big hotel including a spa, a pool, three beautiful banquet spaces, a destination restaurant with celebrity chef, and a gorgeous bar and lounge. Yet, with 76 most distinguished accommodations, it exudes a very intimate feel. No other hotel in Manhattan has terraces the size of The Chatwal, a very unique feature. The suite mix is really good too, with 30 suites, which allows us to attract the most discerning of travelers.

Since joining the company, I've repositioned the suites so that we now have several specialty themed suites with terraces with names such as The Garden Suite, The Chatwal Suite, The Zen Suite, The Sanctuary Suite, and The Ruby Suite. It's a very grand hotel with all of the luxuries, yet it offers a most intimate experience.

What makes your food and beverage component work so well?

All of the credit goes to Mr. Sant Chatwal. He has extensive experience and knowledge in food and beverage, having owned a number of successful restaurants, which led him to recognize that F&B typically is a serious proposition. He also has created some of the most successful F&B operations in the hospitality industry with experiences like at Dream Hotels. He has demonstrated that a successful hotel operation is the one that maintains the positioning

of the F&B product with the right partner. We're fortunate that we have Geoffrey Zakarian and his wife, Margaret, as partners in Lambs Club restaurant at The Chatwal. Few other luxury boutique hotels can provide a landmark destination restaurant, which is so popular for New Yorkers.

When you came in with such high service standards, were those challenging to implement?

I have an absolutely excellent team. We have invested in lots of training, and I have led by example and run training sessions myself. I'm very fortunate to have a very eager team. They are hungry for leadership to raise the game.

Looking at the luxury division within Hampshire, where are those opportunities and how large can this become?

Our plan is to be very selective with the luxury division expansion. Our lifestyle division, with brands like Dream, Time, and Unscripted, is growing at a more rapid pace, as those brands are in high demand.

We have decided the expansion of luxury will be under The Chatwal name. Of the primary markets around the world for our luxury division, we're looking most closely at London, which is a big focus for us. The Chatwal in London, as the other major cosmopolitan city of the world, would be a great fit and a natural connection to our New York flagship hotel. Domestically, we're also looking at Los Angeles, Florida, and Chicago.

Our focus is on economic stability in the destination and, currently, the continental European market is less stable. In due course, we may visit opportunities in Asia.

How important is the family feel to the company in general?

It's the *raison d'être* of our organization. I'm very impressed and I admire it immensely. The family, personalized approach, and details in luxury are vital. Mr. Chatwal is not just hospitable with the guests – the way he guides and respects us as a team is something I have never seen before. There is a high retention factor because he genuinely expresses care for everyone. His giving to the civic, social, and industry causes and commitment to fostering growth and honoring loyalty is extremely rare. That environment of ownership comes from him and it's contagious. We are proud to embrace and share this enriched philosophy and culture of most gracious warmth. ●