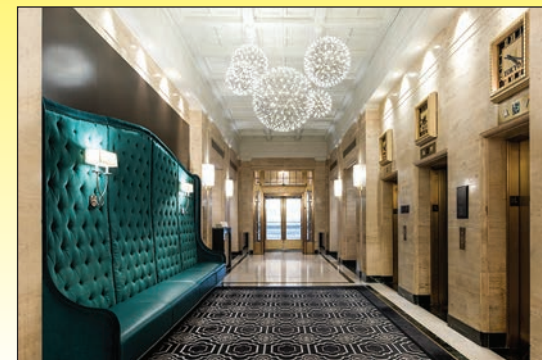


Hospitality

A French Oasis Near the White House

An Interview with Alexandra Byrne,
General Manager, Sofitel Washington D.C. Lafayette Square



A new suite bed (left); the lobby (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Alexandra Byrne is the General Manager of the Sofitel Washington D.C. Lafayette Square, part of the Sofitel Luxury Hotels and Resorts network. Prior to this, she was Director of Sales and Marketing. She held the same position at The Fairfax at Embassy Row, and has been the General Manager of both The Churchill Hotel in Washington D.C. and Courtyard by Marriott. Byrne has also worked in several other leadership roles in the hospitality industry in Washington, D.C.



Alexandra Byrne

PROPERTY BRIEF Sofitel Washington D.C. Lafayette Square (sofitelwashingtondc.com) offers exclusive luxury accommodations in the nation's capital. This elegant hotel is marked by distinctive style, superb cuisine, and incomparable service. Situated at the corner of Lafayette Square bordering the White House, guests can savor a contemporary twist on traditional French cuisine at iCi Urban Bistro or relax in the chic lounge, Le Bar. There is an extensive selection of 237 rooms on 12 floors including 16 suites and one presidential suite, all featuring Sofitel's luxurious feather-top and duvet sleep system, SoBed.

What has made the Sofitel Washington D.C. Lafayette Square work so well and how do you see the property's strengths?

It's about differentiation in the marketplace. It's that French DNA, which we have throughout the property that we combine with local culture.

We have a fantastic location and a beautiful story that is linked to Lafayette Square and the surrounding neighborhood. Taking advantage of this prime location, just a block from the White House has been a tremendous asset for the hotel.

You mentioned that French flair with regard to Sofitel. Are there certain characteristics that let you know you're in a Sofitel or is the design specific to each location?

Oui. It is a combination of the two. It starts with the French greetings of "Bonjour" and "Bonsoir" to our guests, and continues throughout the hotel in our decor, customs, and food and beverage offerings. There is a sense of stepping into a different country because of that European feel. There are certain details that one will recognize in every Sofitel hotel worldwide,

but our properties also bring in accents of the local culture and city influences that makes us stand out.

Are you happy with where the product is today and are there changes guests can expect?

We renovated the hotel last year and our product is ahead of the other hotels in the market. Our product is also more timeless. Our designer integrated the strong history between France and the U.S., and introduced color accents throughout the property. That makes us unique from the

common monochromatic atmosphere so often felt in other hotels. It's still timeless and elegant, just more modern.

Has the Washington, D.C. market been strong and is it growing?

The market is very positive. We are expecting several large conventions in the city. This is also an election year so we will have a lot of excitement at the beginning of the year, and it will wind down just in time to pick up again for the election in November. There are some new hotels entering the marketplace this year as well, so with our renovations complete, we are confident with our position.

How important is it to have a strong suite component within the mix and will you provide a broad overview of that product?

The suite component is extraordinarily important to us. When we have a delegation, for instance, the highest-level guest often requires a larger room on a higher floor. With our selection of suites, we can accommodate such needs, while also taking care of the requests of the rest of the group. Having 16 suites, all with different characteristics, expands our versatility, allowing us to accommodate many types of groups and reservations.

On the luxury side of the business, do you need to have a true spa offering?

I think it is most important to have it as an option. We offer in-room spa services through our partnership with Relax & Rejuvenate. Our clients like the flexibility of having a spa come to them, especially with their busy schedules.

Are you focused on everything from high-level events to intimate gatherings?

Yes. We work directly with the convention center and also welcome individual groups that

come in to attend conventions. We book board meetings, high-end events taking place in the city, holiday gatherings, and intimate wedding parties alike. We have a large portion of the business in Washington and can adapt to most situations.

How do you balance technology today and make sure Sofitel's personal touch isn't lost?

It is an important balance. We want to provide guests with the resources and conveniences that deliver a stress-free and comfortable stay, but we make a concerted effort to ensure that technology does not take over the human element of the service experience. We strive to understand where our guests are coming from and what it is they need so we can create that balance. Everything about our technology focus is for the enhancement of our guest experience.

As a general manager, how important is it to have experience in many areas within a hotel's operations? Is the GM more of a generalist who needs to see all aspects or has the role become more fixated on the business side?

It is a terrific advantage to have experience throughout multiple departments in the hotel. It gives them a much clearer picture and greater competence with the overall operations, and therefore allows them to be more effective in their leadership role. As for the business side, it is very important, but if we focus on one thing more than the other, we will not be successful.

Companies often refer to the tripod: employees, guests, and ownership. We have to make sure the employees are happy so that they make our guests happy, which creates loyal guests. This makes owners happy because they are accomplishing their goals.

What would you tell young women interested in a career in hospitality?

Be tenacious and be ambitious. Don't get discouraged and aim high. We are lucky to be in the hospitality world now, where the gender balance has made great strides, and the efforts continue. AccorHotels, for example, has its own internal network called WAAG (Women at Accor Generation) to support and promote the personal and professional development of women, and to encourage diversity at all levels. As the first ever female General Manager of Sofitel D.C., I would recommend finding a company that will support their career paths and empower them to be the best version of themselves. ●