

Hospitality



The Guest Experience

An Interview with David I. Cohen,
General Manager, Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York

EDITORS' NOTE David Cohen was named to his current post in 2015. He began his career as a Four Seasons Hotel management trainee at New York City's Pierre Hotel in 1984. Prior to joining Hôtel Plaza Athénée, Cohen ran his own hotel consulting business and before this, he oversaw New York hotel operations for TPG Hospitality. Cohen also held General Manager positions at New York's historic Warwick Hotel and Le Parker Meridian, and was Resident Manager of the RIGHA Royal. In addition, he was a member of the opening team for The Ritz-Carlton Battery Park and The Ritz-Carlton Central Park South. Cohen received his Bachelor of Science degree from the Hospitality School at Rochester Institute of Technology as well as a degree from the Centre International de Glion in Switzerland. In addition, he holds an Associate's degree from The University of Hartford in Connecticut.

PROPERTY BRIEF The Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York (plaza-athenee.com) is steps from some of the city's most revered attractions, including Central Park, Museum Mile, and Madison Avenue shopping. This 143-room luxury boutique hotel has been the home-away-from-home for sophisticated travelers from around the world for over two decades. Owned by the TCC Group of Thailand, it is a member of The Leading Hotels of the World.

Since taking over the property, you have implemented many changes. Will you talk about your vision and how it has evolved?

It has always been a classic, beautiful, and lovely luxury boutique property. It just needed an injection of new energy and excitement, which we have focused on over the past 12 months. We have fixed the back of the house so the staff feels more comfortable in their working environment, which ultimately translates to a better guest experience.

We then focused on the guest experience and, first and foremost, reaching out to our regular guests, to guests that hadn't been coming back, and then reaching out to new markets via direct sales calls and e-marketing on a national and global level. We have been successful at retaining our regular guests because they have seen dramatic change. We have also



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made great inroads into a variety of different markets that have shown us great success for new business including China, the Middle East, and South America, particularly Brazil. We have also put emphasis recently on several European countries and we are now reaching as far as Australia.

We have a good balance of retaining regular guests and adding in new guests, and having the older generation mix with the younger generation. The efforts from an entertainment

standpoint have been very strong in all aspects, be it entertainment-related people staying at the hotel or the hotel being utilized for TV and movie shoots.

Overall, the back and front of house blend and we have introduced new talent. I was able to take much of the management talent from top properties around the city and put them together to become a cohesive team. We all understand what the goal is, which is to focus in on the guests, the service, and the hospitality features, and reduce the technology factor by spending more time talking to the guests rather than e-mailing them, even though there are always exceptions.

We really wanted to put the focus on greeting guests by name, following through by name, checking up on them by name, sending them welcome notes that are handwritten, and making sure that at every part of their stay, they are touched and exposed to people instead of technology. We have seen great return from those efforts.

We just completed the upgrade of our food and beverage areas, particularly the Arabelle restaurant. It took us over three months to find a copy of the original chandelier to bring back the original grandeur of the experience of entering Arabelle. We have also just completed restoring the original ceiling in Arabelle by two of Europe's finest painters to bring back the stunning cloud ceiling.

The new chef and his new menus, which all launched recently, are also a nice addition to the fall features of the hotel.

Whether someone is coming to the bar, lounge, or main dining room, it is really a different experience in terms of what one sees and hears and tastes.

The exterior of the building has been completely restored. One of the great highlights is



Arabelle restaurant (left); classic one- or two-bedroom suite kitchen and living area (above)

that it has been over 20 years since one could come here in the evening and see the exterior of the hotel lit. The name and our trim on the awning have all been restored and the brick-work and detail are all renewed for everyone to see, and the wow factor at nighttime is more lively. We're proud of that.

The final phase will be the rooms' renovation project, which we've scheduled for 2017, and with a dynamic concept.

All of this has been wonderful but, if anyone asks me about the greatest challenge in this market, it's that there are a lot of products and not enough people to fill them all.

My belief as a hotelier has been to focus on the service factor and the guest interaction, which will create the return guest factor and cause people to choose us over some of the other hotels that might be more showy and might be possibly even newer in their presentations. Coming home to a warm, welcoming family that knows a guest is important has made a lot of difference this year.

It's still a challenging market, but we're hoping for a strong finish to 2016 and looking forward to an exciting 2017.

How do you find the balance between occupancy and rate in this type of market?

The priority is finding the balance. We're consistently doing that on a daily basis and monitoring what the market will allow us to do. I'm cognizant of the hotel's history and reputation and my goal, based on the points discussed, is to take us to market leadership in the luxury segment. I want to be a really great product, which we're striving towards. It becomes a matter of what time of year it is, how much we're willing to adjust our rate, and how much we're willing to give in on occupancy.

From the first of the year, we have chosen to drive occupancy where we think we can get a fair rate to financially justify our existence. When we see that the rate is going far below what we want, then we use that opportunity to do maintenance on the property and close down a few floors to make sure the product is the best it can be when we are busier. We hold our rate. We don't go further than certain points and our occupancy will stabilize.

Other times, like in the fall, we're driving occupancy as we're completely sold out and at extremely high rates because of events in town. It's all a balance. ●