



The Future of Luxury

An Interview with John Vanderslice,
Global Head, Luxury & Lifestyle Brands,
Hilton Worldwide



A model room at the Canopy Reykjavik City Centre (left);
Koju restaurant at the Conrad Pune (above)

EDITORS' NOTE John Vanderslice, who joined Hilton in September 2009, oversees the Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts, Conrad Hotels & Resorts, and Canopy by Hilton hotel brands. Before joining Hilton, he served as President and Chief Executive Officer for Club Med Americas and as Chief Executive Officer for Miraval Spa in Tucson, Arizona.



John Vanderslice

COMPANY BRIEF Hilton (hiltonworldwide.com) is a leading global hospitality company, spanning the lodging sector from luxury and full-service hotels and resorts to extended-stay suites and focused-service hotels. The company's portfolio of 13 world-class global brands is comprised of more than 4,800 managed, franchised, owned, and leased hotels and timeshare properties, with more than 789,000 rooms in 104 countries and territories, including Hilton Hotels & Resorts, Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts, Conrad Hotels & Resorts, Canopy by Hilton, Curio—A Collection by Hilton, DoubleTree by Hilton, Embassy Suites by Hilton, Hilton Garden Inn, Hampton by Hilton, Tru by Hilton, Homewood Suites by Hilton, Home2 Suites by Hilton, and Hilton Grand Vacations. The company also manages an award-winning customer loyalty program, Hilton HHonors®.

Will you give a brief overview of the growth that Waldorf Astoria and Conrad have experienced?

My job is traveling around the world looking for the best destinations for our brands, which includes traditional gateway cities as well as untapped markets. While our story starts with the history of Waldorf Astoria New York, over the years we have grown in other cities – Berlin, Shanghai, Amsterdam, and Chengdu. In April, we will be opening a property in Beverly Hills, creating a new world-renowned hotel.

On the Conrad side, we were blessed to have a brand that started in a strong Asian market, with hotels in places like Hong Kong and Shanghai. We've since extended into leisure destinations like Koh Samui and Algarve.

One of my favorite new properties is Conrad Pune – it's in a really interesting section of India that is growing fast and is part of the smart luxury set of technology in India. We've also recently opened Conrad Chicago, which is another great example of a product that perfectly aligns with smart luxury.

This focus on brand growth is shared by everyone on my team.

Will you touch on your innovation platform for those brands?

With Waldorf Astoria, we continue to offer True Waldorf Service, meaning every single guest that comes to our hotels gets a personal concierge who knows a bit about them and offers things they want upfront. He or she greets the guest at arrival, checks the guest in, is in contact with them during their stay, and helps them during their departure. We have seen a significant increase in connections between our guests and our personal concierges over the years since we've introduced True Waldorf Service.

For Conrad, we've supported our smart luxury mindset with the introduction of Conrad Concierge, a mobile concierge app. The future of luxury is becoming more enabled by technology. Through our Conrad Concierge, a guest has access to all of our hotel services in the palm of their hand. We've also now introduced Digital Check-in for all Hilton brands through our Hilton HHonors app. With Digital Check-in, guests can choose their own room and check-in before they arrive at the hotel, and now we're rolling out the option for guests to use their smartphone as their room key.

We have found that the people who use our Conrad Concierge mobile app give us higher marks on service and higher marks on our team members, because we've handled their request digitally and now it's just about a seamless delivery.

Additionally, while everyone has been talking about experiential travel, we've really pushed our team to put a stake in the ground by becoming the luxury brands that are all about experiences.

With Waldorf Astoria, we have a culinary program called "Taste of Waldorf Astoria" where we partner with five James Beard Foundation rising star chefs who are then paired with five of our executive chefs, some of whom are Michelin-starred, to recreate an iconic Waldorf Astoria dish. Each year we challenge our chefs to come up with the next Waldorf Salad, Eggs Benedict, or Red Velvet Cake – each created in the kitchens of Waldorf Astoria New York.

For Conrad, we've curated off-property experiences through our Conrad 1/3/5 program. At every one of our 26 properties, we offer one-hour, three-hour, and five-hour itineraries developed for guests to discover the destination they're visiting.

To create these itineraries, we have appointed a director of inspiration, former senior editor of

Conde Nast Traveler Peter Jon Lindberg, and his job is to travel around the world to source the coolest things to do in each destination. We've had tremendous response to this program.

All of these experiences are supported by hospitality programs through which we train our team members to bring all of this to life in our hotel in order to create a true luxury experience.

Will you talk about the vision you had for the new brand, Canopy, and where it is today?

Canopy by Hilton is our new entry in the lifestyle hospitality space. We took the time to do a deep market assessment on where the best place to position a new lifestyle brand would be. The segment is in the upper-upscale space, a bit north of Hilton, but it's really accessible lifestyle, which means it's more of a neighborhood player than a gateway player.

We just opened our first hotel on the coolest street in Reykjavik, Iceland. Canopy Reykjavik is really a hotel that celebrates the neighborhood by bringing in design, art, and culture references from the area into the hotel while making it more accessible to guests via an affordable price point. The brand is also accessible to owners because the investment to build is lower than luxury and the entire experience is localized. Even though it's Canopy by Hilton, each design is inspired by the local area. That's why people travel.

We target the mindsets of people who are adventurous travelers, who want to explore different aspects of their stay and are room-centric.

These properties deliver guest-directed service, and offer thoughtful local choices and really comfortable spaces.

How large can that brand get?

We aren't sure yet, but we have been reviewed very well by developers. We have over 26 developments in the pipeline for Canopy and we just introduced the brand one year ago.

Also, we're building Canopy properties in the coolest and most interesting neighborhoods in the world, so we're confident that the brand will end up being a pretty substantial business.

Will the similarity for Canopy be primarily through service standards?

Yes, because the design is localized. Fifty percent of the lobby design will be influenced by the neighborhood, while 20 percent will be represented in the guest rooms. In lifestyle hotels, we found that creating a comfortable room that guests want to spend time in ended up being an afterthought. We're Hilton, so we know how to create a great guest room. ●