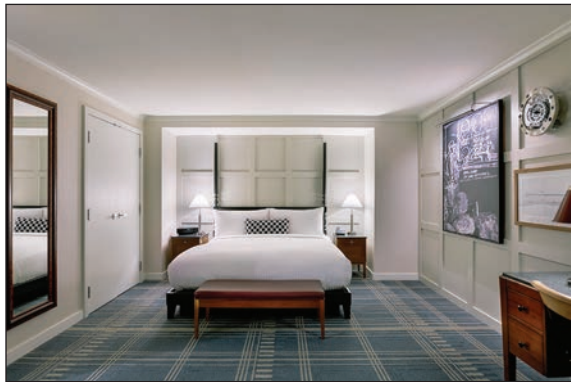


Consistency and Recognition

An Interview with Alex Attia,
General Manager, The Charles Hotel,
Harvard Square



Chancellors King Suite Bedroom (left); the lobby (above);
and Henrietta's Table restaurant (below)

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to joining *The Charles Hotel*, Alex Attia was General Manager at *The Jefferson* in Washington, D.C. Previously, he served as General Manager at the *Loews Hotel Vogue* in Montreal, as well as Executive Assistant Manager at the *Loews New York Hotel*. Attia worked with *Omni Hotels* and *Sheraton Hotels*, as well as an independent property in Chicago, before joining *Loews Hotels* in 1993. A native of Tunisia, he was educated at the *University of Villetaneuse* in Paris and graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1981. He is fluent in French and Arabic.



Alex Attia

PROPERTY BRIEF Next door to Harvard's *Kennedy School of Government* and just steps away from the university's storied quads, *The Charles Hotel* (charleshotel.com) opened for business in 1984 and, over the past 25 years, has welcomed everyone from *Barbra Streisand* to *His Holiness the Dalai Lama*. The Charles is a member of *Preferred Hotels and Resorts* and an *AAA Four Diamond* award-winning hotel. It boasts 295 guest rooms, 46 suites, and one presidential suite. With its classic *New England* design, sophisticated service, technology, and one-of-a-kind accommodations, *The Charles Hotel* is ideal for both business and leisure travel.

When it comes to travel for a property like *The Charles Hotel*, where is the business and is this a challenging market?

It's a challenging time for the industry. We have no choice but to talk politics for a bit. It's about the uncertainty of what is going on. The message, especially to international travelers, is very concerning, particularly for businesses that used to send groups of leaders to seminars. This market is heavily based on education and leadership with schools like Harvard, Tufts, and MIT. Groups come from all over the world and they never thought until recently about what religion the participants are.

There is also the increasing concern we have over Airbnb. At least once per week, there are over 2,000 units listed in Cambridge, Massachusetts on Airbnb. That's huge inventory. It may not be affecting us directly but it has taken away from the mid-market and has taken business from us. Everyone will hurt eventually.

How do you compete with that? Does the industry need a unified voice to address this?

We have to respond to this as an industry. We're also disadvantaged because most of these

units don't have to struggle with how much they're paying their employees and where they find them. We're getting hit on many different fronts at this point – the labor market is very tight, the cost of labor is going up, and most of the available units are good products that will compete with our business.

How critical is your relationship with some of the leading institutions in education?

It's crucial to our success. We have a good product, service, and food, but we need a good relationship with our partners and not to assume that because we're sitting next to Harvard that the business will automatically come to us.

When there is a last-minute request, we have to figure out how to be there for them when they need us. All of us are fighting for a piece of the pie.



How important is it to have ownership that is invested in the future?

It is very important. Fortunately, I deal with the owners directly and have conversations with them about what is happening in the market and what is needed to make sure we remain relevant, especially as an independent. We have to continue to be a product that responds to the value expected by the customer.

What does the word "luxury" really mean and is it more about personalization and customizing the experience today?

We focus on consistency and recognition by the workforce because that makes the difference.

Almost 75 percent of our guests stay with us at least a half dozen times per year, so it's important we recognize them and welcome them back.

How far do you take the technology offering?

We have to respond to our market. The millennials love to use their smartphones to check in instead of stopping at the desk. However, we believe our guests are better served by talking to us for a few minutes on their day of arrival. It's important we continue that interaction to make sure they get the room type they need, for instance, and it's important that we have those conversations as they're helpful to us.

Are you happy with where the product stands today and do you anticipate additional changes?

We just finished a \$20-million renovation in mid-May of 2016, so we are happy with where we are today. We introduced a couple of new energy-efficient items, including a massive switch in the room that turns off the lights so one doesn't have to do it themselves.

We can't just say that we're all set for the next 10 years, however, because most of the renovations are done. We need to be thinking of the next gadget or service we should be offering to make sure we stay relevant.

How challenging is the food and beverage part of the business with so much great stand-alone product in the area?

We have been lucky and successful with our food and beverage concepts. We view each dining outlet as a business on its own, not just as an amenity. Executives are looking for comfort and a product that speaks to their lifestyle. It is imperative we know who we're servicing at each of our dining outlets. *Henrietta's Table* is a fantastic neighborhood restaurant that has focused on serving farm-to-table cuisine for nearly 20 years. We work with the same farmers we have worked with since the mid-'90s when the concept was introduced.

Our outlets aren't just hotel restaurants. They are dining destinations unto themselves. We just partnered with fantastic young chef Michael Pagliarini of the highly acclaimed Cambridge-based restaurant, *Giulia* to open *Benedetto* at *The Charles Hotel* in November. The 220-seat restaurant and bar feature a world class and classic design from legendary Paul Bentel of New York and draws inspiration from the rural sophistication of Umbria. The restaurant is inspired by the honesty and wisdom of traditional Italian regional cooking and a reflection of these great customs. ●