



Exceeding Expectations

An Interview with Ashish Verma,
Vice President, Luxury Division, Dream Hotel Group



Evening view from the Producer Suite roof deck (left);
bedroom of the Director Suite (above)

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 Encompassing artfully modern luxury and lifestyle hotel brands in North America, Thailand, and India, Dream Hotel Group (dreamhotelgroup.com) is a leader in managed properties worldwide. Founded in 1986 by Sant Singh Chatwal, the innovative New York-based company owns over 2,500 rooms and oversees the management, development, and expansion of Dream Hotel Group's proprietary brands that include Dream, The Time, and Unscripted as well as other trusted marks from leading global hospitality players.

How do you view the New York hotel market today?

It's an exciting time in New York with many refurbishments and renovated products being launched, and we're competing with our own repositioned, refreshed, and revived products and services at The Chatwal.

In luxury hospitality, we have had some consolidation because the growth is more in boutique lifestyle not boutique luxury per se.

The advent of Airbnb has had an impact on all categories though of course more on the upper upscale and mid-scale properties.

Secure travel has also become a concern globally, so we are fortunate and grateful that the local administration and law enforcement is keeping people safe.

We have learned a lot in a dynamic 2016. The traveler has many options to choose from. However, we at The Chatwal with our niche and our product and service aligned for our target

audience, and our rates strategy and improvement plans, are geared toward a better and stronger 2017.

Many have never equated the Times Square area with luxury product but, on the hotel side, The Chatwal has provided that. Is that well understood?

Only local New Yorkers of yesteryear feel that way. Times Square is very popular with travelers from all over the world. Everyone loves New York for its vibrancy and energy of Midtown Manhattan. No other part of New York

can match the convenience and quintessential local vibes. All of our guests, without exception, love our location also because it's within walking distance of so many attractions like Bryant Park, Rockefeller Plaza, Christie's, Saks Fifth Avenue, MOMA, shopping on Madison Avenue, and the very best dining in town all within a few blocks.

As Midtown is growing, the locals are starting to recognize it as well. It's a great place to spend a week in their own city to relax and have a staycation in one of our suites, go to a Broadway show, and enjoy Bryant Park and shop and dine in our incredibly magnetic city.

We see hotels in New York City getting out of the restaurant business. This property has a commitment to the restaurant and has a partnership with Geoffrey Zakarian. How important is it to offer that in the luxury space and how challenging is it to be successful in this market?

Practically and financially, it makes sense that labor expenses are offset by keeping the food and beverage separate from the hotel side.

Mr. Chatwal has unparalleled expertise gained over the years in successfully harnessing food and beverage partnerships and building relationships. We were fortunate to own Lambs Club as our destination restaurant. We have a very successful partnership with Geoffrey as our operator and we're continuing to grow such partnerships as we look at companies overseas. We are aiming to work with leading Michelin-starred chefs around the world as we look at properties for The Chatwal in London, Los Angeles, Sao Paulo, and Rio to see who else we could engage to work with The Chatwal brand.

Within the hospitality segment, is it all about the personalization today and is it harder to define "luxury" when so many people use that word?

Indeed, yet people do recognize true luxury. They recognize the differences in experiences when they spend a lot for a room or a suite. They realize it's not just about quality linen but also certain amenities, and all the thought that is put into the hardware.

However, the ultimate 'luxury' experience is on the software side. Details and personalization are things we should take pride in and be passionate about; ultimately, service is the mainstay. One can create a lot of great hardware with great partners and design, but if one does not cater to guest expectations, one cannot extend or anticipate great service, and that would not be true luxury.

Product is relatively easy; location we can be blessed with by an investor or owner; but service is entirely in our hands and, as a leader, we should be vested in that deeply, at least in luxury boutique. The goal is to inspire and lead by example, to build a team that anticipates and exceeds the expectations of luxury hospitality at The Chatwal.

You have a number of constituencies – owners, guests, employees. However, you generally talk about employees first. What makes a successful hotel when it comes to catering to all segments?

I strike a balance among the three and I do invest a lot of energy, focus, and care for our employees. We cannot just demand a certain level of service consistently; it has to be natural. I treat my team with respect and give them time as I would with a guest or with the owners. If employees are happy and fulfilled, they will do what the owner expects and exceed what the guest expects.

Ultimately, we have to maximize the bottom line and it has to be about whatever we have to realistically do to have the right sized organization with the right capabilities in the team to meet our financial goals and expectations from ownership.

What advice do you give young graduates coming into the hospitality industry and what are the keys to success?

Reflection. It is vital for them to understand what they desire out of a career.

In many ways, hospitality hasn't changed because it's all about the guest feeling at home and the team taking pride and having a sense of responsibility. As leaders, we must strive to create a work environment that is happy because then our team smiles from within. Authentic service comes from the deep, natural understanding that hospitality is an art. ●