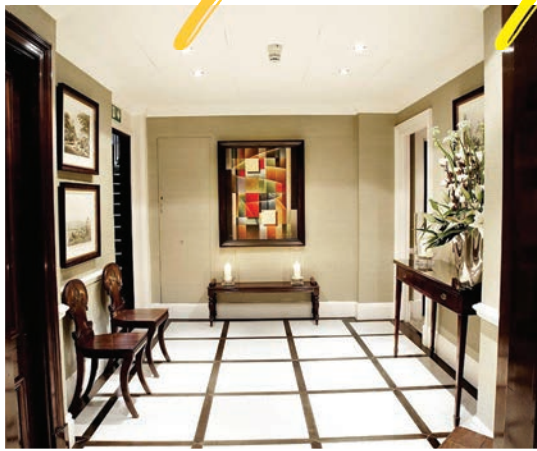


Orchestrating the Luxury Experience

An Interview with Debrah Dhugga,
Managing Director, DUKES Collection



DUKES LONDON lobby foyer (left); entrance (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Debrah Dhugga is a seasoned luxury hotelier who holds a fellowship with the Institute of Hospitality. She was recognized as one of the top 100 U.K. females in hospitality and transport in 2012, and was named Business Mentor of the Year in 2013. Dhugga is a member of the Institute of Directors, the SPA Advisory Board, and Business Women Leaders. She is also a trustee for the hospitality charity "One and All" where she was tapped as a keynote speaker at the House of Lords. Dhugga is a founding member of the Leading Ladies of London, an organization comprised of female general managers of five-star hotels whose mission is to bring more women leaders into the hotel industry. She supports the industry as a speaker at hotel schools and conferences. She is a mentor to many young people in the industry and personally challenges herself to raise funds for an industry charity each year.



Debrah Dhugga

PROPERTY BRIEF Recognized as "Europe's Leading Boutique Hotel" and the "World's Leading Classic Boutique Hotel," DUKES LONDON (dukeshotel.com) is a hidden gem in the heart of St. James Mayfair, where quintessential British charm and fine luxury merge to create a timeless atmosphere for all guests. The property features stunning bedrooms that offer outstanding comfort, the legendary DUKES Bar, and a great restaurant offering British cuisine, which has been awarded three AA Rosettes. There is also the beautiful drawing room where afternoon tea is served as well as a health club featuring an Italian marble steam room, a modern gym with the latest Technogym equipment, and a beauty treatment room.

Where do you see the business today and has it been challenging?

Yes, because there is so much more supply coming on and the demand isn't there in many of the major cities or destinations of the world.

There were not as many big congresses going on in the last quarter with the American election and Brexit in the U.K., as well as the Euro being so high. These have led to a challenging time for the industry in general.

There is more competition with the likes of Airbnb and just more challenges today with service apartments coming on as well. It has an effect on the overall picture.

In that kind of climate, how do you balance occupancy with rate?

We have to maintain some integrity even if we're going to have to stop offering the value-adds that are a cost to the room anyway. It can be very frustrating and once people go into a rate war to balance the rate and the occupancy, it becomes

quite dangerous. We have to be as good at managing our rate in weak times as we are in strong ones.

The recovery depends on how quickly the city is going to pick up. It's a massive challenge.

At day's end, we have costs and we have to balance what is right between the occupancy and rate.

In such a competitive market, does differentiation come down to service and people or can you differentiate by product?

It's all about service – luxury is service. One can go into a less luxurious hotel but if the service is exceptional, that property will be remembered.

What hoteliers have to consider is if they cut back on their staffing during these tough periods, they are straightaway cutting back on their service and standards of delivery and relying on efficiency to run the business at a luxury level.

People who aren't looking at paying a higher rate and are paying lower revenue per available room aren't necessarily looking for the service.

We have to balance our costs against what is coming in and what the demand is.

Is there a consistent feel throughout the property and would you talk about how important a strong suite product is in a city like London?

It's not just about the room but the value-adds that go into that room as well. It's the chauffeured car that picks guests up as they arrive in London, having the concierge there to pick up the guest's bags and whisk them to their suite, having their favorite cup of tea or glass of wine waiting for them in their room, and having their

butler unpack their bags for them. It's all about these value-added extras in a suite. It's not just the room, even though there are wonderful amenities including flowers and chocolates, and a fruit tray. The pampering is there to make the guest feel special. We orchestrate the luxury experience from the minute the guest arrives into town.

When it comes to hiring, are you looking for those with the right personalities or those coming out of school with the right skills?

We can't give someone a personality – they have to have that. The service, warmth, and hospitality side of it is important.

When I'm actually looking at our hotels and who we're bringing in, grooming is vital, and also being able to smile and have a conversation. We don't want someone who is shy and reserved and can't talk to someone on the floor. There is still a place in the back of house for these people, of course.

Hotel schools are important for those coming into the industry because it gives them an intro into what the life is and what the standards are, and it fast-tracks them for a future career.

With the challenges in food and beverage, do you need to look at that piece more as a stand-alone entity?

Absolutely. Our restaurant is very much a hotel restaurant, but we're now working to change it into a destination restaurant. In London, very much like in New York, many hotels now have signature restaurants based in them, which are destinations on their own. Many hotels have name chefs working for them.

How important is it to have owners that focus on the long-term?

It's critical. Owners have to work with the operators and with the hotel management team to reap the rewards.

It's a challenge today for owners to see why they should invest when their return isn't there. It's also really important for hotel managers to be honest with owners about the challenges. We are one team with the same goal at the end of the day.

Hotel life is special; it's a way of life and you either love it or hate it. I certainly love it, even after 26 years in the industry. ●