

Hospitality

Uniting the World's Independent Boutique and Lifestyle Hotels

An Interview with Frances Kiradjian,
Founder and Chief Executive Officer,
Boutique and Lifestyle Lodging Association (BLLA)



Frances Kiradjian

EDITORS' NOTE Frances Kiradjian, a 25-year hospitality and travel industry professional, created BLLA to give a voice to independent properties as well as small brands around the world, offering them the opportunity and the means to compete on a level playing field with major hotel companies. BLLA serves more than 1,000 members, including hotels and the suppliers, manufacturers, and service providers that sustain them. Kiradjian is a graduate of the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California (USC).

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The Boutique & Lifestyle Lodging Association (blla.org; BLLA) is the first and only alliance dedicated to uniting the world's upscale, independent boutique and lifestyle hotels and small brands. BLLA was created to be the unifying voice of this distinctive subset within the hospitality industry. With more than 1,000 members and a reach to more than 150,000 industry professionals, BLLA's goal is to unite the world's collection of boutique and lifestyle properties and the suppliers that sustain them. BLLA offers their members the opportunity to successfully compete on a level playing field with major hotel companies. The association educates members in order to market themselves to meet the ever-increasing demand from discerning boutique-seeking clients.

What did you see in the market that made you feel there was a need for BLLA and what is its mission?

I created BLLA after having been in the industry for many years within both travel and hospitality and, having worked with the big brands all those years, I noticed that many independent hotels were calling on me for assistance. At many of the conferences around the world, I noticed that a number of their needs were never considered or met, and they were left like a fish out of water. The boutique lifestyle hoteliers were frustrated because they are very creative and are on the leading edge of the hospitality industry.

In 2007, I decided to launch BLLA after meeting with 10 small brands that were made up of independent hotels. They felt someone had to take the lead on this because there was no other organization that was right for them and they needed an organization that could represent their interests around the world.

Our mission is to unite the world's independent boutique and lifestyle hotels. We make

sure they fit within our definition of boutique and lifestyle and then connect them with cutting-edge business, give them regional insight, invite them to conferences, and connect them with the right vendors, service providers, and others that have experience in the boutique sector and are people that can fulfill their needs.

We want them to have the opportunity for global recognition. The big brands have marketing pull as do the big online travel agents, like Expedia. We need to band these hotels together and unite them to take their message to the world.

We call our association members "families." We use the word "family" a lot because they're all independently owned properties and they love to be part of a close-knit organization like BLLA. Every interaction with us is like we're taking care of our family members. I pick up the phone no matter what and I spend time with people. I also always make the time to meet with them when they're in town.

When you see so much consolidation among big brands, do you anticipate a future for boutique properties?

The future will feature an enormous mix. There will be properties that are against having a playbook such as might happen with a big brand, although the big brands have done a good job recently of creating soft brands. This allows independent properties to retain their independence while taking advantage of loyalty programs and distribution.

But there will always be those properties that have found great success in being totally independent and really smart with their websites and connections. They're distributing who they are themselves because in today's world, depending on how smart someone is online, they can get just as much business and cut out a lot of overhead.

The boutique sector – both independent properties and small brands or groups of hotels with one owner – really is growing. There are many properties that are currently branded as part of a big chain that are starting to recognize this more than I have ever seen over the past 10 years. We're starting to see properties that want to become independent because they want to do their own thing. They want to be creative today and don't want to be told exactly what to do. There are many rebels out there who are frustrated at being told how they should handle things.

There will be more properties joining us as this practice grows because we can assist and connect them, and individually, they might not have that same drive or skill to be so entrepreneurial.

How much growth do you anticipate in your membership?

Any property can be a member and take advantage of membership benefits. However, only those properties that fit our criteria, which will be qualified via our own algorithm, will make it into the new booking system we're launching soon. It will be the official list of real boutique and lifestyle hotels around the world.

We see huge growth in this area because half of the world's hotels are independently owned and half of those are upscale lifestyle and boutique hotels. Even though people were saying the word "boutique" would go away, I never believed that, and it is being used and embraced more and more.

Will you touch on Stay Boutique™ and the impact you anticipate from this program?

Stay Boutique is a registered trademark. We're launching what we call our Direct Booking Initiative. Along with all of the other things we provide our members, we now want to provide our hotel members additional incremental revenue through this booking site, which will be a list of all of the real and approved boutique and lifestyle hotels globally along with a booking button, which will be linked directly to their own booking engine. BLLA does not collect commissions or fees. We will have marketing and advertising opportunities available later this year.

Part of this site includes something called Discover Boutique, which features all the media surrounding boutique hotels, including the stories and all the topics people talk about in the boutique lifestyle space combined with talk about retail, fashion, art, music and entertainment – all of which are elements that make up the boutique sector.

This concept came from a few years of hearing directly from corporate travelers, travel agents, and consumers directly who said if we had a place they could book, they would be more trustful of what we said about boutique travel than they would some of the big online travel agencies.

It's a trusted seal of approval because we're the official association for this sector of the industry. They trust us more because we're an organization that does its homework and is there to define "boutique & lifestyle" going forward. ●