

Hospitality

Classic and Modern Blended Together

An Interview with Senih Geray,
General Manager, The St. Regis New York



A Bentley at the iconic entrance of The St. Regis New York

EDITORS' NOTE In December 2016, Senih Geray returned to The St. Regis New York as General Manager. Geray joins The St. Regis New York from The St. Regis Atlanta where he served as the General Manager since 2012. Geray began his career in the hospitality industry in 1989 as a Guest Service Agent at the Sheraton Grande Torrey Pines in La Jolla, California. After much success, Geray relocated to New York where he first joined The St. Regis New York team as Financial Controller, a position he held for eight years. Geray has also served as the General Manager at the Sheraton Voyager Antalya Hotel, Resort & Spa in Turkey, and The St. Regis Aspen Resort. Geray attended the United States International University in London where he received his B.S. in business administration. He continued his education at the United States International University in San Diego, California where he studied Hotel and Restaurant Management.



Senih Geray

PROPERTY BRIEF The St. Regis New York (stregisnewyork.com) offers 238 luxurious guest rooms and suites. Contemporary luxury meets classic sophistication at this iconic hotel, just steps from an exceptional Fifth Avenue shopping experience. Guest rooms and suites are newly renovated and marry original design elements, such as crystal Waterford chandeliers and elegant crown moldings, with beautiful, large-format photographic artwork, vibrant-hued fabrics, and stunning beveled mirrors. Rooms feature marble-tiled entryways, rich color schemes, custom furnishings, and state-of-the-art technologies. It is the flagship property of St. Regis Hotels and Resorts.

When the opportunity presented itself to return to The St. Regis New York, what excited you about it and made you feel it would be the right fit?

It was more of an emotional connection for me from the 1990s, because I was here in a different capacity then. Those eight years were the longest time I have ever spent in one hotel. Then I went to an overseas location, then did a location in Aspen for six years, and then Atlanta for four years.

When the position became available and, at this crossroad with the ownership group

changing with Starwood fading out and Marriott International coming in, it almost felt like a duty to me to be back at the brand's flagship location. I am excited to be back so that I could fill the bridging role from what was the past through ITT Sheraton, then Starwood, and now under Marriott International.

I was fortunate enough to be given the position, and I always had a longing to be here again one day.

What does the ownership change mean?

It hasn't changed things now, but even from ITT Sheraton to Starwood and from Starwood to Marriott International, as long as the brand is there to be cherished by the parent company, the role will always be for me to make sure the past practices are in place. I think whatever has worked in the past is great but, more importantly, with certain initiatives that we tried and weren't as successful, it's important that the voice in the building is there so we can actually reflect on the history of the property and, to a certain extent, educate the new players on what has worked and what hasn't worked. Based on this property, the brand itself, the St. Regis brand, has become a successful brand and has expanded very quickly to a big number – we are almost 40 hotels now around the globe. I feel with that expansion, there are a lot of decisions made, mostly positive, but there were some that didn't take off as much. To have that kind of understanding in the building when a conversation about future programs arises is very important.

Where is the New York City market today and do you worry about oversupply?

I do, and I have a comparison point. In the 1990s, not only were the number of hotels in the comp set much less than what it is today, but even geographically, everything seemed to be populated in Midtown. Now we have Uptown and Downtown, and we still have Midtown but there are more properties in place.

I'm sure there are more people visiting New York, but at the same time, with that we now have to jump higher from the crowd so we are actually seen at a certain level. Just riding on past successes sometimes doesn't guarantee the future.

For us, it's important that the innovation aspect, which goes back to 1904 with John Jacob Astor, has to be at the forefront for everyone that works in this building. How to tweak things and renew ourselves to stay relevant to the needs of the customers is the key to who becomes successful and who doesn't.

This property recently underwent changes. Are you happy with the product today, and are there additional changes on the horizon?

I don't think there will be any changes over the next few years, but just like any luxury product, once we hit that seven- to 10-year cycle, certainly a concept review will come into place. Our last one was finished at the end of 2013, so we're in the return phase on those investments.

In the past, especially with our hotel rooms, that old charm is reflected, almost to the full extent, but it didn't leave room for modern sophistication. With the latest design, we have found a karma with the classic and modern blended together. It still works as my parents' hotel but at the same time, I can enjoy it and even the younger generation can as well.

There is something that resonates with people's emotional connection to the property.

On the accommodation side, how important is it to have such a strong suite product?

At the end of the day, it's a great team effort that gets the job done, but we need to have certain star players to showcase our overall product. In our case, as much as our staff does that in many ways from a product perspective, the designer suites we have puts us on the map and differentiates us. More importantly, they become a gateway for any story to be told in partnership with what we have with those specific suites.

What are the keys to a successful food and beverage product and how hard is it to drive revenue in this area?

To think about food and beverage apart from rooms is almost impossible. Our guests will always come to stay in the hotel and enjoy the room facility. However, our past history is so rich and full of rituals, many of which have to do with food and beverage concepts, that we always have to be dependent on this regardless of what profitability level it provides. ●