

# Hospitality



## An International Hotel



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

The Charles Hotel Presidential Suite bedroom (left)  
and exterior (above)

**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. He 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, Attia 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](http://charleshotel.com)) opened in 1985 and, over the past 30+ years, has welcomed everyone from Barbra Streisand to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The Charles is a member of Preferred Hotels and Resorts and a 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 you look at the current state of the hotel business within the Cambridge area, where is the market today and has the hotel been able to achieve growth?**

This past year has been rather difficult business-wise. The projections from 2016 to 2017 were to see small growth, mainly rate-driven but, unfortunately, occupancy did not come through and without that, we can't be bullish on the rate. We all found that it was a softer market than we expected.

There are many factors: Airbnb is a reality we're dealing with more and more. Cambridge alone has more than 1,900 listings and that has directly or indirectly taken business from all of us.

Also, international travel has been down. Some of it is political and some of it is because people are afraid to travel.

We hope 2018 will improve over 2017, but we're not necessarily confident in that.

**When that is the reality, what financial adjustments can you make to keep the property profitable?**

It's becoming harder and harder. Many of us are working below staff levels, and we can only trim so much. We don't want to reduce hours for employees because then they look elsewhere.

When we have a good employee in a tight labor market condition, we want to hold onto them and do what we can to keep them working as many hours as possible.

**Are you happy with the current product and do you anticipate changes on the horizon?**

Even though we're happy, we're always looking at what kind of service we can improve upon, what kind of new technology we can offer our guests or improved security that we can introduce to protect our employees and guests.

We're lucky to have an ownership group that is always looking at how we can make things better. The next few years, it will be about making sure that the older generation and younger generation both feel comfortable in our spaces. We did a good job in our recent renovation – everything is now user friendly for the older generation but the younger generation can also connect to their own technology.

**How do you find the balance between offering the latest technology to guests while keeping the human element at the forefront?**

It's not easy, but the reality is we're pushed into not having papers at our front desk.

However, we emphasize that connection with the guest at the front door and at the front desk and in our restaurants – that interaction is so important. Our employees need to recognize our customers. We can't become machines and only communicate via text.

**How do you define the market for The Charles?**

Our market is probably more international than the rest of the city. We're next door to Harvard University, and every business leader from all over the world who visits the schools or financial institutions in Boston stays here.

**In defining luxury travel today, how important is personalization and how do you approach this at The Charles?**

It's important, and we do it in many ways. We do it through the linen we use, our bathroom amenities, the room service offerings and even in the mini bar. We review our mini bar sales on a quarterly basis to see what sells and what doesn't and that is about customizing the product for the guest that is staying with us.

We want to make sure we have direct communication with our guests to make sure what we provide is what they need and desire.

**What advice do you offer young people on how they can grow and become leaders within the industry?**

They need to be patient, as well as to invest in learning the industry – to invest in understanding the process in every discipline. The sky is the limit and they can get as far as they want to, but they have to make sure they have the patience that it takes to learn and experience all they need to know. Every day and every guest is different, and that's what we love about the industry.

**How important is it to have a close relationship with your owners?**

It's very important for the operation of the business, as well as for the hiring process. The owners commit to keeping the property in good shape and to making sure we differentiate ourselves from the competition which, in turn, makes it more exciting for candidates to join us.

We talk about this on a regular basis at The Charles, because it's a selling point. Candidates here can join a business that lets them be part of the process and learn many things.

**What is it that has made hospitality such a special industry for you?**

It's having the opportunity to meet and greet and connect with so many different people with unique backgrounds and needs. I enjoy the challenges as well. They give me the opportunity to learn how to react and plan, and meet expectations. I don't believe this experience can be found in any other industry.

**During these challenging times, how important is it for you to celebrate the wins with employees?**

It's more important now than ever. When everything is going well, we take things for granted, but when we're starting to be concerned about our level of business, we want to make sure that we're transparent with the staff and bring them into the conversation. They need to know where we stand. We don't want people to start worrying about what might be happening. The more information we share with our team, the better they and we will be. ●