



DUKES COLLECTION



An Interview with Debrah Dhugga,
Managing Director, DUKES COLLECTION

DUKES LONDON (left); DUKES DUBAI (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to joining DUKES LONDON, Debrah Dhugga was Director of Retail and Spa at hair and beauty brand ghd. Previously, she had spent four-and-a-half years as CEO of Tom's Companies, a Durham, U.K.-based hotel, restaurant, and spa group with luxurious properties including The Samling and Seaham Hall hotels. Earlier, much of her experience had been in sales and marketing, including as Director of Sales of Malmaison Hotels from 1996 to 2005. Dhugga, who holds a fellowship with the Institute of Hospitality, and was recognized as one of the top 100 U.K. females in hospitality and transport in 2012, 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 within hospitality whose mission is to bring more women leaders into the 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 BRIEFS 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 meet to create a timeless atmosphere for all guests. The property has undergone a multimillion pound refurbishment in 2017 and features stunning bedrooms that offer outstanding comfort, the legendary DUKES Bar, and the newly launched GBR (Great British Restaurant). There is also the option to experience true English style with Champagne afternoon tea in the Drawing Rooms, as well as a health club featuring an Italian marble steam room, and a modern gym with the latest Technogym equipment. Sister hotel DUKES DUBAI, located on the Palm Jumeirah, boasts an array of first class leisure facilities including an outdoor infinity pool, lazy river, beach club, DUKESY Kids Club, private beach and 14th floor indoor pool, as well as a fully equipped fitness center.

Will you discuss how the London and Dubai properties are positioned in the market?

DUKES LONDON is one of the oldest hotels in London and has been trading for 110 years as a hotel; it's a very classic luxury hotel in St. James in Mayfair. We never try to be on-trend or the cool hotel in London. We invest in service, attention to detail and guest delivery.

In Dubai, we're situated on The Palm with 566 rooms. The properties are sisters, not twins, but we're both all about service and attention to detail. Dubai has some of the most glamorous hotels in the world, but it's not really a destination that is renowned for its service delivery. Being the only British owned and operated property situated on The Palm, our core value is going to be about the British service experience.

When we were recruiting for staff, we traveled, as I didn't want all of the team to come from Dubai. I wanted fresh energy, so we've done a lot of workshops all over the world and have brought many multinational personalities into the hotel.

The hotel has seven food and beverage outlets, an outdoor infinity pool, a floating swimming pool in between the hotel towers, a beach bar, a beach side steak restaurant, a kid's club and access to our private beach.

When guests visit DUKES DUBAI, they will feel comfortable as a corporate traveler as well because the interior is very much like DUKES LONDON.

Does the size of the property in Dubai bring more challenges?

We have a strong guest relations team to be able to handle this. The length of stay in Dubai is a lot longer than that in London, so it's less transient.

It's all about training for that attention to detail. Today, technology gives us a lot of information about the guest before their arrival.

Where do you see the London market today?

It's a challenging time, although 2017 started off well. There have been a few shocks with terrorism, so people get nervous about traveling, but they have to be strong and live through this journey. We didn't get many cancellations.

We compete with areas like Paris and Milan and, if we get bad media coverage, then travelers will choose another European city, so we have to be on top of our game, stay positive and carry on.

Do you worry about oversupply in Dubai?

Dubai is a bubble and it's an architectural haven. They have the most amazing towers and luxurious hotels.

What's interesting is that occupancies are holding up at about 80 percent. Emirates is developing new flights on new routes, so there is always traffic coming into the city.

Sheikh Mohammed has a vision he will always continue to deliver and I admire him very much.

There is so much going on in Dubai at this point, and there are now repeat guests. This year Legoland and Bollywood opened, and the Asian market loves that so it attracts a further area for destination stays. We are also working toward the 2020 EXPO.

Will you market the two properties together?

Yes, we market them as DUKES COLLECTION. They're five-star luxury properties. We have several amenities that are similar at both properties so guests know they're enjoying a DUKES experience.

Are there more DUKES properties on the horizon?

The owners definitely want to grow the brand. We haven't secured another destination at the moment, but they are open to opportunities to own and operate more hotels.

DUKES is a strong ambassador brand that people know and there is a nice brand value to it. We wanted to create and develop the brand first in London.

Has your role changed?

I have to look at the vision and strategy as well as being on property, but attention to detail is key to me. My role is focused on the brand, but I will not let go of the service operations standard because that is a side of it that I enjoy very much.

Also, it's my job to ensure that the businesses work and are profitable.

Is it harder today to define true luxury?

The word "luxury" depends on what one is looking for, and it comes down to the traveler.

A young professional businessman or woman who is away from home might consider luxury a great room, fully stocked minibar, a gym to work out, SkyTV and breakfast.

For the leisure traveler, luxury is about everything being done for them – the bed turned down, the chocolate on the pillows, the slippers by the bed and being recognized upon arrival.

In today's world, people want luxury for less, so it's becoming harder for the hotelier. We have to make sure we never compromise our offering. ●