

Hospitality

Luxury in the Center of Hong Kong

An Interview with Duncan Palmer,
Managing Director, The Murray, Hong Kong



The Murray, Hong Kong (left); The Murray Suite living area (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Duncan Palmer was appointed to his current post in June 2016. Previously, with the Langham Hospitality Group as Managing Director of The Langham, London, Palmer orchestrated and managed the handover from a previous hotel management company and redeveloped and repositioned the hotel with a totally new inventory of hotel rooms and suites. During his tenure with Langham Hospitality Group, he spent four years back in Hong Kong managing The Langham, Hong Kong and was Vice President Design for the Group Worldwide. The owners then invited him to return to London to oversee the repositioning of The Langham, London. With The Savoy Hotel Group, Palmer had the exclusive pleasure of being only the sixth appointee as General Manager in over 100 years at The Connaught London. With the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group, he spent 12 years accumulatively in Macau, Manila, Bangkok and Jakarta.



Duncan Palmer

PROPERTY BRIEF The Murray, Hong Kong, A Niccolo Hotel (themurrayaniccolohotel.com), opening in early 2018, is a high-profile preservation project led by British international studio for architecture and integrated design firm Foster + Partners. Part of Hong Kong's Conserving Central Project, the hotel, which was the stand-alone Murray Building, is one of the city's most iconic landmarks. A member of Global Hotel Alliance's Ultratravel Collection, the contemporary, urban-chic sanctuary features 336 oversized rooms and suites spanning 25 floors. Other facilities include a stunning rooftop bar with breathtaking views of the central business district and the green oasis of Hong Kong Park, a series of signature restaurants and bars, as well as creative meeting and event spaces.

What makes this property so special and how will you position the property in the market?

The property itself is the first luxury hotel to open on Hong Kong Island for the past eight years, so it is a well sought after opening and one that is going to gain a tremendous amount of focus. The key fact is that it is a Conserving Central Project with the government. We are preserving this 1969 building as an iconic landmark within the center of Hong Kong.

The owners are keen to put this hotel on the map in Hong Kong as the most iconic hotel in the city. Because of its history and architectural aspects, it has a very unique standing in this marketplace.

Is there a common feel throughout the accommodations and how broad is your suite offering?

The building itself was originally a government building. The floor plates transformed very well into 336 rooms and suites. The design is one of a sophisticated, urban-chic sanctuary.

It's unique in its style and has been designed by world-renowned architects Foster + Partners, which has designed the Hong Kong International Airport and other luxury hotels around the world.

The rooms themselves are going to be a minimum of 50 square meters in size with two very large square windows overlooking Hong Kong Park and the bird sanctuary.

About 10 percent of our accommodations are suites, and we have four that range between 170 square meters to 220 square meters in size.

What is the key to being successful with the food and beverage component?

Hong Kong is a sophisticated gastronomic city and we have positioned five key restaurants and bars in this hotel.

The first one is a unique city bar off the hotel lobby, Murray Lane, which will cater to many city goers in and around the building. In addition, we have the Garden Lounge, which will predominantly serve tea but is also a great environment for evening drinks while also serving as one of the areas for breakfast.

The Tai Pan restaurant is a modern European space with a French chef, who is someone we will make famous through our work on this concept. It will feed on the urban-chic aspects of the hotel with sophisticated, yet approachable, dining.

We have also built a rooftop restaurant called The Aviary, which features dishes from the top epicurean cities around the world. It is an engaging space.

Finally, we have a Chinese restaurant called Guo Fu Lou.

Each of these outlets has its own personality. The concepts for each are carefully crafted and the gastronomic offerings are going to be as good as any other property in the city. They will each have a twist which, with the right marketing and staff, will make them wonderful platforms for the hotel.

What approach have you taken to your fitness and well-being offerings?

We offer an indoor pool and we have five spa treatment rooms, two of which are doubles. We have not encouraged outside vendors since we are a freestanding hotel, and we have no shops or offices onsite. This property is a sanctuary unto itself, so our facilities are well appointed and will offer a small collection of treatments that will be appreciated by visitors.

What type of talent have you assembled at the property?

We have attracted an array of talent from many of the luxury brands throughout different areas.

It's challenging because the best players don't always create the best team, so we've been holding team-building exercises. We need them to do their jobs, but we're looking for them to create excellent guest experiences at the same time.

People are attracted to what we're creating here, which is a contemporary, urban-chic hotel. We have focused primarily on getting people with the right attitude and those that want to connect with our sophisticated, yet engaging, style of service.

We're not just looking to put in luxury standards throughout the property, but to raise those standards through the guest interaction with the people that we've brought on board.

How critical is the focus on providing personalized guest experiences in the luxury segment?

Intuitive, personalized, engaging and experiential service will bring guests to the property and keep them coming back. It's not over-pampering the guest, but reliably providing the experience they expect.

Our staff's passion also has to come through for the guests. They have to be quite refined in their approach. Guests are paying good rates and expect a certain degree of engagement and those small touches in and around their rooms or the public areas.

Has the general manager role become more about the financial aspects as opposed to hospitality?

It's difficult to find the right balance, but it definitely requires the right team. Hotels have become more fine-tuned toward earning the right amount of money per square foot. However, we will also need to deliver intuitive service and value to be successful. ●