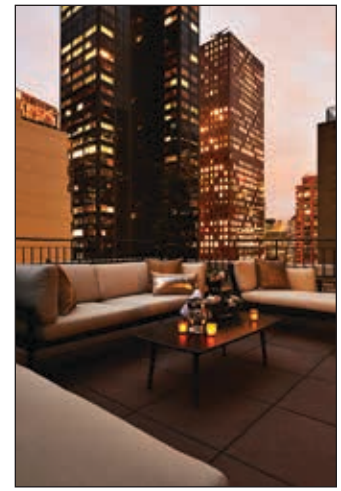




Personalized Service



An Interview with Gul Turkmenoglu,
General Manager, The Benjamin

The Benjamin exterior (left):
Suite terrace at dusk (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Gul Turkmenoglu assumed her current post in January of 2017. After beginning her career on the opening team of the Conrad Istanbul and serving in a number of management positions, Turkmenoglu was promoted to Director of Rooms at the Conrad Cairo. She then relocated to New York City to join the management team of the Waldorf-Astoria where she spent six years. Turkmenoglu also served as Hotel Manager for ONE UN New York, Assistant General Manager of The Lexington Hotel NYC and, most recently, Assistant General Manager of the Hudson New York. Turkmenoglu received her B.S. degree in Tourism & Hotel Management from Cukurova University in Turkey and her M.B.A. from New York University, Stern School of Business.



Gul Turkmenoglu

PROPERTY BRIEF Situated at the crossroads of culture and commerce, The Benjamin's (thebenjamin.com) Midtown East location makes for easy access to New York City's top attractions, including Fifth Avenue, Grand Central Terminal, MoMA, Rockefeller Center, Park Avenue businesses and more. The hotel boasts a distinctly residential feel and a large array of spacious luxuriously appointed suites, inspiring guests to consider it a more personal pied-à-terre than a hotel. The luxury hotel is widely known for its innovative science backed sleep program, offered in partnership with author and sleep medicine expert Dr. Rebecca Robbins, Ph.D., the hotel's Official Sleep Consultant. The Benjamin has recently been awarded the honor of historical landmark status. Designed by famed architect Emery Roth, this neo-Romanesque building is considered one of the premier properties of "hotel alley" – a stretch of hotels just north of Grand Central Terminal – and one of Roth's most recognizable and successful works. The hotel opened in 1927 as the Hotel Beverly and it was purchased by Denihan in 1997 and named in homage to Denihan's founder, Benjamin "Bud" Denihan, Sr. The Benjamin is also home to The National Bar & Dining Rooms, the award-winning grand café by leading culinary figure and Chef Geoffrey Zakarian.

When this role presented itself, what excited you about the opportunity?

What excited me was the hotel itself and the people. When I interviewed with the Denihan

family, I was impressed with the company's rich history. It was started by their father over 50 years ago and continues to deliver a guest-centric approach to hospitality. This resonated with me and my philosophy, as well. Also, I loved the hotel, particularly the size, because of the opportunity to truly personalize the service.

How valuable is it to have such a broad suite offering?

It's key, and we are going to focus more on it this year. We only have 209 rooms and nearly 50 percent of the prod-

uct are one-bedroom suites, most with kitchens/kitchenettes and many with terraces. It's important for the affluent travelers, families or those who want space. In New York City, there aren't many hotels with this kind of spacious product anymore. It's sometimes a challenge in building our RFPs for corporate clients as they are not often interested in pricing on the suite product. However, our mix is right and our loyal customers appreciate that.

What are the keys to being successful in food and beverage?

We have a great relationship with Geoffrey Zakarian. He really cares about the brand and it's more than just a business. Both of us work hand-in-hand to deliver unique experiences for our guests.

Is a spa offering an essential component for a luxury hotel?

It's not a must. We can still have great partnerships with local luxury spas. It's a great asset to promote to leisure, high-end guests and Federico Calde is known for his work coiffing runway models for Fendi, Valentino, Armani and Oscar De La Renta, so that is certainly attractive to those guests.

Will you describe the sleep program at The Benjamin?

We partner with Dr. Rebecca Robbins who curated a science-backed cornerstone sleep program to ensure our guests get their best night's sleep in the city that doesn't. Sleep at The Benjamin is a main event. We know our guests tend to be leaders and always on-the-go, and this program caters to this mix.

With booking windows getting shorter, is it still possible to forecast?

Even the group bookings have become short term. We were very fortunate this past year – despite the market trending down, we grew our market share.

We can forecast to short term booking windows, but we need to be aware of what is happening. The more we know, the better we get.

Does true luxury today require customization and personalization?

This trend has expanded a bit since there is now a technology component as well. Luxury customers want to be able to control things in the room.

Even with that, to be considered true luxury, the personalization component needs to be there. Service is key.

How do you make sure the technology enhances the personal touch as opposed to taking away from it?

Our team needs to come first so retaining them is important. We look after them so they can look after our guests.

They build relationships with our guests over time and the technology doesn't interfere but rather helps them serve better where possible.

Has Airbnb impacted your business?

Not necessarily. Service, among others, is a key differentiator – this is something Airbnb simply does not offer, and guests of hotels like The Benjamin require.

How valuable is it to have owners with a long-term vision and focus?

It is the key to success. It's the starting point for all strategies and the way to bring said strategies to fruition.

What advice do you give to young women about career opportunities in this industry?

For a small company, we have three female GMs, which is fantastic. It's about the passion. I don't think the GM role is gender-specific. If one wants to put in the hard work, that is what will matter.

Is the role in leading a hotel today more financial or is it still about hospitality?

It's both. To make a good decision, one needs to look at financial or statistical data, and they need to fit the hospitality into that.

Are you happy with the product today and are there changes on the horizon?

I'm happy with our product today, but we are constantly working on improvements as our guests needs evolve, especially in the suites.

Did you know at a young age that you wanted to be in hospitality?

My father was a GM and my Aunt opened the first five-star hotel in Istanbul, so it's in my family. ●