

Hospitality



A Hotel With Soul



**An Interview with Offer Nissenbaum,
Managing Director, The Peninsula Beverly Hills**

The Peninsula Beverly Hills rooftop pool (left) and entrance (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Offer Nissenbaum has held his current post since December 2007. Prior to joining Peninsula, he was Regional Vice President of Operations for Omni Hotels, based in New York City, overseeing eight properties on the East Coast. He concurrently served as Omni's corporate liaison to the Global Hotel Alliance, which includes international luxury brands Kempinski, Pan Pacific, Dusit and Leela. Nissenbaum received the coveted "Hotelier of the Year" Award from Virtuoso, the prestigious global organization of luxury travel specialists.



Offer Nissenbaum

PROPERTY BRIEF The Peninsula Beverly Hills (peninsula.com/beverlyhills) has earned the AAA Five Diamond and Forbes Five Star awards every year since 1993, one of the very few hotels in Southern California to have earned both accolades. Nestled in lush tropical gardens in the heart of Beverly Hills, the iconic luxury property features 195 elegantly-appointed rooms, including 38 suites and 17 private villas; The Belvedere, the only AAA Five Diamond-rated restaurant in Los Angeles for 19 consecutive years, The Living Room, home to the legendary Peninsula Afternoon Tea served daily, The Roof Garden for alfresco dining as well as The Peninsula Spa.

How critical is it to maintain a culture around continuously enhancing the guest experience at The Peninsula Beverly Hills?

It's something we continuously focus on. We're a hotel with soul, and it starts with the type of people we hire. We need to have individuals who have genuine care and concern for our guests' well-being, and that is not something that can be taught. We can teach the technical side of the job, but showing concern for our guests needs to come naturally from within.

Our hiring process is unique. We have a potential candidate shadow the job they're going to be doing, to give the prospective associate a sense of the responsibilities they will have in that role. This process saves us challenges down the road with people not being happy in their position.

We also have a culture that is very aware of the delicate balance of making guests feel like royalty and yet like they're at home – the two aren't mutually exclusive. It's all about comfort.

When life becomes stressful, guests expect the hotel to fulfill their needs in an anticipative and exceptionally diligent way. We understand that and have developed an organizational culture that is completely focused on the guest experience.

We focus on connecting with the guest emotionally – it's not enough to have a clean room, fast check-in, and good food. That is the norm. We need to do something unique and different to really make a difference.

Are you more focused today on hiring for personality or skills?

Almost every position in the hotel is teachable. What's not teachable is a willingness and mindfulness to go above and beyond, to put in every effort to fulfill guests' needs and preferences.

One of the biggest challenges we have is with the new generation of millennials coming into the workplace. They have expectations – they want to have balance in their lives, work regular hours, and have holidays and weekends off, but the 24/7 hotel business does not work that way.

When I first joined the industry, I would work any hours they wanted because I understood that's what it took to succeed. For some millennials, their values conflict with the labor-intensive operation we run at the hotel.

Are you happy with where the property stands today and are there changes planned for the future?

We just started our normal cycle of enhancement of the entire product. Every guest room and suite will be refreshed and renewed, with a full change of soft goods.

Most hotels do this on a six- to seven-year cycle, but we do it much more frequently.

In a market like Beverly Hills, how critical is it to have a significant suite offering?

We obviously offer a product with our Villas that few hotels in the market have. This gives us an advantage because these premium accommodations are completely confidential and private – guests can access and depart from the Villas via a separate entrance.

The Villas also give people a sense of being at home rather than at a hotel, and for those who are looking for a nontraditional, residential style experience, the Villas are unique. They are also ideal for those looking for a romantic

getaway, as each features a fireplace and some have private Jacuzzis.

I generally sell out of the suites before I sell out of guestrooms, which illustrates the high demand for suites. The type of clientele we have are independently wealthy and can afford whatever they want, so consequently they gravitate to our suites.

What is the key to being successful with a hotel restaurant when you're in such a competitive food and beverage market?

We are fortunate to do well in this regard because we have found our niche. Few restaurants in the market are similar to ours.

We also decided to take a healthier approach to our menu. We grow our own herbs and produce on the roof of the hotel, which we have had a lot of fun with and the guests love. If we can't get the best fish, for instance, we won't put it on the menu.

We offer a true dining experience where guests feel at ease to enjoy a conversation at dinner and to not have to yell over music. Last year's addition of our Belvedere Patio has also been very well received and has become popular in its own right.

Another great point of distinction is that wherever a guest wants to dine in the hotel, he or she can order off the menu of any outlet, not just the one they're sitting in. Our frame of mind is to always be thinking what is best for the guest and to work around their preferences.

Is it enough today to have a fitness room and offer healthy menu items, or do properties need to offer more of a focus on wellness?

We need to provide a spectrum of lifestyle options for guests. We have programs like yoga on the roof, running trails and guided bicycle trips, but we don't push them on anyone.

Some people are health conscious but many aren't, so we can't just assume that no guest wants to indulge while away. We need to offer a truly fantastic cheeseburger and French fries, for instance. We have healthy options available for the guests if that's what they desire.

What has made the experience working at The Peninsula Beverly Hills so special for you?

This is the longest tenure I've had with any position. I manage the property like I own it. It's a special place and I'm blessed to be working with amazing people. ●