

# Hospitality



## The Guest Experience

An Interview with Pedro Dias,  
General Manager, The Surrey



The Surrey entrance (left); an Ultra Deluxe Suite (above)

**EDITORS' NOTE** Prior to his current role, Pedro Dias was General Manager for Commune Hotels + Resorts, and W Hotels. He was also Hotel Manager for The St. Regis New York; Interim Task Force GM at W Hotels and Westin Hotels; Director of Resort Operations for Luxury Collection Resort and Rooms Division Assistant Manager for The Leading Hotels of the World. Pedro received his B.B.A. in Hotel Management from Escola de Hotelaria e Turismo do Porto.



Pedro Dias

**PROPERTY BRIEF** The Surrey ([thesurrey.com](http://thesurrey.com)) is New York City's only Relais & Châteaux hotel, owned and operated by Deniban Hospitality Group. An intimate address on the Upper East Side, it began as a townhouse to the stars of the 1920s. Its location gives cultured guests direct access to top fashion houses, restaurants, world-class art institutions and iconic landmarks, while the hotel's discreet service allows for calm personal space. The Surrey offers world-class dining by Café Boulud, the atmospheric Bar Pleiades, Cornelia Spa and a private roof garden. Lauren Rottet created its 189 exquisite salons and suites.

### Where does the New York City hospitality market stand today?

Even through the recession period, New York held up well.

Today, we are seeing a transition in business models and supply growth, as well as in consumer trends. We're seeing a blend of hotels that define themselves as lifestyle luxury boutique hotels, which is also redefining what lifestyle and luxury is or should be.

This supply growth brings challenges because it is not being followed by demand growth at the same rate in New York. These challenges force us to reimagine our business and continuously search and capture new customers. As in all things, challenges offer the unique opportunity to grow and innovate.

### Do you primarily look at your competitive set geographically?

We need to look at it from a micro-location aspect, so we look at our direct comp set in our location. However, we can't ignore the rest of the market because the increase in supply, which hasn't impacted our area specifically, is still impacting the city.

We continuously keep an eye on what our neighbors do and are experiencing as well as the overall city market-wide.

### When this opportunity presented itself, what made you feel it would be the right fit?

Compared to where I was previously, this position feels like I'm going back to my roots. I'm not a luxury-only person but this is a more defined luxury product. This property is the only Relais & Châteaux property in New York, which makes us very proud, and it has also

been highly recognized by the media.

### Are you happy with where the product currently stands?

Change is a constant and, in this business, owners and investors understand that we need to constantly refresh the product, especially with the increased newer supply.

In 2009, this was a brand-new product; eight years later, it's a product that is still in good condition but it's time to think about refreshing it.

### How important is it in a market like New York to have a significant suite offering?

A good room mix is critical for success. One of the opportunities we see to support our ADR growth is through that room mix, leveraging on the number of suites available in our portfolio.

### How challenging is it to be successful in the food and beverage segment?

We've seen the growing success of the independent restaurateurs. They have the full expertise and the creativity to come up with the right concepts because they know what the market is looking for. They create these concepts that have become increasingly more appealing.

At the same time, we have seen the constant struggle from a hotel operator perspective with the entire food and beverage operation.

I'm fully supportive of the business model that allows the experts in food and beverage to run those operations and keep their creative minds flowing around the market and consumer trends and shape their concepts to those trends.

### How critical is the spa product to a city hotel?

We have seen significant demands in this regard, not only from international clients, but also from the local clientele.

Adding a spa component to a city hotel brings a bit of the relaxing oasis look and feel into the hotel.

Spas have had their ups and downs, of course, but today the spa model can be profitable if it's done the right way. The secret to that success in my view is how the experience is created and delivered.

### With the booking windows continuing to get shorter, is long-term planning still possible?

Forecasting has become more challenging. We continue to do it every week, but 37 percent of our business in any month is booked during that month.

We have been seeing different trends overall. The online world has changed the way we do business, as has the airline world. We're forced to manage things within a much narrower booking window.

### Is the general manager role still primarily about hospitality or is the financial focus more prominent?

I grew up in a traditional hospitality environment, which was focused on the hospitality aspect.

It wasn't until I joined Starwood in Europe that I really saw a change in that dynamic. Providing guest satisfaction had to be on par with providing financial performance.

When we think about global chains, it's about keeping the balance among the metrics. The GM is ultimately the gatekeeper in maintaining that the hospitality feel is prevalent within the team and guest experience.

### How do you offer the necessary technology to guests while making sure it doesn't take away from the human touch?

The client has the choice of what is a better fit for them. I personally would not want to replace the opportunity to interact with the guest upon arrival at the desk and have a moment of connection.

Even with all the technology, millennials still appreciate building a relationship.

### What do you tell young people about building a sustainable career in the industry?

It's very important for them to understand all aspects of this business. I believe some of the millennials are too eager to get titles. My best advice is to avoid rushing things and, instead, allow themselves the time to build the necessary experience. They should strive to build a story over the course of their careers, in terms of the impact they've made. I seek out people who have stories. ●