

## Creating an Immersive Experience



The Peninsula Chicago Lobby



Z Bar outdoor terrace-

An Interview with Maria Zec,  
Regional Vice President, The Peninsula Hotels;  
General Manager, The Peninsula Chicago

**EDITORS' NOTE** Since March 2002, Maria Zec has served as General Manager of The Peninsula Chicago and assumed her current post with The Peninsula Hotels in May 2007. Prior to this, she served as Managing Director and Hotel Manager at the New York Palace Hotel. Zec holds a B.S. in business management and a B.A. in French from Purdue University.



Maria Zec

**PROPERTY BRIEF** The Peninsula Chicago ([chicago.peninsula.com](http://chicago.peninsula.com)) has been recognized as a premier property with Forbes' Five-Star and AAA Five Diamond awards since its grand opening in 2001. The property boasts 339 luxurious guest rooms and suites and offers a 15,000-square-foot spa and fitness center, 24-hour room service, a ballroom, and eight additional meeting and event rooms as well as three distinctive restaurants and Z Bar. The name "Z Bar" was chosen by the HSH Board of Directors in honor of Maria Zec, Peninsula Hotels' first-ever female general manager. The Peninsula Chicago is managed by The Peninsula Hotels which operates luxury properties throughout Asia, Europe and the United States.

### What are the keys to being a great hotel today and how do you define The Peninsula Chicago difference?

A key component to our success is being able to create an immersive experience that integrates timeless tradition with new and exciting offerings for our guests.

We often define our success by the beautiful memories we create for our guests. This starts with our compassionate employees who are genuine, considerate and happy people who take great pride in their work, going above and beyond for our guests and their co-workers at every opportunity.

Beyond offering warm and caring service, we keep our hotel immaculately maintained throughout the public space, the spa, restaurants, meeting rooms, guestrooms and suites. One of the most unique features is our in-room technology which is innovative yet very intuitive and easy for guests to use.

Our culinary offerings allow guests to experience a wide variety of exceptional cuisine in venues that are favorite spots for guests and locals alike. This year we expanded our offerings with a fabulous new rooftop bar.

### Will you discuss the culture of continuous improvement at The Peninsula Chicago and the investments made at the property to maintain its leadership position?

The Peninsula brand stands for continual reinvestment in our hotels in order to offer the most relevant and forward-thinking features, amenities and facilities. This allows us to remain market leaders and to continue to provide one of a kind experiences at our properties.

Not only do we evolve to keep our loyal guests happy, but also to provide opportunities to welcome new guests to The Peninsula. A good example of this was our conceptualization and construction of Z Bar, which opened at The Peninsula Chicago this past year. This venue has elevated the profile and awareness of the hotel and brand among the millennial community. While we love that we have been a part of families' traditions and memory-making moments for many years, we want to connect and engage those from the next generations to continue to build our legacy. This historic company has a long-term focus on addressing the needs of the local community and benefitting the world around in numerous ways.

Personalization and attention to detail are passions of our team as they focus clearly on all the details related to both our product and our service. This past year, we renovated our main Lobby restaurant to create a more contemporary look and feel, which complements the guest room renovation completed in 2016. In addition, we take great care in personalizing each guest's stay. Whether a guest is traveling for business or leisure, we focus on details to deliver their preferences and provide special moments that surprise and delight.

### You mentioned that The Peninsula Chicago recently introduced a new bar, Z Bar. Will you provide an overview of this offering?

Z Bar is a rooftop destination that celebrates the city with spectacular views of the Magnificent Mile (Michigan Avenue) including the historic Water Tower Park and the iconic John Hancock building. The bar opened June 2018 and is located six and a half floors above street level. Our goal was to create a one-of-a-kind experience featuring internationally-inspired cocktails and global cuisine, complimented by an upbeat atmosphere with curated music and a unique calendar of cultural happenings.

The creative interior has five distinctive areas including two lounges and a bar with a cityscape mural of Chicago's famous bascule bridges and a bean-shaped skylight with amazing views of the John Hancock building as well as a private salon that can accommodate up to 12 guests. In addition, the exterior terrace can accommodate 75 guests and includes a water feature in the summertime and fire pit and heat lamps for the cooler months.

### Art is an important component of the property. Will you highlight the focus on art at The Peninsula Chicago?

We maintain amazing art collections throughout our hotel including select pieces depicting Chicago's industrial and Art Deco era. Each guestroom and suite showcases an "art wall" that features a chrysanthemum flower, which is Chicago's official flower since 1966.

In addition, we are celebrating our fifth year as the official hotel sponsor for EXPO Chicago, one of the premier contemporary art fairs in the U.S. Every September we collaborate with EXPO Chicago to bring a fascinating contemporary art exhibit to the hotel.

We recently expanded our commitment to art through showcasing artists and their work in a revolving "Artist-in-Residence" program on the lobby level.

### You have led The Peninsula Chicago for a number of years. What has made the experience so special for you?

I love my job. I love the people with whom I work. I have a great team. We have guests that value what we do and we have the support from our head office.

Finally, I love developing talent. I take great pride in mentoring young managers and helping them to achieve their dreams and their potential.

### What are your key priorities for The Peninsula Chicago as you look to the future?

It is important that we evolve with the changing times and ensure we develop our products and services based on the desires and passions our customers will have in the future. We must provide the very best in terms of accommodations, cuisine, wellness and cultural experiences and constantly remain a leader within the industry.

### What advice to you offer young people interested in a career in hospitality?

My advice to young people is to be passionate in whatever industry they choose. To excel, you must work hard, take chances, be inquisitive and constantly learn. It's all about the journey. ●