

Hospitality

Timeless Elegance

An Interview with Deborah Yager Fleming,
Chief Executive Officer & Partner, Acqualina Resort & Spa



Lawns at Acqualina Resort & Spa (above); suite living area (below)

EDITORS' NOTE Deborah Yager Fleming joined Acqualina Resort & Spa in March 2004 after having served as Vice President, Sales & Marketing at Island Outpost, where she managed marketing campaigns for 12 boutique hotels, including *The Tides in Miami*. She also garnered valuable experience in New York at *Leading Hotels of the World* where she held senior management positions and implemented the design of worldwide sales strategies and innovative marketing programs.



Deborah Yager Fleming

PROPERTY BRIEF With a lushly landscaped 4.5-acre backyard of seaside bliss, world-class restaurants, curated amenities and spacious rooms and suites all with balconies and water views, Acqualina Resort & Spa (acqualinaresort.com) is at the center of Miami's Sunny Isles Beach providing an exclusive experience and an ultra-luxurious beach lifestyle. As Florida's only hotel of its kind, built open to the sea with no structural or visual barriers, Acqualina evokes a Mediterranean lifestyle just steps off the pristine sand into the Atlantic. The lush grounds are dotted with umbrellas in the resort's signature red color and lounge chairs punctuate the blue and green hues of its natural surroundings. The property is the recipient of the coveted Forbes Five Star Award and the AAA Five Diamond Award. TripAdvisor named Acqualina as the Best Beachfront Resort in the U.S. for five years in a row.

What have been the keys to Acqualina's success?

It starts with employee happiness. To maximize the long-term value of the Acqualina brand, ensuring that our team members are happy is most critical to our success. We've done that by empowering the employees to create personalized experiences with our resort guests. This has resulted in a significant amount of repeat business.

The importance of recognition and rewarding team members is such a foundation in everything that we do here. One of the things I am most proud of is that we recently launched an app called "Together," which is an employee engagement app. Approximately 85 percent of the workforce is actively

participating in it. It has been wonderful to see the engagement that is taking place with sharing of news, photos and content.

I take great pride in seeing our employees prepare and execute five-star services from a visual representation within the app. For example, we have housekeepers who are taking photos of their turndown experiences and broadcasting them not only to their co-workers within the department to see, but for all of the Acqualina team members. We have

425 team members involved in the app. It has created a spark where more people are posting and commenting and this brings a great sense of pride and inspiration.



How do you define the elements to providing a true luxury hotel experience?

It's about personalization, because what could be appealing to me may not necessarily be appealing to you. It's all about emotion. It certainly requires having a beautiful quality design and architecture and the highest-quality linens, but it's how we make you feel from an emotional perspective that is most important. That is really true luxury and it is something that has to be personalized because we are all different. Many of us appreciate a wonderful bottle of wine, but there are individuals who are avid connoisseurs of wine and then there are those who are more of a novice wine drinker. The approach has to be different and tailor made and this truly comes down to active listening. We are living, breathing individuals and any minute something could happen to enhance or change our lives so you have to be conversational and attentive in the luxury space in order to fulfill at the highest level from a service perspective.

Are you happy with the product today and what changes can guests expect from Acqualina?

I come from a place where I'm always looking at how we can further develop and improve our services. I'm very happy with the people that I'm surrounded by who support me in my quest to make it better. I'm proud of our product because it provides a timelessly elegant experience in every facet, whether you're at the beach relaxing in a lounge chair under a red umbrella, or at the front drive surrounded by beautiful Italian mosaics and flowing fountains. I have this catch-phrase that I use often, "photo ready," and it means that everything always has to be ready to be photographed.

Acqualina's design embraces classic furnishings and decor with modern elements. It's a Mediterranean style experience that exemplifies the highest standards of excellence. To achieve this, it requires a significant investment. We always want to remain relevant by developing new offerings for our guests. For example, earlier this year we launched a grand three-bedroom suite with a distinctive design and feel. We are now designing a second, three-bedroom suite, which will be ready to launch in early 2020. Together, we will be able to offer a combination six-bedroom gorgeous showcase suite.

The fact that we're a family-run and independent brand allows us to be nimble and agile and create experiences quickly. It is all about what's on the horizon and how we make what is here now even better.

What advice do you offer young people interested in building a career in the hospitality industry?

The first is to have patience. One of the most difficult things to do is self-assessment. I try to impart to our millennials that there are skill sets that one acquires through academia, but the important thing is the application and that requires time and exposure. The benefit of being at an independent brand like ours is that we embrace career development. It's about that human connection, and I do believe that what you give is what you get.

People who are goal driven and have aspirations need to put a goal post down and have a plan to reach that goal post. Once they've reached it, they need to move the post to another level and make a plan to get to the next level. ●