

Pursuing Excellence

An Interview with Erika Alexander,
Chief Lodging and Services Officer, The Americas, Marriott International



The St. Regis Aspen Resort, a Marriott International property

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to her current position leading operations across the United States, Canada, the Caribbean and Latin America for Marriott International, Erika Alexander was Area Vice President, Americas - Eastern Region, where she was responsible for 28 Marriott, JW Marriott, Marriott Conference Center and Renaissance hotels that were managed by Marriott and located in Georgia, Tennessee, Louisiana and the Carolinas. She has held a variety of positions in sales and operations and as general manager and regional vice president for both select and extended stay brands and full-service hotels.



Erika Alexander

Alexander spent several years at Marriott corporate headquarters as a brand director for Residence Inn by Marriott. During that time, she helped launch TownePlace Suites by Marriott and subsequently held the position of brand vice president. Alexander and her teams have earned many awards in the areas of sales, finance and leadership excellence, including Marriott International's Diversity and Inclusion Trailblazer Award. She was an International Women's Forum Leadership Foundation Fellow and is a member of the 2011 class of Leadership Atlanta. Alexander is active in the community and has served on several boards including Leadership Atlanta, Atlanta Children's Shelter, International Women's Forum of Georgia, The Ron Clark Academy and the executive committee for the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. Alexander graduated with a B.A. from the University of Virginia and an M.B.A. from George Mason University.

COMPANY BRIEF Marriott International, Inc. (marriott.com) is based in Bethesda, Maryland, and encompasses a portfolio of more than 7,200 properties under 30 leading brands spanning 134 countries and territories. Marriott operates and franchises hotels and licenses vacation ownership resorts around the world. The company now offers one travel and loyalty program, Marriott Bonvoy™.

How do you define what makes Marriott special and what have been the keys to Marriott's success?

I believe my tenure with Marriott is an excellent example of what makes the company special. This year marks my 30th anniversary. With the size and scale of our footprint, as you walk the halls at headquarters and in the hotels, you come across so many different people from different backgrounds. Many

of these, like me, came up through the ranks of the hotel business, working for a company that has given us the opportunity to be our best and to advance. What sets Marriott apart is our secret ingredient – our team of hardworking, everyday people from every walk of life with inspirational stories.

I grew up in a town that didn't even have a hotel. The very idea that 30 years later, I would be in the role I am, in a company like Marriott, is pretty extraordinary. There is a saying at Marriott, "If you take care of the associates, they will take care

of the customers who will continue to return." Our core values make us who we are: putting people first, pursuing excellence, embracing change, acting with integrity and serving our world. This sort of humble, hardworking philosophy at the root of our company is appealing to me.

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Will you discuss Marriott's commitment to building a diverse and inclusive workforce?

As an African American woman working for Marriott, the first thing I think of when asked about diversity and inclusion is "winning." Marriott has one of the most diverse workforces in the United States with 65 percent minorities and 54 percent women and we are deeply committed to each and every one of them. I cannot imagine a 30-year career with a company that didn't follow through on a promise.

To tackle the hardest problems as a global company, you need to have the best and the brightest talent, and a group of talented leaders is not complete without associates of various backgrounds, cultures, genders and ethnicities.

It is also critical for young leaders to see diversity in positions of importance and authority. As examples, our Chief Financial Officer is a woman, our Chief General Counsel is a woman, and our Chief Commercial Officer is a woman.

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

First, I would like to share that in the hospitality business, we get to have fun. Not only do we have fun, but we get to create joyous moments and precious memories for our guests every single day. It's extremely rewarding.

My journey into the industry began when I went to the University of Virginia for my undergraduate degree and then got a job in a Philadelphia hotel. I was supposed to go home for the holidays one year and called my mother to say, "Mom, you're going to have to excuse me, but I can't come home as there are people who have called off from work and I need to be here. If you want to see me, you're going to have to come to Philly." Like any great mom, she jumped in her car and came. She spent the overnight shifts with me, washing linen and folding clothes. My mother was literally aghast, not that she was doing that kind of work, but that this was what I was doing willingly as a hotel leader – having never shown similar interest at home..

What I learned over the course of the first five or ten years of my career is that the journey in any business starts with being responsible, leading a team, developing talent and proving to your leaders and to yourself that you have goals and will meet and exceed them. Developing a deep knowledge of the business from the inside out will place you in a good position for a solid career in this business.

In hospitality, people are at the heart of our business, and in real life, real people have real problems. You need to be flexible and adjust, and if you do, you will find great joy in working with people from those with M.B.A.s and Ph.D.s, to the moms and dads who are hustling in every small town and big city around the country that are doing the hard work of getting their kids on the school bus, then driving to a hotel and then running a restaurant, cleaning rooms, or taking care of the grounds. All are exceptionally important jobs.

Great leaders care as much about the people working in their business as about the business itself. Marriott operates exactly that way. It doesn't matter whether your passion is finance, sales, or running a restaurant, there is a home in the hotel business for you. ●