



Wellness and Sustainability



An Interview with Neil Jacobs,
Chief Executive Officer, Six Senses Hotels Resorts Spas

*Six Senses Shabarut in Israel (above);
organic garden at Six Senses Ninh Van Bay in Vietnam (left)*

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to joining Six Senses, Neil Jacobs spent five years at Starwood Capital Group as President of Global Hotel Operations where he led the group responsible for the development of two new brands – Baccarat Hotels and 1 Hotels. Previously, Jacobs spent 14 years with Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts serving as Senior Vice President Operations for Asia Pacific. He was responsible for the operation of 16 hotels throughout the region and new properties under development in China, India and the Indian Ocean. His global career included key leadership roles in Europe, Asia and the Americas. Jacobs studied hotel management at Westminster Hotel School in London, French civilization at La Sorbonne University and Italian culture and art in Florence. He is fluent in five languages.



Neil Jacobs

COMPANY BRIEF Six Senses Hotels Resorts Spas (sixsenses.com) are discovered in some of the world's most exquisite destinations. Whether cradled by dramatic mountains, perched on a vine-laden hilltop, or dipping sun-kissed feet into an opal bay, each one begins with nature getting everything just right. From its simple beginnings with a single resort in 1995, Six Senses is now recognized as a pioneer of sustainable practices, demonstrating that uncompromisingly gorgeous hideaways can live in harmony with local communities and ecosystems. Today, the hospitality management company upholds this same ethos operating in 21 countries under the brand names Six Senses, Evason and Six Senses Spas.

What excited you about the opportunity to lead Six Senses and made you feel it was the right fit?

I've worked with some amazing people over the years from Issy Sharp to Barry Sternlicht to other iconic people. Interestingly, early-on in time at Starwood Capital, we looked at trying to buy Six Senses. I knew the brand extremely well having run Asia for Four Seasons since Six Senses originated in Asia. I always felt that it was a brand that had some good vision and was doing certain things before its time, especially when it came to sustainability. There was always that intrigue.

Aside from running Asia-Pacific for Four Seasons, I also looked after spa and wellness globally for the Four Seasons brand. Wellness has always been of great interest to me personally.

I met with the former president of Four Seasons, Wolf Hengst, who sat on the board of Six Senses. He said that there was a move from one of the investors to buy the company, backed by a private equity group in New York called Pegasus Capital. I spent time with them and was really encouraged by their approach to investment. What was exciting to them about Six Senses were the sustainability and the wellness platforms. The intention was to transform Six Senses from being a small resort group, 95 percent of which was in Southeast Asia, and to create a global platform. We wanted to continue to honor the values that were instilled in the company, but to grow it geographically and ramp up what we were doing in wellness and sustainability.

All of that was super exciting to me. It took about six months to close the deal, and I moved back to Asia to run things and to start driving the execution.

How deeply ingrained is wellness and sustainability as part of the Six Senses culture?

It's completely ingrained in the culture. Wellness and sustainability drive every major decision we make in the company and its growth, even to the extent that we would potentially turn down deals that others would consider really good if the ownership group behind those deals doesn't resonate with us or believe in these two platforms. We rely on our owners' ability to execute and on their integrity. A lot of people call us because we're kind of a hot commodity right now, but not everybody believes in what we do. If you don't believe in what we do, we know it's going to end up in a bad place because we have certain brand standards that dictate what we need to be doing in the realms of sustainability and wellness. They're not negotiable because that's who we are.

We have a WIT (Wellness Innovation Team) with about six people who spend 50 percent of their time creating content around wellness and keeping us ahead of the curve.

In the past three to four years, everybody brandishes the wellness term around. It's so overused. It has to be ingrained into the culture to do it properly.

We focus on wellness not only for our guests, but also for our employees who we refer to as hosts. It took us two years to develop a very exciting host wellness program that we call Mission Wellness that defines how we look after our employees from a wellness perspective.

Spa, to us, is an important component of wellness. Spa, alone, is not wellness. For us, it's mind, body, soul and spirit. It's also food and sleep. It's the whole thing that really dictates a healthy lifestyle. We're not evangelical nor do we stick wellness down anyone's throat. We're not a destination spa company. We want to be wider in our approach and have options so our guests can choose the amount of wellness that they want. We get a lot of people coming to our properties that really don't want to do anything. They just want to lie on the beach or do very little. That's okay. We structure our programming in a very layered way so you can choose as little or as much as you want.

Sustainability is part of the heritage of Six Senses. We look at sustainability from many angles. There is clearly the element related to how we build hotels. Whether it's fabrics or off-gassing and BOC levels and light quality and mechanical, electrical systems, all of these things we agonize about relative to how properties are built today. Any new project that we do, as part of the contract owners have to allocate half a percent of total revenue for sustainable activities.

From the perspective of self-sustainability, we have something called Earth Lab in every property which now showcases what we are doing. Basically, it's taken the back of the house where all of this work used to go on and puts it in at the front of house. The one thing we didn't do very well before is talk about it and show people exactly what we were doing.

For 20 years, we have not had any imported water at our properties. Occasionally, we get guests that are upset about that, but we explain it to them. We tell them why it is a part of who we are as a brand. We have stated publicly that by 2022, we will be plastic-free completely in our resorts. ●