

Believe in Travel

An Interview with Michelle Woodley, President, Preferred Hotels & Resorts

EDITORS' NOTE As President of Preferred Hotels & Resorts, Michelle Woodley oversees multiple departments across the company including sales, marketing, IT, revenue management, and customer relations. During more than 15 years with the company, she has held various leadership positions with cross-functional responsibilities including Senior Vice President of Global Marketing Strategy, Senior Vice President of Distribution & Revenue Management, and Executive Vice President, the role she held prior to her promotion to President in January 2018. In 2018, several months after she was named President, she received recognition by Hotel Management as one of the most influential women in hospitality. Before joining Preferred Hotels & Resorts in 2002, Woodley spent five years as Vice President of Distribution for Swissôtel and Raffles Hotels & Resorts, charged with overseeing the strategic direction and operations of the company's electronic distribution and database solutions. She held various senior positions in operations, marketing, and distribution with Swissôtel from 1990 to 1997. She has been an active board member in industry organizations throughout her career. She is currently on the Americas Board of Directors of the Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMIAI), and also serves on the Board of the HSMIAI Foundation. She served two terms as president and two terms as vice president of the Hotel Electronic Distribution Network Association (HEDNA), and she was a founding member of the Open Travel Alliance (OTA) and served two terms on their board of directors as treasurer. Woodley is a graduate of the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration.



Michelle Woodley

Resorts Integrated Quality Assurance Program. The I Prefer™ hotel rewards program, Preferred Residences™, Preferred Pride™, and Preferred Golf™ offer valuable benefits for travelers seeking a unique experience.

Will you highlight the history of Preferred Hotels & Resorts and how the business has evolved?

Preferred was founded in 1968 as a small hotel association made up of 12 North American hoteliers who provided similar guest services and quality standards and could serve as a mutual referral organization. Today, the company is owned and operated by the Ueberroth family and is the parent company for six brands: Preferred Hotels & Resorts, Beyond Green, Historic Hotels of America, Historic Hotels Worldwide, PTG Consulting, and Beyond Green Travel, representing more than 1,100 hotels, resorts, and residences across 80 countries, in addition to a global portfolio of

destinations such as Suzhou and Nanjing in China; Guadalajara, Puerto Vallarta, and Baja California in Mexico; and Honduras.

How do you define the Preferred culture?

As something we are proud of and work to enhance every day, we have created a culture that celebrates individuality and diversity across the board – from the teams at our member hotels to our global team of associates. We champion our differences and see them as a strength in our business.

We think of Preferred as a global family, and our values serve to inspire and engineer potential to co-create brighter futures for our associates and our hotel partners. This is fundamental to our brand promise and ideology, Believe in Travel, which gives direction to our culture and is something we have really leaned into over the last few years. I see our ideology demonstrated every day through our teams and their engagement, as well as touchpoints with hotel members and industry partners. We encourage everyone to explore their passions and, most importantly, to have fun.



The Vault cocktail bar at INIALA HARBOUR HOUSE & RESIDENCES in Malta

COMPANY BRIEF Preferred Hotels & Resorts (preferredhotels.com) is the world's largest independent hotel brand, representing more than 650 distinctive hotels, resorts, residences, and unique hotel groups across 80 countries. Through its five global collections, Preferred Hotels & Resorts connects discerning travelers to a luxury hospitality experience that meets their life and style preferences for each occasion. Every property within the portfolio maintains the high-quality standards and unparalleled service levels required by the Preferred Hotels &

How did Preferred adapt its business to address the challenges caused by the global pandemic?

Like most companies, we took a closer look at how to be more efficient and closely examined all our processes. We streamlined, cross-trained, and upskilled our associates so that they could continue to provide timely and effective service to our hoteliers and maintain excellent relationships with travel buyers. During the most challenging times, we worked even more closely with our member hotels and supported them by developing action plans based on their individual needs, and worked extensively with our regional leaders to conduct town halls that engaged hoteliers and supplied them with actionable information on financial loans, health and sanitation, distribution, employee wellness, and market trends. We took a similar approach with travel buyers across all segments, including group, corporate, and leisure, to ensure that we were up to date with regional travel trends to keep the Preferred family of brands top-of-mind.

Collaboration and communication were the keys to making it through the pandemic, ensuring that we actively listened to voices within our community so that we could collectively manage our way through the pandemic together. We continue to do much of this now, which is a positive to come from the pandemic.

Where do you see the greatest opportunities for growth for Preferred Hotel Group?

The most significant growth opportunities for Preferred Hotel Group are to continue to increase the footprint of our four hotel brands, namely Preferred Hotels & Resorts, Beyond Green, Historic Hotels of America, and Historic Hotels Worldwide; developing the reach and global membership of our loyalty program *I Prefer* Hotel Rewards; and expanding in-house capabilities for our award-winning consulting brand, PTG Consulting, which serves the tourism and hospitality industry's most dynamic brands, destinations, and hotels.

Our largest hotel brand is Preferred Hotels & Resorts and so a lot of efforts are focused on the strategic growth and retention of the global portfolio which comprises more than 650 hotels, resorts, and residences in approximately 80 countries. Our top priority is to welcome independent hotels that share our quality standards and commitment to offering the finest independent hotel experiences. In 2021, we welcomed more than 40 new properties to the brand portfolio, and so far, in 2022, we have added another 30 new member hotels, including La Casa de La Playa in Mexico, INIALA HARBOUR HOUSE & RESIDENCES in Malta, and Virgin Hotels Dallas in Texas. In recent months, we have also helped to launch brand new hotels such as Sommerro in Oslo, Hotel Per La in California, The Fullerton Ocean Park Hotel Hong Kong, and The Wall Street Hotel in New York City. Hotel owners are turning to Preferred as they view us as less restrictive and a valuable alternative to what may typically be found with a hard brand.

Our loyalty program, *I Prefer* Hotel Rewards, continues to evolve globally as the largest points-based loyalty program for independent hotels with over 4.5 million members today. Over the last 18 months, we have rolled out program enhancements to appeal to members, including the introduction of our first ever *I Prefer* Gift Cards. I am excited to see the momentum behind this program as we continue to invest and expand to drive bookings to our valued hotels.

Another growth area for us is our consulting brand – PTG Consulting. This brand provides strategic solutions and services to destination and hotel clients, such as strategic planning, travel trade representation, revenue for hire, sales representation, public relations, and social media, to name just a few. We leverage our experience in the industry and our global network to drive and support their success and we continue to invest in growing this area of our business as demand for consultancy services increases.

How is Preferred focusing on sustainability?

We launched our sustainable hotel brand, Beyond Green, in April 2021 to address the deepening importance of sustainable luxury travel. The portfolio currently consists of 26 properties with each member hotel subject to a rigorous selection process to ensure that their offering is genuinely sustainable and sets the standards for others who want to follow. Preferred Hotel Group also has its core social responsibility program, GIFTTS, which stands for Great Initiatives for Today's and Tomorrow's Society. The program was introduced in 2006 to platform Preferred Hotel Group's corporate social responsibility initiatives and to support the environmental and socially beneficial work taking place globally at our member hotels.

Through the GIFTTS program, we have formed long-standing philanthropic partnerships with organizations such as Wine to Water, ECPAT, NOW, and Clean the World. We have a much stricter travel policy and offset our team's carbon footprint for necessary air travel by making charitable donations to ClimateCare. We also provide guidance and best practices to the independently operated member hotels within the Preferred Hotels & Resorts portfolio that are seeking ways to improve their sustainability footprint.

Will you highlight your role as president of Preferred Hotels & Resorts and how you focus your efforts?

My role as president is to ensure that our company is continually connecting the dots between our commercial, back-of-house, and regional teams to ensure that everything we do provides value to our hotels and clients. I am in contact with associates across the globe as well as hoteliers and travel buyers daily and spend a lot of time listening to and synthesizing our clients' needs with our actions.

You joined Preferred in 2002. What has made the experience so special for you over the past 20 years?

Over the past two decades we have seen great successes for the brand as it continues

to develop; it is rewarding to be a part of a company that keeps progressing. Since joining Preferred Hotel Group, I have been privileged to see Preferred Hotels & Resorts become the world's largest independent hotel brand; the addition of Historic Hotels of America and Historic Hotels Worldwide to our family of brands; the launch of our sustainable hotel brand Beyond Green; and the development of new lines of business like PTG Consulting. From a personal perspective, no two days are the same. Each day I strive to learn something new or teach something to someone else. I love what I do and am fortunate to do it for a company and in an industry where I am passionate about the work and surrounded by talented people. I understand the responsibility I have in leading a team and do not take any of it for granted.

Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women to grow and lead in the hotel business?

There are definitely more opportunities. When I first started my career in hospitality in the early 1990s, I was the only woman on the executive team, and I knew of just two female general managers for a portfolio of 32 hotels. Today, we are fortunate enough to effect change in our industry. Through the Preferred Hotels & Resorts brand, we are honored to work with women leaders such as Sheila Johnson, CEO of Salamander Resorts, and Sally Beck, General Manager at Royal Lancaster, London, to name a few. At Preferred Hotel Group, over 40 percent of our Executive Team are women, including the Chief Executive Officer, President, and Chief Revenue Officer.

Although we see more women taking on leadership roles in hospitality, there is still work to be done. Diversity of thought and approach is vital to a prosperous workplace. By having women and men in top management, a valuable mix of perspectives in collaboration, communication style, and change management are enabled which helps a company make well-rounded decisions. Women should look to successful people of either gender in their lives as role models to help develop their own sense of self and reach their potential.

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

I have a few pieces of advice. First, you are entering the hospitality industry – which, by definition, has the mission of receiving and hosting guests. Whether you are headed down the path of operations, finance, or marketing, do not forget to always be the consummate host. Second, go into every meeting to learn something new. Even if you do not think the subject is interesting or relevant, there is always something to be learned. Next, ask questions – especially of your customers. Whenever possible, do it in person. Their insights are what will help you build your business. Finally, the hospitality business offers numerous career opportunities and is one of the most borderless industries. It is rewarding every single day – enjoy it and have fun. ●