

Intertwined With New York City's Vibrant History

An Interview with Sofia Vandaele, Regional Director of Operations, Luxury and Lifestyle, New York City and General Manager, InterContinental New York Barclay

EDITORS' NOTE Sofia Vandaele launched her career in her native country of Belgium and held numerous sales and marketing roles working at properties including Sheraton Hotels Brussels and Starwood Hotels Central London. She continued to advance her career with managerial positions in competitive markets including Sheraton Belgravia Hotel (London, United Kingdom); W New York, The Court & The Tuscany (New York City); W New York – Downtown (New York City) and The London NYC. Prior to The Barclay, Vandaele served as General Manager at Hilton Paris Opera (Paris), where she led a \$50 million renovation at the 268-room full-service hotel. Presently General Manager of The Barclay since 2018, Vandaele leads a team of 400 staff for the flagship luxury property. A hospitality veteran with 25+ years of experience, Vandaele serves on numerous boards including Hotel Association of New York City – Board of Directors and Executive Committee member (2018); New York Tourism and Conventions – Board of Directors and Executive Committee member (2020); and IHG Americas DE&I Board Member (2019).



Sofia Vandaele

with the city's electric history since. Originally part of Grand Central Terminal's urban design plan, the hotel has remained intertwined with New York City's vibrant history for nearly 100 years. As the centennial celebration approaches, Barclay's Journey to 100 is highlighting stories of the hotel and its guests, sharing cherished memories and historic events. Evolving with the times, The Barclay has undergone spectacular renovations and technological enhancements throughout the years but has not lost

its historical luster.

The property draws guests from all around the globe and is located off elegant Park Avenue, in the heart of midtown Manhattan's East Side near the city's most exclusive Fifth Avenue and Madison Avenue shopping, dining, Broadway theaters, museums, Rockefeller Center, Times Square, Central Park, Grand Central and the United Nations headquarters.

We often say, The Barclay is close to everything and not in the madness of anything – easy to get around town from here for whichever reason you visit The Big Apple.

How valuable is it to have such a strong suite product and do you see this as a differentiator for InterContinental New York Barclay?

InterContinental New York Barclay boasts 704 well-appointed guestrooms, 32 of which are suites. These include our B-Suite Collection, an array of luxurious accommodations with a residential feel. The crown jewel of the collection is The Harold S. Vanderbilt Penthouse. It's truly the most majestic suite on Park Avenue and has played host to politicians, celebrities, and other dignitaries. The suite is 2,700 square feet and includes an oversized living space with floor-to-ceiling windows, two bedrooms, a gym, and a private 1,300 square foot terrace with unobstructed views of the Chrysler Building. The suite has been the location for award winning movies

PROPERTY BRIEF Built in 1926, the classic, yet contemporary InterContinental New York Barclay (icbarclay.com) has completed an extensive renovation and is welcoming guests with a heightened level of personalized service, residential warmth and luxury, and a vigorous Sustainable Hospitality program. The completely redesigned property boasts 704 well-appointed guestrooms, including 32 suites and an opulent Presidential Suite, as well as a luxurious Harold S. Vanderbilt Penthouse Suite; The Parlour, featuring a selection of fine, crafted spirits; and more than 20,000 square feet of flexible function spaces. Two elegant ballrooms serve as premium venues for memorable New York weddings, benefits, and galas, affirming The Barclay's position as the hotel of choice for the business, diplomatic, cultural, and social circles.

Will you provide an overview of InterContinental New York Barclay and how the property is positioned in the market?

InterContinental New York Barclay opened its doors in 1926 and has been intertwined



The terrace of The Harold S. Vanderbilt Penthouse boasts an incredible view of the city, including the Chrysler Building



InterContinental New York Barclay's bar and restaurant, The Parlour, is a perfect intimate hideaway within the lobby

and shows including *Billions* and *Succession*. It's the ultimate New York City suite and is an absolute differentiator for InterContinental New York Barclay.

How has InterContinental New York Barclay approached its restaurant/food and beverage offering, and what are the keys to being successful in this part of the business?

We offer The Parlour Bar & Restaurant, which is a nod to the hotel's 1920s origin evoking the spirit and the glamour of old New York. The food and beverages at The Parlour celebrate the city and the hotel's history and culture, focusing on seasonality and leaning into local and sustainable ingredients, many of which are sourced right outside of the city. The property welcomes beehives to the rooftop each spring and our chefs harvest honey alongside herbs grown on site for use in our cocktails menus, a differentiator from other New York City hotel restaurants. While The Parlour and our Club InterContinental both serve delicious food and drinks, our bartenders, servers, and other staff are the key to being successful. The level of intuitive service is unmatched.

Will you discuss InterContinental New York Barclay's focus on offering personalized service and a customized guest experience?

InterContinental New York Barclay customizes the guest experience in a number of ways. For example, Perle, a digital concierge who personifies our text messaging services offers one-click high touch service to guests, providing information on everything from the best places to dine out in the city to our various on-property offerings. Perle is named in honor of Perle Mesta, one of our most famous guests,

and is our beloved virtual hostess. Additionally, guests can peruse our online amenity category, picking and choosing which in-room amenities are right for them during their stay with us. We also recognize how incredibly important it is to have in-person interaction and have a dedicated guest relations and concierge team at the ready to help with any needs and wants. This team is focused on providing incredible occasions to our guests – from helping pull off the perfect birthday surprise to executing a beautiful anniversary dinner – and no detail is spared. InterContinental Hotels & Resorts also offers brand-wide initiatives for our guests as well. For example, we, along with the InterContinental brand, have a partnership with Timeshifter, a jet lag app that uses the latest circadian science to adjust to a new time zone.

How critical is it for InterContinental New York Barclay to build a diverse and inclusive workforce to mirror the diversity of the guests it serves?

It is absolutely critical for InterContinental New York Barclay and for IHG Hotels & Resorts. The industry itself still has a way to go, but it's wonderful to see it becoming more diverse and inclusive overall. I personally sit on the DEI board for IHG Hotels & Resorts Americas and make a daily effort to encourage a culture of support, inclusion and respect, valuing each and every associate, regardless of department and title. We have implemented "Journey to Tomorrow," as part of IHG's brand-wide initiative, that includes yearly goals that ladder up to a variety of important factors, including diversity, equity, and inclusion. Journey to Tomorrow champions a diverse workforce where team members of all cultures share ideas, support one another, and, in turn,

contribute to making a positive impact on each other's day-to-day.

How do you define the role of the general manager and what are the keys to being effective in the role?

It's difficult to clearly define the day-to-day of a general manager as we wear many different hats. No two days are the same, which makes this job incredibly exciting, but not without its challenges. I have three key pillars of responsibilities as a general manager, which are work colleagues, hotel guests, and property stakeholders – which includes ownership, hotel competitors, and the community which we service and operate in. I believe the key to being effective in this role is to be an open, honest, and inclusive leader, regardless of the situation. Growing up in Belgium in a hospitality environment (of my parents restaurant) and in a destination with a unique culture – a culture of compromise, for example – shaped me by providing me with certain personality tools and traits – understanding, adaptability, empathy, etc. Enforcing authority and control does not make a great, or even a good, general manager. An effective general manager listens, learns, and then leads – in my case, again, it's the guests, colleagues and stakeholders that impact me and vice versa. I also believe that it is pertinent to focus and celebrate the small victories and joys, otherwise it's very easy to get caught up in the negative minutiae that can impact the day-to-day.

Did you know at an early age that you wanted to pursue a career in the hospitality industry, and what has made the industry so special for you?

I was drawn to the hospitality industry from a young age, growing up in Belgium, and I loved interacting with different personalities and being of service. My parents had a restaurant where I experienced hospitality in some shape or form my entire life. I seemed to have "Barclay Service" instilled in me from the beginning. I then studied hotel management at university, which solidified my desire of making hospitality my chosen career path, and began my initial sales and marketing career with Starwood Hotels & Resorts (now part of Marriott International) in Brussels and quickly worked my way up to Hotel Manager just a short few years after working with Starwood. I then joined the Sheraton Belgravia team as the Hotel Manager, which catapulted my career trajectory in hospitality management – from London, to New York, Paris and back to New York City.

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

Meet as many people and experience as many places as possible. Say yes to as many opportunities as you can. You never know what will impact you positively in the future. Channel your passion – both ROI and ROE (Return on Effort) are incredibly important and make a big difference in building a career. Finally, focus and refocus regularly – stay clear on what you are striving towards and your goals at hand. This sometimes requires you to tweak your lens, like a camera, and retool your path forward. ●