

For The Independently Minded

An Interview with Kenan Simmons, Senior Vice President, Americas, Small Luxury Hotels of the World



Kenan Simmons

EDITORS' NOTE Kenan Simmons is the Senior Vice President, Americas, for Small Luxury Hotels of the World. He is responsible for leading the sales, marketing, development, and owner relations strategy for the Americas region. He is focused on ensuring member hotels maximize results from the Americas market as well as building the brand portfolio in the region. His career spans over three decades in the luxury hospitality sector with a strong focus on design-driven independent luxury hotels which pay homage to their location and provide unique experiences for global travelers. Prior to joining Small Luxury Hotels of the World, Simmons spent 17 years with Leading Hotels of the World as Vice President – Americas, responsible for sales to the

travel trade, corporate and group markets in the U.S.A, Canada, Mexico and Latin America. Simmons started his career at Trusthouse Forte Hotels in various operations and sales roles. His career spans 20+ years in the industry also holding various positions with Rosewood Hotels and Manchester Hospitality.

Will you discuss your career journey?

My career in hospitality has spanned more than three decades. I started my journey with Trusthouse Forte Hotels, working across various operations and sales roles, which gave me a strong foundation and understanding of the industry. From there, I held roles with Rosewood Hotels before joining Leading Hotels of the World, where I spent 17 years as Vice President, Americas, overseeing sales across the travel trade, corporate, and group markets. I later joined Manchester Hospitality, supporting the Grand Del Mar in San Diego, before making the move to Small Luxury Hotels of the World. Over the past 11 years at SLH, I've led our U.S. team overseeing our operations in the Americas, our largest global source market, while driving the continued growth of our portfolio across the region.



The Inn at Rancho Santa Fe in Santa Fe, California



ONE GT Grand Cayman in George Town, Grand Cayman

Throughout my career, I've been fortunate to work with some of the world's leading independent luxury hotels, and I've always been drawn to properties with a strong sense of place and a unique story to tell.

What led to your interest in the hospitality industry?

I started out as an accountant in New York, but it didn't take long for me to realize I wanted something more dynamic. That led me to an Assistant Front Office Manager role at The Westbury Hotel on Madison Avenue and it completely changed the course of my career. I was fortunate to work for an exceptional General Manager, Stefan Simkovics, who encouraged me to learn every aspect of the business and gave me opportunities to grow. That's where I discovered my passion for hospitality. After three years at the hotel, I moved to Trusthouse Forte's Americas Regional Office, and my career continued to evolve from there.

How do you define Small Luxury Hotels of The World's mission?

Our mission is simple and truly is what we say in our name: we champion small, luxury, independent hotels worldwide. At its core, what we do at SLH is bring together conscientious guests with the best boutique luxury hotels and share the stories of the independently-minded hoteliers behind them.

Will you highlight your role and areas of focus?

I oversee sales, marketing, development, and owner relations for the region. My role is focused on helping our member hotels maximize opportunities with SLH globally, and as a result, exposure. A big part of my role which still excites me every day is building strong relationships with our owners and fostering a community among our hoteliers, which we know they appreciate.

With our team, I also grow our portfolio across the Americas. We seek out the most characterful independent luxury hotels and have the pleasure to meet visionary hoteliers doing something different. With a portfolio that focuses on diversity, the world truly is our oyster. Some new additions from the last six months include coastal retreats like Sansara Surf and Yoga Resort, Casana Hotel in Brazil and La Coralina Island House in Panama, the nature-driven escape of Puerto Valle Hotel de Esteros in Argentina and the contemporary coastal charm of The Bower Coronado in California. We're also continuing to expand across the Caribbean, welcoming new openings such as One GT in the Cayman Islands and new destinations to come soon.

What have been the keys to the strength and leadership of Small Luxury Hotels of The World?

I could speak to an array of different factors here, but I'll keep it to three key strengths. First, we truly do seek out the best, luxury independent boutique hotels. The strength of the brand and the portfolio is dependent on the curation of this by our expert team and our 35-year strong track record of championing small, independent, luxury hotels. Luxury looks different to every traveler and will look different in any SLH hotel you visit, which is the point. But what unites any SLH hotel is that they must align to the core values of the brand – are they relevant, independent, characterful and inviting. We've recently grown to more than 700 hotels in 100+ countries, which has been driven by demand from travelers looking for intimate escapes, hoteliers seeking the recognition we provide, and guests buying into a currency of trust with SLH as a brand. This is only possible because our values remain strong. More than half of the portfolio is in Europe but there has been a lot of growth in APAC and the Americas, which is exciting to see resonate really well with our guests, too.

Second, the global exposure we offer hotel members is second to none from sales to marketing and communications across multiple global markets – we help independent properties share meaningful stories on a global stage and, ultimately, generate bookings and revenue. I'd like to highlight our exclusive and strategic partnership with Hilton here as well. It's a partnership that allows us to introduce Hilton Honors members to SLH hotels while they retain their full independence. It's been a great success for us and our hotels; it's nearly doubled our number of bookings as a result, without compromising our values or those of our hoteliers.

Finally, we have remained at the forefront of the evolving luxury travel landscape not just as followers but as leaders, more than just anticipating how travelers' expectations of luxury continue to change but shaping what this can look like beyond traditional definitions as well. For example, our Considerate Collection was launched five years ago and celebrates hotels leading the way with intention across sustainability and regenerative hospitality. Our Wellbeing Collection, launched in 2025, is another example and highlights properties that go beyond the spa and prioritize holistic wellbeing and meaningful guest experiences. As we celebrate 35 years, we're proud of our heritage, but we're not standing still.

Will you provide an overview of Small Luxury Hotels of the World's presence in the Americas?

We have a diverse portfolio across the Americas, with 111 independent luxury hotels throughout the region, from iconic city hotels to remote ranches and resort destinations. Focusing on North America, one property I was especially excited to welcome recently was The Inn at Rancho Santa Fe. Being based in the San Diego area, it's a hotel I know well and an iconic property in Southern California. This year we've also welcomed our first property in Palm Springs, La Serena Villas, an adults-only hotel with 18 Spanish-style villas that reflects the character and lifestyle of the destination.



La Coralina Island House in Bocas del Toro, Panama



The Refinery Hotel on West 38th Street in New York City

The diversity of the portfolio is paramount. Whether it's vineyard-driven luxury at Carneros Resort and Spa in Napa Valley – a member of SLH's Finest Collection, or the industrial heritage and creative energy of The Refinery Hotel in New York City, every hotel tells its own story. Malliouhana Resort in Anguilla captures intimate Caribbean luxury through a strong sense of place and local connection, while Appellation Healdsburg celebrates Sonoma's food, wine, and agricultural heritage, combining the vision of Michelin-starred chef Charlie Palmer and luxury hospitality veteran Christopher Hunsberger.

The Americas has always been an incredibly important market for SLH and is our largest source market worldwide, so it's a great pleasure to be leading our efforts and expanding our presence here year-over-year.

How do you define the characteristics of a true luxury hotel experience?

A true luxury hotel experience is defined by personalization, authenticity, and the ability to create meaningful moments that resonate with each individual guest. A great example of this was my experience at Calala Island in Nicaragua, where I was able to go fishing with the local staff. After the expedition, we brought our catch back to the property where the resort's Michelin-starred chef created a meal from it. It wasn't a traditional interpretation of luxury, and it may not be everyone's definition of it, but it was an incredibly personal experience that created a lasting memory – and that's what true luxury is about. It's about creating thoughtful, bespoke moments that connect guests with a place and its people in a meaningful way.

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

My advice to anyone interested in pursuing a career in hospitality is to stay curious about the world, be open to different cultures, remain adaptable, and never underestimate the impact of the small details. The ability to anticipate needs, solve problems, and make people feel valued is what creates memorable guest experiences.

I've been fortunate to spend the majority of my career in this industry and have had the opportunity to see the world, meet incredible people, and build lifelong relationships along the way. I remember a client once telling me over lunch at a very high-end New York restaurant, "You may not make a million dollars in hospitality, but there will be many times you feel like a millionaire." I've always thought that was true. When you work in luxury hospitality, you're exposed to experiences, cultures, and people in a way that's hard to find in any other industry. ●