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## It's A Great *Pleasure*

Luxury hotels reinterpret  
the select experience



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# It's A Great *Pleasure*

In a realm where distinctive is the norm, luxury hotels continually reinterpret the guest experience

By Nina Lemke



**W**hat if you chose a different hotel for your next business trip? Someplace where an impeccable staff anticipates your every need and provides those touches that delight your senses.

A hotel that's unique, indigenous and wholly memorable.

What if you arrive at your meetings each day feeling confident, successful, relaxed and pampered? You entertain your clients at the perfect local restaurant or meet with your team in an atmosphere of elegance and relaxation. And imagine you come home from the trip feeling energized instead of overworked and underappreciated.

What if a successful outcome could be accomplished because you took a leap into luxury?

Veteran business travelers are accustomed to the suite upgrades and concierge privileges that come with their frequent traveler status. But there is a place, above the typical concierge level, where some find accommodations that excel and the difference is more than just thread count and down pillows.

## Small Hotels, Big Experiences

From a technical perspective, there are six tiers of hotel product; economy, midscale, upper midscale, upscale, upper upscale and finally, the luxury tier. Each tier has a specific set of standards from food service

to property amenities; from staffing models to public space use. Every tier caters to their core guest and travelers choose their hotel based on their specific needs for a particular trip. The luxury tier may be the natural choice of celebrities and the well-to-do, but it's also the choice of business travelers when the occasion calls for distinction.

"There are many and various factors that go into delivering a 'luxury' hotel product," explains Bob Van Ness, executive vice president of Americas, Preferred Hotel Group. "Luxury is created when variables like fine service, the physical aspects of the property, amenities and ambiance are carefully executed at a very high quality and highly personal level."

With over 650 hotels worldwide Preferred Hotel Group represents a collection of independent hotels, resorts and luxury residences located in both city center and destination locations.

For Paul Kerr, CEO of Small Luxury Hotels of the World, luxury is all about choice. "At SLH we give our customers the choice to book that is most convenient for them," he explains. "They have the freedom to choose when they want to arrive, when they want to eat – even if it's breakfast at 2 PM by the pool. That is luxury to me. Previously luxury meant fluffy white robes and room service, but that has changed drastically. Nobody wants to have the same experience as another guest – it's neither special nor memorable." True to their name, Small Luxury Hotels of the World, SLH, has 520 hotels in 70 countries with an average size of just 50 rooms.

Both PHG and SLH offer unique collections of hotels that are independently owned. "We have a dedicated development team who is constantly scouting emerging destinations, places where SLH is not represented where current hotels or new builds would be a good fit for our brand," explains Kerr. "The selection and inspection process is rigorous. Final approval is done by me, personally and the board of SLH." Only five percent of the hotels that they consider actually make it into the SLH portfolio.

**"Nobody wants to have the same experience as another guest — it doesn't feel special nor is it memorable"**

"To join SLH, the hotel must be the best of the best in the area and independent. It must offer high standards of excellence and reflect its local surroundings and culture. We're all about small hotels and big experiences."

PHG has a similar vetting process and works closely with their owners and managers to truly develop an independent culture and deliver authentic luxury hospitality. "Our member properties continuously introduce travelers to a new twist on the luxury experience. Whether in Boston or in Beijing, travelers can count on our hotels to be indigenous and unique."

There are service and staff standards to be considered a luxury or 5-star hotel including, among other things, a high staff to guest ratio, 24-hour room service, multiple dining outlets, a concierge and valet. The physical property requirements are less standardized so selection process, inspections and audits must be done personally. "At SLH, we don't have a set

of standard amenities that all hotels are required to have. For example, it wouldn't make sense in Fiji to have a door person because in Fiji, some hotels don't even have doors."

There are luxury chains with recognizable names such as Four Seasons, Waldorf-Astoria and Fairmont. Large, multi-brand hotel chains also offer products in the luxury tier. Marriott International offers multiple choices in luxury lodging including JW Marriott, BVLGARI Hotels and Resorts and the Autograph Collection which features independently owned hotels that can tap in to Marriott's resources and operational expertise.

One of the most recognizable names in luxury hotels is Ritz-Carlton, which also falls under the Marriott umbrella. Service is the hallmark of a true luxury experience, and 'Puttin' on the Ritz' has become almost synonymous with care and comfort of guests. As the hotel's credo puts it: "The

Ritz-Carlton experience enlivens the senses, instills well-being, and fulfills even the unexpressed wishes



and needs of our guests." And their motto, "We are Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen" is legendary in the hospitality industry.

### A Rare and Ineffable Quality

Whether part of an independent collection or a brand within a brand, what is it about the experience that sets it apart from any other hotel? "It's the anticipation of the guest's needs and personalized service," explains an inspector with Five Diamond Hospitality. "From the moment you arrive, the experience is seamless."

You can describe a hotel building; the décor, the art and the grounds, but trying to describe the intangible feeling of staying in a luxury hotel is difficult unless you've shared that experience.

If you're unfamiliar with it, here's the kind of hospitality you can expect: You give

floor, a room on this level is a wise upgrade as these accommodations can enhance your stay immeasurably. Club floor guests can anticipate early check-in and late checkout, rooms with extra amenities, and, in most cases, a lounge with complimentary food, beverage, business services and other perks. A place to gather the team, discuss the wins of the day and create a plan of attack for tomorrow.

Let the feeling of success drive success.

### Luxury Bargain Hunting

Most business travelers, guided by their company travel mandate, stay within the midscale to perhaps the upscale tier. Depending on the market, some five diamond hotels play in the negotiated corporate rate arena. However, for most business travelers and executives, luxury brands, particularly the small, independent

and welcoming, that is easy to get around, that has friendly, knowledgeable staff to assist you when you need it and has excellent food, whether dining in your room, in the restaurant or poolside."

For Kerr, the physical attributes of the property are tantamount to the service level; "I tend to favor hotels on the water because I enjoy traveling on my boat. I also enjoy hotels with a gym, preferably one with a view so I can look out over a beautiful vista when I'm breaking a sweat rather than in some gloomy basement that's been converted to house exercise equipment."

Hotels in every tier do their best to take care of their guests while staying within the expected price point for their product. From the roadside motel to the conference hotel in the city center, the hospitality industry is in business to serve their guests.

Brands are developed based on guest feedback and traveler needs. In every tier, hotels are going through significant changes, refreshes and updates today as the typical business traveler profile transitions to a younger demographic with different expectations and requirements of their lodging choice.

The core guest for a luxury brand hotel isn't over-the-top, suite-trashing celebrities you read about in the press. "I could describe them by profession, such as the entrepreneur, the financial planner, the business executive, the real estate developer or the hotel owner. But it's not the profession, executive rank or even the net worth that defines our core guest," notes Van Ness. "It's much more about their sense of adventure, desire for new experiences, personal confidence and their appreciation of fine service."

Despite what the non-traveling public thinks, business travel is far from glamorous. Away from home and family, trying to answer e-mails on an iPhone or tablet, stuck in the middle seat on a crowded flight; standing in line to check in to the hotel after a hot, traffic-delayed shuttle ride from the airport. Business travel can be a grind so here's a question...

What if you chose a different

experience?

What if, when you arrive at the hotel, you feel like you've arrived? **BT**

"It's not the profession, rank or even net worth that defines our core guest. It's much more about their sense of adventure"

your name one time and from then on, you are introduced to each staff member along the way as if you were the only guest in the hotel. They anticipate your needs and requests. If you're there for a wedding, for instance, your tuxedo will need to be pressed and your shoes shined. No need to ask. Women staying in a luxury brand are treated to spa quality toiletries, amenities, service and special touches that are distinct from even the upscale brand they may have experienced.

If you're there on business, they may anticipate your need for transportation and have made arrangements pending your approval. They ensure you are connected to the hotel concierge who can literally make your stay.

For business travelers, having access to a spectacular concierge, one that can make anything happen for you, is a benefit worth considering. "The concierge at a luxury property can make the difference between a good trip and a wildly successful one. Their job is to make you look good," the inspector says. More than just a resource for making restaurant reservations, the hotel concierge can be a critical partner in your business success.

In addition to the concierge, if the property offers a hotel "club"

hotels, aren't offered on their corporate booking tool.

There are, however, opportunities to enjoy a luxury stay at a rate that doesn't raise the exception flag on your expense report – if you know where to look. Some of the most beautiful hotels in the world are located in areas that are considered weekend destinations and may welcome business travelers who can fill their rooms during their slower mid-week. Trading the convenience of your standard lodging choice for the luxury service and experience of a five-star hotel might be well worth a little extra travel time and incremental expense.

Possibly for business but definitely for incentive or leisure, Las Vegas has one of the largest selections of luxury hotels in the world and offers travelers a great value on the five-star experience.

Veterans of luxury hotels agree that travelers today are looking for the new and different. PHG's Van Ness describes his favorite hotel as, "One that is upscale yet comfortable

