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COMMAND AND CONTROL

Anthony Ross has only been with Preferred Hotels & Resorts for slightly more than a year, but he's already got the company running like a smooth, well-oiled machine

Text by **Raewyn Koh**
Photos courtesy of **Preferred Hotels & Resorts**

Armed with over 25 years of experience, Anthony Ross is no stranger to the international hospitality industry. This includes a stint as Vice President for Marco Polo Hotels, where he developed a new luxury hotel brand. Prior to Marco Polo Hotels, Ross held appointments for Swire Hotels, Pan Pacific and Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group. His extensive experience also encompasses the management of independent hotels, including The Sentosa Resort and Spa in Singapore.

As Executive Vice President of Asia Pacific, Middle East and Africa (APMEA), Ross has big shoes to fill, as he has taken over previous Vice President Ananya Narayan's position. Narayan was responsible for establishing the company's Hong Kong office, growing the region's membership from 13 to 47 members in three years.

But this doesn't daunt Ross. The collected man has a clear vision ahead of him and a strategy comparable to that of an army general's. And like any general, one needs to understand and accept the weaknesses even in the strongest brigade. Ross identified Asia as being one of the powerhouses of global outbound travel in recent years and attributed this to the fast-growing popularity of Low Cost Carriers (LCCs). "[LCCs] have greatly enhanced connectivity within the Asia Pacific



region, and major airlines [are] fighting to stay in competition with attractive deals for popular destinations,” Ross commented. It’s not just airlines that are affected – the booking windows for accommodation are becoming shorter with the prevalence of online and mobile booking channels.

This posed a challenge to Preferred Hotels & Resorts as they sought to appeal directly to the consumer by making hotel search an effortless and intuitive process. Their website, PreferredHotels.com, now

offers more than 650 independent luxury hotels and infinite luxury hotel experiences on one channel. For the consumer, choosing a hotel has been streamlined and consumers are able to choose their own idea of personal luxury by setting preferences for style, price point and location.

Ross is also quick to recognise business opportunities that not only benefit Preferred Hotels & Resorts but its growing clientele as well. His plans for the future include a focus on China

where he aims to expand the portfolio developed in Beijing to other first and second tier cities, as well growing other markets in the Asia region.

We delve into the perceptive insights of Ross and his plans to change the hotel reservation industry.

What are the travel trends of Asian countries currently? How does Preferred aim to meet such client demands?

From a hotel owner’s perspective, many are now re-evaluating the substantial costs and dilution of control over their assets (i.e. the retention of their unique brand identity and style of hospitality service) that they are subject to when they consider signing up with chain hotels. Preferred Hotels & Resorts fills in this gap by providing the brand endorsement, international connectivity, sales and marketing support of hard brands, but at a fraction of the cost. This allows hotel owners to retain their asset’s brand identity, but subject to an internal evaluation system, thereby ensuring consistency in levels of product offerings and service standards for hotels guests.

We have 30 Sales offices around the globe and more than 65 sales specialists that cover every major market segment. We also have brand level partnerships with leading TMCs, Frequent Flyer Programs and Alliance Partners around



1. The ART Hotel in Denver offers unique art-curated accommodations
 2. The Capitol Hotel Tokyo provides a tranquil setting with sophisticated Japanese tastes
 3. The South Beach in Singapore is one of Preferred’s newest members

EXPERT

the world that offer value-added benefits to all our 650 hotel members worldwide.

What future trends does Preferred predict in Asia Pacific?

The rise of the Independent Hotels in Asia Pacific in the next 3 to 5 years. Business and leisure travellers are becoming more receptive to the unique experiences that independent hotels or small hotel groups offer.

How does Preferred set themselves apart as an industry leader?

Our iPrefer Rewards Program is the world's first loyalty program that rewards travellers with points for choosing the independent hotel experience. With iPrefer, travellers no longer have to choose between the unique perspective of an independent hotel experience and the appeal of a points-fueled loyalty program. The program provides the best of both worlds.

Unlike the constantly changing earning-and-redemption structure of the points programs from the chains, iPrefer presents a simple and flexible model that allows the traveller to dictate where, when, and for what they want to redeem their points. This structure stands out as an attractive alternative to the common "points-for-rooms-only" model.

Any milestones of Preferred that you would like to highlight?

Last year, the company entered its 10th year of private ownership and leadership by the Ueberroth family, with Lindsey Ueberroth as President and CEO. In March this year, the company rebranded to Preferred Hotels & Resorts and positioned the name as the master brand with five distinct hotel collections – Legend, LVX, Lifestyle, Connect and Preferred



1. The group of hotels under Preferred include the opulent Palazzo Versace in Dubai
2. Ross advocates authentic travel experiences in independent hotels like The Fullerton Bay Hotel
3. The lavish lobby of the Discovery Primea in Manila

Residences. The new brand architecture is designed to help consumers identify which member hotel is going to provide them with the two ultimate luxuries – comfort and convenience – in a fashion that meets their life and style preferences for that occasion.

What's lacking in the Asia-Pacific hospitality industry? What changes would you like to see or pioneer?

Currently, the hospitality landscape in Asia Pacific is still dominated by chain hotels, who are now coming into the independent hotel space, launching new brands that appear to cater to independent hotels. But all of these new "independent" brands are really just another cog of the franchise chain.

Travellers today are looking for authentic and memorable experiences, where travel, either for business or pleasure, is becoming more aspirational, and luxury is defined by personal life and style preference at any given time. Asia Pacific destinations have a natural affinity to provide top-notch hospitality products and services – delivering the authenticity of a destination – featuring the unique characteristics of specific cultures within their own brand of hospitality. This integration of brand identity and culture gives independent hotels a timeless quality that will stand the test of time and evolution of travel trends.

Preferred Hotels & Resorts has been representing and partnering independent hotels for nearly 50 years, and we want to continue to grow this market segment by engaging with like-minded independent hotel brands in the region, and provide them a strong support system so that they can compete in the international arena, at a fraction of the cost.

What are Preferred's expansion plans for the future? Which markets are of top priority to Preferred and why?

Preferred Hotels & Resorts continues to strategically build our portfolio of hotels around the region, and invest in resources to ensure that our member hotels have the same access to the international market as do the chain brands. We are committed to growing to more than 1,000 hotels in over 100 countries. This goal isn't just about quantity of hotels, but about the right hotels in the right locations. This will ensure our guests can stay in the hotel of their choice whether for business or pleasure anywhere in the world. China continues to be one of our top priorities for growth; as well as markets like South Korea, Vietnam and Indonesia.

