

LUXURY

TRAVEL ADVISOR

www.luxurytraveladvisor.com

BECOMING BELMOND

John Scott builds
new brand with
iconic portfolio

DESTINATIONS

South Africa Wine Country
Paris' New Look
Florida Keys for Families

SPECIAL

Ultra Luxury Summit!

CRUISE

River Suites

Radical Personalization

Luxury Travel Advisor held a roundtable with top general managers within the **Preferred Hotel Group** earlier this year in New York in conjunction with their annual meeting. Joining us at The Mark Hotel, which kindly hosted us, were **Bruno Chiaruttini**, L'Hotel du Collectionneur in Paris; **Michael Davern**, The K Club in Kildare, Ireland; **Christopher Gould**, The Atlantic Hotel & Spa, Fort Lauderdale, FL; **Philip Kendall**, The Carneros Inn in Napa Valley, CA; **Fergal O'Connell**, The Fitzwilliam Hotel in Dublin, Ireland and **Rene Zimmer**, Finca Cortesin Hotel Golf & Spa in Marbella, Spain. Following is a condensed version of our discussion, where we shared luxury travel insights.

Ruthanne Terrero, *Luxury Travel Advisor*

What is happening in your regions that is having an impact on your business? If you have new hotels opening up in your area, what are you doing to keep up, remain fresh?

Christopher Gould, The Atlantic Hotel & Spa: We have a new Conrad hotel opening up next door to us this year and we

welcome the growth of the destination, but it really makes us focus on our game. As the destination rises, we will rise too, but we want to be at the top. It really gives us motivation to focus and be the marquee property for the destination.

Fergal O'Connell, The Fitzwilliam Hotel: People come to Ireland because they want to experience

the culture. Inevitably, there will be an Irish connection with people coming from the U.S. They will have ancestors who came to the States years ago and they want to retrace their steps and combine that with perhaps a golfing trip, or with something else. What we have seen in the last two years is multigenerational trips, so grandma, sons

and daughters, and then grandkids are traveling more so than ever, which is obviously challenging for a hotel that's been open 15 years, because the rooms don't lend themselves to that; but we've got to adapt.

U.S. travel to Ireland has been very strong over the last two years; particularly last year, the U.S. was just phenomenal, and at the luxury end, it has been very, very strong. Connectivity, particularly between the East Coast and Ireland, had been very strong. We now have connectivity into San Francisco as well and that's going to open up the whole West Coast.

Bruno Chiaruttini, L'Hotel du Collectionneur: Paris has had a lot of hotels closing for refurbishment in the past few years and there's a lot of new inventory coming on as well. In the very upscale category there's a lot of

SURMISING THE LUXURY SCENE: Fergal O'Connell, The Fitzwilliam Hotel; Bruno Chiaruttini, L'Hotel du Collectionneur; Philip Kendall, The Carneros Inn; and Ruthanne Terrero, *Luxury Travel Advisor*.



competition; we're talking about an average rate of €1,000 a night.

We had big changes at the end of 2012—a change of name (from Hilton Arc de Triomphe Paris), so a change of brand, and a change of strategy. We invested about €200,000 just in training in 2013 and we're ready to do more in 2014. We went from a four-star to a five-star hotel. It's the largest five-star hotel in France, so it's a big challenge. We have seen while moving from four-star to five-star that the guest doesn't have the time and the patience, so we need to deliver the promise that we make. That's what we we're going to concentrate on in 2014.

Rene Zimmer, Finca Cortesin: About 90 percent of our staff is local from Andalusia and for us what's very important is staff training. As a fairly new property, our resort offers the top luxury [in the area]. The staff is very important, because we want them as natural as possible. I never want to have a stiff approach to guests from the staff side. They want a really natural person who can speak the language.

We have six restaurants and golf is very big for us. You have to pack in a lot of amenities for the guest who is paying high rates. Sometimes, as an operator, we don't know what more to offer because we have free Wi-Fi, the fresh flowers. It's expected all over the world, so it's the attention to detail and to the service. Having staff that can anticipate guest needs before arrival is a big thing for me at the moment.

The human market is, I think, the biggest thing in our business.

ABOVE: Fergal O'Connell, The Fitzwilliam Hotel and Bruno Chiaruttini, L'Hotel du Collectionneur.

RIGHT: Christopher Gould, The Atlantic Resort & Spa; Michael Davern, The K Club; and Rene Zimmer, Finca Cortesin.

You can have the best resort, but if you don't provide the service and you don't have this person smiling at you and speaking in your language, then everything breaks. Gastronomy is also a big point. We have six restaurants for our 67-suite hotel, so when we run on full speed, we have a lot of local people coming in as well.

Ruthanne Terrero, Luxury Travel Advisor: How are you keeping up with the demands of the affluent traveler?

Bruno Chiaruttini, L'Hotel du Collectionneur: The main difference between a four- and five-star hotel at the end of the day is the staff, the attention and the experience. So we are focusing more on the experience than on the product. By renewing most of the staff, especially the head of the department, we are hiring people who have known what luxury means, so having some hotels closing is an opportunity to hire good people. We're also going to change our chef as well.

Christopher Gould, The Atlantic Hotel & Spa: The greatest luxury is having somebody who's very intelligent, motivated and well connected curate your experience and add value beyond the interior design and the amenities in the hotel. We've embarked on a mission of radical personalization for our guest experience. We have a very long length of stay that we've maintained with a high staff-to-guest room ratio: two staff to every guest room.



We've amplified our concierge services. They lead all guest-facing staff on a mission to find out as much as we can about each of our guests. With 124 rooms and suites, it's not daunting for us to apply that level of focus, but it shows in guest comments and their willingness and desire to come back and pay well for that pleasure. Our approach is that it's not always about the marquee, super-expensive experiences; it might be just a simple visit to learn paddle-boarding or something like that. Our team, led by our concierge, doesn't just gather information; they cultivate relationships with local suppliers so that we can ask for things that aren't available to the general public. We identify suppliers that we want to have relationships with and invite them in and say, "We want to have an even better relationship with you and these are the types of things that we may want to ask you for. We may want after-hours access, we may want to be able to come out to the property and perform a service." In the hospitality business, we celebrate specialization and customization and that true luxury experience.

Philip Kendall, The Carneros Inn: Christopher, I loved your term, "radical personalization." It's very interesting. Your staff has got to be able to connect with these people. It's being able to speak to them about something that's interesting, and being able to be completely aware of what's



going on your property and your area. The luxury traveler certainly understands that. They see it in so many different venues. You go to the grocery store you like because the clerks don't talk to each other while they're checking you out, right? They talk to you. The luxury traveler has to believe that you have their best interest at heart, and it's not that difficult to convince them of that if everybody is doing what they're supposed to be doing.

Bruno Chiaruttini, L'Hotel du Collectionneur: Simplicity is a luxury nowadays. Sometimes, we want to give our guest a lot because you think that giving a lot means that you offer so many things and that makes it luxury. Actually responding to what the customer wants is where you make the difference.

Fergal O'Connell, The Fitzwilliam Hotel: An important thing for us is giving our staff the confidence to do things. It's as much about the people that you're going to meet when you arrive as it is about the hotel product. We have photographs of our concierge team and our front desk team. When I'm presenting to travel agencies, I show them photographs and say, "Your clients are going to meet these people when they come to my hotel." That gives them a sense of, "Okay, I can relate, this is the type of product and these are the people."

It's not unlike what Christopher was saying; it's radical personalization. We will find out as much as we possibly can about the guest prior to their arrival. We



ABOVE: Philip Kendall, The Carneros Inn; and Ruthanne Terrero, *Luxury Travel Advisor*.

ABOVE, RIGHT: Rene Zimmer, Finca Cortesin.

will do everything that's moral and legal. Being a 140-room hotel, it's not that hard; as I told the director of sales, if an agent makes a booking through reservations and we see that, we will actually call the agent back and say, "Oh, thank you for a reservation, is there anything we can do?"

We also have a premiere product in the hotel, which is the 12 best rooms hand-picked by me for the deluxe premium guest.

Michael Davern, The K Club:

We've seen more demand for suites and adjoining rooms and multigenerational family experiences, so we've opened a private residence, which is 10 rooms on a private park overlooking the golf course. It has its own swimming pool and cinema and a spa area. It's like a boutique luxury hotel with dedicated staff; it also has access to our concierge and our entire team. We can do fishing, golf and falconry on the property. We've also expanded a lot of our leisure facilities.

Ruthanne Terrero, *Luxury Travel Advisor*:

They come from beautiful homes and they want the same thing when they travel.

Philip Kendall, The Carneros Inn:

It's funny that you say that, because I was just having lunch with some people and they said, "Everyone wants a hotel to be

different, but when they get there, they also want it to feel like home." Suites certainly give you that opportunity. We also have villas and rooms. Everything at our hotel is individual. So everyone has their own backyard regardless of the room type they're in, but we also have a fractional product that we are bringing back into our inventory, so we're increasing our suites.

Ruthanne Terrero, *Luxury Travel Advisor*:

With people coming from these pretty amazing homes, how do you keep up with your room product? That's got to be a challenge, I'm sure.

Fergal O'Connell, The Fitzwilliam Hotel:

You've just got to keep on top of that; there's no excuse for the physical product, it's got to be exceptional. At our level of business, that's an assumption that that's going to be there. The extra bits that they're looking for are the personalized service and the sense of wow. It's getting slightly more difficult to wow these people because they're used to staying in so many other hotels. You've got to keep on top of it.

Ruthanne Terrero, *Luxury Travel Advisor*:

Does being an independent hotel give you an edge?

Christopher Gould, The Atlantic Hotel & Spa:

It gives us a sense of authenticity, a sense of place that's special and unique and that should be treasured and valued highly. What you have around the table here are hotels that

are very special to the location they're in. In Napa Valley, on the right bank of Paris, in the heart of Dublin, you have unique experiences that express the best of those destinations. We are really focusing on trying to do that for our unique destination in South Florida. To have the freedom to not be bound by an absolute brand standard on choosing the carpet and what's going to be on the breakfast menu is nice. But, what the travel professional gets is the assurance that if we're a member of Preferred Hotel Group, there are very stringent quality guidelines, but you're also going to get something that's special and unique when you travel there.

Michael Davern, The K Club:

People come to Ireland because they like the people, they like the scenery, they like the heritage and the culture. That's critical to the whole experience. There are a lot of business hotels that might be branded, but that's not what the high-end traveler who's looking for the experience of a vacation is looking for. With us, it means that we're not restricted in any way and we can provide exactly what we need to, whether it's a wonderful art collection, or great history and culture around the building. It is really, really authentic.

And you're not even trying to make it authentic. You support your local producers. You deliberately have Waterford glass chandeliers because that's what people want to see in their Irish

luxury experience. If you have Irish ownership, Irish management, Irish staff and everything about it is just Ireland, you're delivering this fantastic luxury experience.

Rene Zimmer, Finca Cortesin:

Being an independent hotel brings us back to our roots. As a general manager, you are in the lobby, you are speaking directly to the guests, and then you report directly to the owner. If you want to change something, you don't have to check the rules and what the procedure is. As independent hotels, we are personalized, we are authentic and we have a special character. We try to employ mostly local staff. That's an advantage. Personally, I think it's very beautiful to work for an independent hotel.

Bruno Chiaruttini, L'Hotel du Collectionneur:

I very much agree with Rene. As an independent hotelier, you have the best of both worlds. You have the advantage of being part of Preferred Hotel Group, which gives great comfort to guests, but it also gives you the flexibility to create a very peaceful, unique experience.

Michael Davern, The K Club: In many ways, as the general manager, you're setting the tone. Not a head office, not a corporate office, you. It gives you great flexibility.

Ruthanne Terrero, *Luxury Travel Advisor*:

It's great to be on your own, but isn't it a bit stressful because you're the one making the decisions?

Philip Kendall, The Carneros Inn:

Oh, being independent is not for the faint of heart, but it is challenging and fun. You set the tone. So, you're responsible for your successes, but you're responsible and accountable for your own business. From that point of view, it doesn't suit everybody, but I think that's the joy.

—Ruthanne Terrero