



HOMING INSTINCT

Literally born into the travel industry, Lindsey Ueberroth, CEO of family-owned Preferred Hotels & Resorts group, wants to make each trip and hotel stay an immersive and unique experience.

STORY ANNEMARIE EVANS

PHOTOGRAPHY: GARETH GAY

Sitting in a suite at the Upper House in Pacific Place, Lindsey Ueberroth looks over the water of Victoria Harbour, which she's loved since she was a child.

"Sometimes I get asked if I could live somewhere else in the world, and Hong Kong would be at the top of the list. I love being on the water, and there's such an energy to this city that I find wonderful and engaging," says the American chief executive of the Chicago-based Preferred Hotels & Resorts.

Her father, John, spent his career in travel and hotels, while her mother, Gail, was an air stewardess. There's a family joke that part of the reason travel is in Ueberroth's DNA was because she was literally born into the industry, as her mother was pregnant with her while flying for TWA, the major US airline that merged with American Airlines in 2001.

"I travel all the time. We have 30 offices around the globe. I probably get around to half of them each year. My family has been coming to Asia for a long time. I came here as a child, so it's a mixture of memories," says Ueberroth, who was recently in Hong Kong, her seventh stop on a 10-city Asian tour.

TREMENDOUS GROWTH

The Ueberroths took over the Preferred Hotel Group 11 years ago. Since then, it has grown exponentially as a global collection of independent luxury hotels, currently with 650 members worldwide. The group recently switched from a multi-brand portfolio to one master marque, Preferred Hotels & Resorts.

"When we first bought the company, we only had seven hotels in Asia," Ueberroth says. "And now, a decade later, we have 110 hotels. China, in particular, has grown in the past two years. We added 11 [member hotels] last year alone and now have 24. Our goal is to get up to 40 in the next two to three years. Our goal is to have the right hotels in the right destinations."

THE CHINESE TRAVELLER

Ueberroth notes that the Chinese traveller has changed in the past few years, so it is important to anchor the Preferred brand on the mainland to promote familiarity and loyalty. Eschewing large tour groups, the middle-class Chinese traveller is



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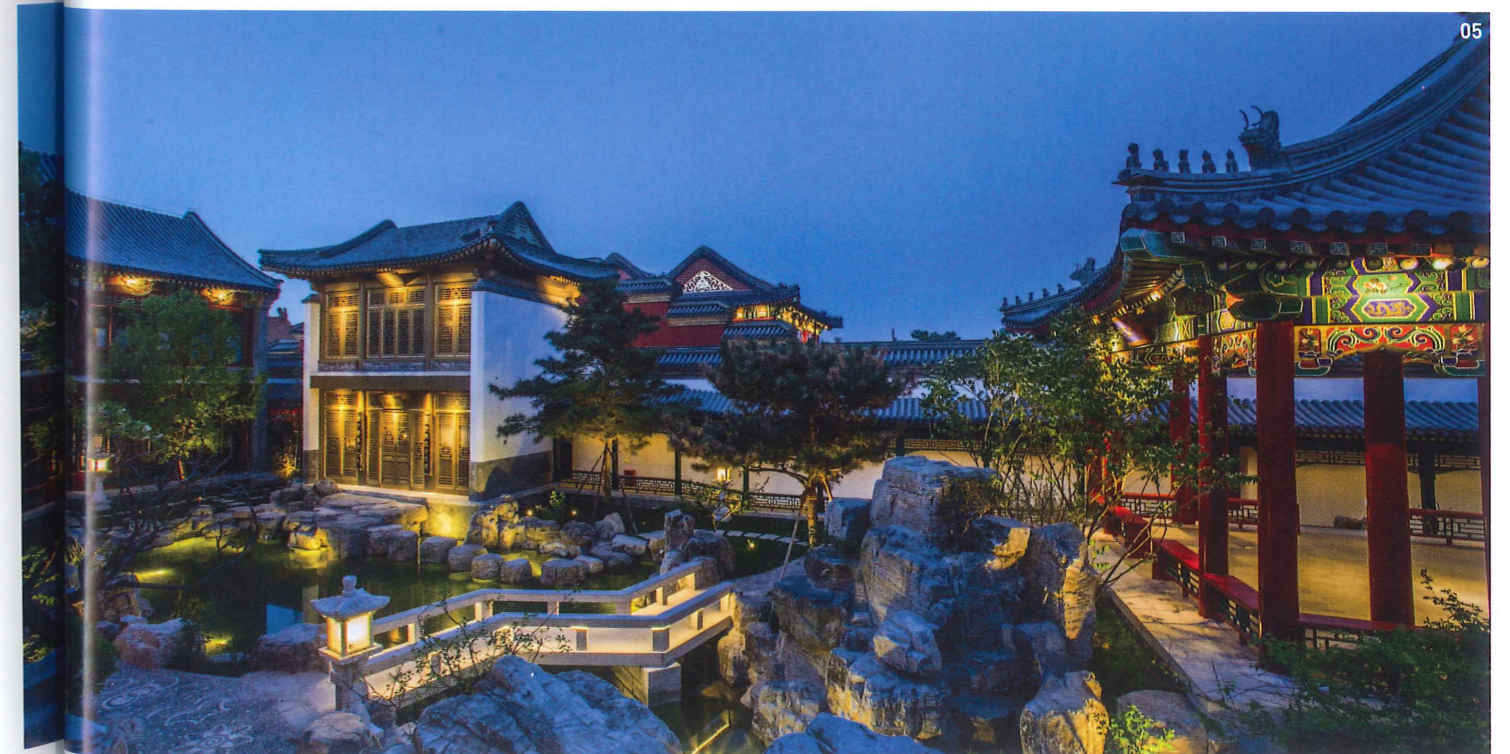
discerning and knowledgeable, oftentimes using social media to research prospective destinations, she says.

"They want one-of-a-kind experiences, authentic experiences. They want to be considered knowledgeable and well-travelled," she adds.

The concept of luxury has also changed, and means different things to different people. "The concept of stars and ratings – it's not globally consistent. Luxury is now a very personal experience. If I'm travelling with my family, it's very different to if I'm travelling for business or for a romantic getaway," Ueberroth says. "Some will define luxury as getting dressed up to go to a Michelin-starred restaurant. But most people are pretty happy being in their favourite pair of jeans going to their local restaurant where people know them. So it's a much more intuitive way of positioning our hotels and our brand."

LEFT PAGE
Lindsey Ueberroth

01 Lindsey Ueberroth (second from right), president and CEO of the company, with her father, John, who is executive chairman, her mother, Gail, vice-chairman and chief creative officer, and her brother, Casey, chief marketing officer.



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Which is why Preferred has, as part of its recent rebranding, ensured that each of its properties has been aligned with one of five collections – Legend, LVX, Lifestyle, Connect and Preferred Residences.

IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES

According to Ueberroth, Preferred portfolio hotels geared towards families must deliver on the experience and pass a certification process. “We ask them: What age groups do you cater to? What activities do you have? Do you have certified babysitters? We took it to a whole other level,” she says.

Preferred has also created packages for sports

events. So for a golf tournament, it will provide access to tickets, a chance to walk the course and other connected activities. “They are immersive experiences,” Ueberroth says. “They are not cookie cutter – every one is different.”

Luring the affluent Asian traveller is sometimes all about brand awareness on social media, she adds. “I just joined WeChat. You’re going to see a lot more of us promoting the brand through that channel.”

Preferred Hotels & Resorts is a family business – her father is chairman of the company and her mother, Gail, and brother Casey are also executives for different sections. “We’re four different personalities

02 Fullerton Bay Hotel in Singapore

03 Hotel Napoleon in Paris

04 Deluxe guest room of Montage Beverly Hills

05 LV Garden Beijing

so we don’t see eye to eye on everything,” she says. “But the biggest challenge is, when you’re together, not spending the whole time talking about business. That takes discipline!”

EARLY LESSONS

Ueberroth says she was chronically shy as a child. Public speaking still isn’t her cup of tea, but she’s learned how to be confident along the way. And, thanks to lessons from the family, she learned early to keep up with business news and not to turn up to meetings bereft of pen and paper.

“The biggest turning point for me was launching the Preferred Boutique brand in 2006,” Ueberroth says. “It’s one of the brands we’ve now retired.”

She concedes that coming up with an idea, implementing it, watching it grow and then taking a step back is tough. “But it’s helped me in doing the rebranding,” she says.

It’s been a feat for the family to get 650 hotels to embrace its vision. Ueberroth was also keen to have a loyalty programme that was easy for the consumer to engage in. As an “I Prefer” member, the customer is entitled to early check-in, late checkout and other perks. Ueberroth has even considered tampering with the usually sedate minibar to give loyal customer a wide range of goodies. “I’m living my personal passion. My job isn’t a job. I feel very lucky.”