

LEADERS

January, February, March 2017

Volume 40 Number 1

LEADING CHANGE

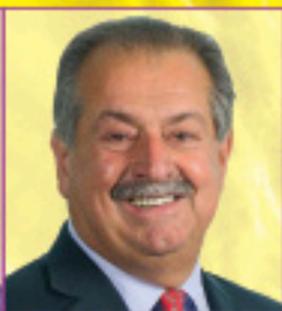
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J.W. MARRIOTT, JR.



Fulfilling a Vision

An Interview with David W. Garrett,
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer,
Garrett Hotel Consultants LLC



The Ivy Hotel in Baltimore tea room (left); and courtyard (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Over the years, David Garrett has been very active in Relais & Châteaux, serving as the President of Relais & Châteaux North America for many years, as well as a member of the Board of Directors of Relais & Châteaux International.

COMPANY BRIEF *GHC (garrethotelconsultants.com) brings decades of luxury hotel experience to the task of creating small, jewel-like hotels and inns out of existing properties that need preservation and a new lease on life. They work with clients to create something truly exceptional out of their property, be it an historic estate or a languishing B&B, a cattle ranch or a castle by the sea. GHC has created and operated some of the finest hotels in the world and has access to the finest talent in the field, from architects and interior designers to world-class managers and chefs. They offer a range of services, and help clients create something both extraordinary and profitable.*



David W. Garrett

Will you talk about how your experience evolved into the creation of Garrett Hotel Consultants?

I was originally in the investment banking business. My wife and I went to a small hotel, The Point, in Upstate New York and it was so exquisite that I decided to buy it. We fell into hospitality because of a passion for the property itself but, being a businessperson, I was able to put a serious long-term plan together for the property. Five years after we bought the hotel, The Point was rated one of the top hotels in the country and for 10 years in a row, the number-one hotel on the continent.

It became incredibly profitable, so I took that model and began to think about whether there was more demand for this type of hotel than we had recognized. I then met someone at The Point who wanted to own a hotel and we created Twin Farms in Vermont. We put it together and hired a staff, I set a goal for the hotel to beat out The Point, and 10 years ago, it was also ranked number one.

Along the way, we continued to look at other properties and developed more hotels – each of them with the vision of absolute excellence. We recognized that there was a niche within the industry that no one was addressing – the really

high-end customer who wants a truly unique experience.

All of these properties were designed to cater to those type of travelers from around the world.

I soon dropped out of investment banking entirely and went into hospitality. These properties take many years to develop so we don't do many at once.

Since then, the industry has exploded and there are properties all over the world like ours.

What created success for the properties?

We didn't know if enough people wanted this luxury level, so our projects carried an enormous risk. I just knew that when I was there chatting with guests that they were blown away by the experience of it.

We carefully determined what we wanted to do and we still do that today. Once the vision is created and clarified, it makes all other decisions easy. We also frequently dine with hotel guests, and I listen to them talk about where they go, what they want, and what they're looking for. We then implement those ideas.

That has been our greatest advantage from the beginning.

Can you only do that at a certain size?

Once a property gets too large, the reality of doing that is a different thing. It has to be a small property and it has to be a very high-end and expensive property because executing many of the experiences guests are looking for can be costly.

Also, the vision can't be focused on money. Almost all big-box hotels are corporate-owned and it's all about the bottom line. They're in the hotel business but we're in the hospitality business.

We focus on the guest experience and, if we do that well, the guest will pay for it and the bottom line will come.

Outside of the service and general experience, are there certain characteristics that tie your properties together?

We have many guests who say they knew their hotel was a Garrett property. The locations are very warm and intimate, and welcoming. There is an incredible attention to detail – I don't think any other hotel does what we do. All of our artwork is fine, original artwork, and people instinctively get that.

We don't do anything other than make sure each property has a tremendous ambiance and is in sync with its environment.

How hard is it to find properties that fit into your niche?

Almost every month, we're looking at an existing hotel that might fit or that has a unique physical location with potential.

Within minutes, I know whether it will work or not. In the end, it's rare to find the right place.

We don't want to just create a hotel. If it can't be at the four- or five-star level, and cater to the clientele we know how to cater to, then we won't do the project.

One of the most recent projects on which I'm currently consulting is The Ivy Hotel. It's a gilded-age gem in Baltimore that we were lucky to find. We're creating a product unlike anything the city or state has seen before. It's also a first for Relais & Châteaux as their only property in Maryland so I'm really excited about it.

There is a running debate around the future of independent properties. Do you feel they can still compete?

Absolutely. Society is becoming much more experience-oriented; they want to enjoy the culture of whatever community they're in – the opportunity is as good as it's ever been.

When hiring, are you looking more for personality fit or schooling?

It is without question about attitude. People can be trained to do anything. Very few of our people have been to hotel schools because they aren't trained properly for us there.

We look for people who have a great attitude and who have an interest and passion to take care of people and work with them. It really is all about staffing. Great service can outweigh other issues.

When you have several properties, is it hard to be involved in each one?

Yes. In our procedure of developing a hotel, the most important thing we do is to develop clarity from the very beginning, usually through a long brainstorming session. During that, we will pull together the entire team and throw out crazy ideas. Out of that will come a thorough understanding of the vision and from that, all of the other decisions fall into place. That consistency enables us to oversee various properties. ●