

Biz.Travel Q&A with Nick Seewer

Nick Seewer is chief executive officer of Cape Town's The Pepper Club Hotel and Spa; Brian Berkman, Biz.Travel's contributing editor, had a chat with him about, among other things, what's required to run a hotel successfully, and what separates a winning CEO-GM team from an also-ran.

 By [Brian Berkman: contributing editor, travel](#) 10 Mar 2011



Have the international visitors we were promised by World Cup publicity visited or booked to visit Cape Town?

I think that the World Cup had an extremely positive impact on tourism during this current season, especially given that most of our traditional markets were still struggling through the effects of the global economic downturn. It was really great to see growth from emerging markets while still getting business from our traditional ones!

With The Taj Cape Town and other inner-city five-star hotel properties on your doorstep are they coming to stay at The Pepper Club?

Most definitely - I think that the Pepper Club Hotel has had an extremely successful first year of operation attracting both the corporate and leisure markets, especially from the newer markets. Whereas we have not 'given it away', we have learnt to be very flexible and are open to negotiation,

With over 20 years with Orient Express Hotels and Safaris few others have the insight into the luxury travel market that you do. How have luxury traveller expectations changed in recent years?

Luxury travellers have become far more demanding when it comes to service delivery and hospitality. They are much more sophisticated now and have experienced many more competing destinations, all offering different experiences. Even the luxury traveller today is looking for value for money and new experiences. There are also increasing numbers of younger people travelling with their families. Are you marketing The Pepper Club to the same clients to which Orient Express markets? Orient-Express focuses very much more on luxury, resort travel, where the hotel tends to be the destination. Although we also attract similar guests to the Pepper Club, we also try to attract the smaller tour groups, conference groups and the domestic, corporate traveller.

Running a hotel in the past required an iron fist, a broad smile and the ability to know one wine from the next. What do you believe is required to run a hotel successfully today?

Although one still has to run a hotel with an iron fist, it is critical that the successful hotelier is aware of the changing demands of the traveller, the ability to be more understanding and flexible, to have an eye for detail and be a leader of people. You have to lead by example, be fair and honest, be able to communicate well and be able to recognise both staff and guests alike. Ultimately he/she must be a business person - to provide the ultimate experience to the guest but maximise the ultimate profit to the investors!

How do you believe owner-operated hotels differ from management-contracted ones?

Operators of owner-operated hotels are more likely to get quicker responses and direction to issues that concern the operation - and are normally less complicated to manage. Management-contracted operations always tend to be more complicated given the number of decision makers one normally has to deal with, sometimes at a central and corporate level. They are also more demanding when motivating expenditure and explaining results.

I was impressed to see owners The Solomon Brothers at The Pepper Club Hotel as well as at your sister Pepper Club on the Beach restaurant when I visited. How hands-on are they?

They have a remarkable understanding of the business, given the limited time that they have been exposed to it, and like to be involved in the marketing of the operations. They do understand, however, the need to allow the operations team to manage the business for them but, at the same time, to be kept informed.

In a property such as yours, how do the roles of CEO and GM differ?

The GM is very much more involved in running the hotel operation and ensuring that the standards of operation are adhered to in order to produce the desired results. The CEO's role tends more towards questioning the results, drawing the GM's attention to any perceived weaknesses, motivating the results by way of sales, marketing and PR and ensuring the property is maintained to a high standard, given the major investment.

How are you dealing with noise from the adjacent nightclub?

It's an on-going challenge - but with cooperation with the local council, the local CCID law enforcement organisation and by building a relationship with the local businesses.

I was really impressed with the quality of breakfast at the hotel. I know that you've redesigned Sinatra's restaurant, but how important is it today for a five-star hotel to have a destination restaurant?

The quality of the hotel's food, the way it is prepared, presented and served, is of major importance and can be a major reason for people to visit and, indeed, stay at a property. We are hoping that, once Sinatra's is fully launched, it will become popular with both residents and locals. The Pepper Club Hotel is extremely lucky in that it has its own beachfront restaurant which offers its clients the best of both worlds - a 'one of a kind' in Cape Town.

What are the three things that distinguish The Pepper Club from your competitors?

Its location in central and historical Cape Town, its proximity to Long Street nightlife, its 'cutting edge', New York style, and the Camps Bay, beachfront restaurant, Pepper Club on the Beach, which also offers facilities for the hotel guests' to make use of the magnificent beach.

Whom do you consider your competitors?

All the city centre and waterfront hotels can be considered competitors - we just have to keep that one step ahead and be fully aware of what our competitors are doing!!

As a veteran of the industry are the hours away from home; the constant exposure to food and drink and endless entertaining not to mention having to work while others play worth it? Would you do it all again?

The hotel industry is extremely demanding but offers many rewards - you have to learn to pace yourself and learn to make full use of your team!

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