

meinhard huck

By Alia Akkam



1. Swissôtel unveils its first Southeast Asian resort in Phuket, Thailand.

SWISS ROLL

Business and leisure travelers converge at Swissôtel



Every time Meinhard Huck, president of Zurich-based Swissôtel Hotels & Resorts, heads to Chicago, he is buoyed by the sight of the only North American property in the brand's portfolio. "I just love it," he says—and with good reason. Originally designed by architect Harry Weese, after a \$10 million renovation earlier this year the Swissôtel Chicago now sports a revamped lobby with check-in pods replacing a commonplace front desk, the city's skyline etched into backlit glass, and an artistic lighting installation comprised of an impressive plethora of dangling glass bubbles.

When Swissair and Nestlé launched Swissôtel in 1980 with the Hotel Le Président in Geneva, discerning corporate travelers were the targeted demographic. That hasn't changed.

"Ostensibly, we are a deluxe business hotel," says Huck, who first started working for the company in 1997 as a senior vice president for Europe.

The face of business travel, however, has altered considerably from the days of Swissôtel's debut, and that's why Huck has made technology a priority. "We have to find our brand DNA. It's not always about introducing new things but delivering something on a consistent basis," he says. "A few things we do we must do right. Of course what we're doing is continually eyeballing the IT sector. We want to make sure that our IT strategy is something the guest wants, that gadgets are user-friendly. There must be an added value. I still want my coffee to be served by a waiter, not by pressing a button."

Business travel has also surged in Asia in

particular, and Swissôtel has kept that in mind for its long-term vision. "Our Asia customer base has increased—Japanese business, Australian business, Singaporean business. We opened a hotel in India two years ago and there are now two hotels under construction there as we speak," Huck notes. Earlier this year, Swissôtel also expanded its reach in Thailand with its first Southeast Asian resort property, a takeover of the Courtyard by Marriott at Kamala Beach in Phuket.

Ever since the brand's partnership with the now shuttered Swissair has dissolved, Huck is quick to point out how Swissôtel has gradually expanded to appeal to the leisure segment as well. "We are a small company but represented globally," he says, pointing to the Swissôtel presence across five continents, including such up and coming destinations as Estonia and Saudi Arabia. In 2013 and 2014 hotels will also make their mark on locations like Sochi, Russia, and Bodrum, Turkey.

One way Huck has brought recreational travelers into the fold is to reinvent the idea of the executive lounge. "It's a new concept. Let's move away from the words 'executive lounge,'" he says. "The definition means it's only for executives and that it's boring. We also want leisure guests. In Dresden [at the Swissôtel Dresden Am Schloss], for example, it's more of a huge lounge with all natural wood and a kitchen attached to it, crossing the line from business to



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2. Vaulted ceilings from its days as a wine cellar give the Swissôtel Dresden Am Schloss an historic feel.

3. Designer Khuan Crew created the first Swissôtel Living extended-stay concept at Swissôtel the Bosphorus in Istanbul.



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leisure, and making it more accessible."

Another way of connecting with various guests is through the unified but distinct look of Swissôtel properties. "We are not a cookie cutter brand," Huck points out, and that is why an in-house design director works with designers around the world to fuse contemporary Swiss touches with elements that reflect the heritage of each hotel location. "When in Kolkata, you can see it's a Swissôtel, but it also feels Indian; the wood in our lobby area has an Indian design. In the Netherlands, we use tulips in a modern way on wallpaper. It's not in your face; it's very subtle."

At the Swissôtel Dresden Am Schloss, porcelain in the lobby is a hushed nod to the delicate material for which the city is known. There are other architectural treasures at that hotel, too, best realized in the signature Pürovel Spa & Resort, where dramatic relaxation rooms with vaulted ceilings embrace the hotel's past as a 15th-century stone cellar. "Every

now and again you have a property that is historic architecturally," says Huck. "If there is something that is beautiful don't ruin it; work with it and make it more beautiful."

Through the years, Swissôtel has collaborated with a number of high-profile talents. Swiss fashion designer Ida Gutt created the original doormen's uniform for the chain while textile designer Jakob Schlaepfer lends his savvy to Swissôtel fabrics and wallpapers. Oversized Big Bang clocks grace Swissôtel lobbies thanks to a partnership with Swiss watchmaker Hublot, and Khuan Chew, best known for her work on the Burj Al Arab in Dubai, dreamed up the brand's new extended-stay concept, Swissôtel Living. The 63 apartments inside Swissôtel the Bosphorus, Istanbul, are the first of these residence-inspired accommodations that will be strategically rolled out.

Connotations of luxury have also transformed in the 32 years since Swissôtel's

inception, but Huck is adamant unparalleled service remains the most important requirement. "We are 5-Star but at the end of the day it's all about service. It doesn't matter how nice or not nice the hotel is if the service is not what it should be, if the customer service isn't there," he says. "There needs to be an emotional involvement of colleagues. We need to be passionate about our jobs. We have several training programs but you don't generate emotion just through a training program. It's all about believing in what the brand is. Since we are a Swiss company we are able to deliver Swiss culture around the world. If you can't come to Switzerland, we bring Switzerland to you." **hd**