POISED TO LEAD

Company of the Year Marriott Hotels of Canada is taking the country’s hotel sector by storm

THE 2015 PINNACLE AWARDS ISSUE
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On behalf of Hilton Worldwide, congratulations on the well-deserved honor of receiving the 2015 Pinnacle Award for Regional Company of the Year. Thank you for your leadership and pursuit of excellence at Easton’s Group of Hotels. You are a valued franchisee, and we look forward to many more years of partnership and collaboration with you and your incredible team.

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### Features

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 11 | **CONFERENCE REPORT**  
A wrap-up of the Best Western 2015 Convention and The Western Canadian Hotel & Resort Investment Conference | By Jackie Sloat-Spencer and Jane Mundy |
| 16 | **COMPANY OF THE YEAR**  
The Acquirors  
With two major acquisitions by its parent company in less than a year, Marriott Hotels of Canada soars to new heights | By Ian Harrison |
| 22 | **REGIONAL COMPANY OF THE YEAR**  
Modern Family  
Easton’s Group of Hotels carves out a new niche in the mixed-use segment | By Jackie Sloat-Spencer |
| 28 | **HOTELIER OF THE YEAR**  
Keeper of the Castle  
Poised, relentless and modest, Hotelier of the Year Robert Mercure leads a historic Quebec City landmark into its next chapter | By Iris Benaroia |
| 34 | **SUPPLIER OF THE YEAR**  
Raise the Roof  
Thinking like a hotelier has helped Houston Construction win the 2015 Supplier of the Year award | By Shane Schick |
| 41 | **CATERING TO A NEW COHORT**  
They may be pigeonholed as flighty and hard-to-please, but give them consistent feedback and the right tools and millennials will stick around | By Laura Pratt |
| 43 | **LIFE IN THE FAST LANE**  
The emerging lifestyle brand is making waves in the Canadian marketplace | By Jennifer Febbraro |
| 49 | **CROWD PLEASERS**  
Meeting and conference facilities are undergoing major overhauls as properties vie for business | By Denise Deveau |
| 51 | **DIFFERENT STROKES**  
When it comes to furniture, hoteliers are ditching the copy-and-paste mentality in favour of memorable pieces | By Liz Campbell |

### Departments

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 2 | **EDITOR’S PAGE**  
Stacy Manning, The Westin Trillium House, Blue Mountains, Ont. |
| 3 | **CHECKING IN**  
   |
| 56 | **HOTELIER**  
   |
EDITOR’S PAGE

’TIS THE SEASON

By the time this copy of the magazine lands in your hands, December will have arrived, and with it a flurry of holiday activity.

For the team at KML, the Pinnacle Awards luncheon and celebration always caps off a pulsating year of activity. And, for me personally, it’s always a highlight and a pleasure when I can pick up the phone to let the winners know they’ve been chosen to receive a Pinnacle Award. The reactions run the gamut from stunned silence to unrestrained enthusiasm and excitement.

It’s equally gratifying to look back on our circle of achievers over the course of 27 years to see that all of the individuals and companies that we have feted have gone on to great success and accomplishments. And, as reported by many of them, the Pinnacle Awards mark a watershed moment.

Somehow it’s fitting that we present our Pinnacle Awards during the holiday season, when many of us are focused on giving to others. For the recipients, the awards are a validation of their hard work, perseverance, dedication and commitment to succeed.

But apart from recognizing business acumen and all that is associated with it, let’s not lose sight of the wonderful efforts made by these stellar companies to give back to the community, which has always been a core tenet of the companies and individuals we choose to honour. Perhaps no other industry can lay claim to having a bigger heart than the hospitality industry, where charity is measured not just through a financial commitment but also by countless donated hours, products and services.

Looking at this year’s winners, it’s hard not to be inspired by the generosity of these companies. As a sponsor of the Children’s Miracle Network, Marriott Hotels of Canada has contributed more than $4.3 million to children’s hospitals across North America, while the Easton’s Group of Hotels funds eye camps in India and entrepreneur circles in Canada. Other acts of generosity are happening at the property level, where Houston Construction Ltd. is busily installing Automated External Defibrillator (AED) units at many properties, and Fairmont Le Château Frontenac GM Robert Mercure is part of a team that’s turned a 400-year-old monastery in Quebec City into a one-of-a-kind therapeutic sanctuary. Certainly, their dedication and commitment to succeed.

In the spirit of the season, on behalf of the entire KML team, we wish our readers and advertisers alike a holiday season full of good health, happiness and, always, a touch of magic!

ROSANNA CAIRA
Editor and Publisher
rcaira@kostuchmedia.com

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Quebec is set to pass new legislation that will regulate unregistered tourist accommodation providers such as Airbnb hosts and student residences that rent to tourists during the summer months. Tourism Minister Dominique Vien tabled Bill 67 in late October, proposing changes to the Act Respecting Tourist Accommodation Establishments, which will level the playing field for hospitality players. The bill will ensure that owners of rental accommodations for tourists, B&Bs and hotels are subject to the same rules — requiring them to be certified and pay provincial hospitality taxes.

If passed, Quebec will become the first province in Canada to establish home-sharing regulations, joining the U.K. and several U.S. cities that have already introduced rules on Airbnb-style accommodation rentals.

With this bill, Vien strives to define a tourist accommodation as being offered publicly on a regular basis. “We would like to ensure that people who, for example, go on a trip abroad once or twice a year and rent their homes for two weeks are not subject to the law,” she said. Vien also stressed that Airbnb and similar platforms will remain legal in the province. Rather, it is those who rent out accommodations who will be directly affected by the bill.

Eve Paré, CEO of the Greater Montréal Hotel Association, says it is hard to quantify the effect that unregistered accommodations have had on the Quebec lodging industry. However, since the funds collected through lodging taxes are wholly dedicated to the promotion of Quebec and its regions as tourist destinations, there is an undeniable element of inequity. “Because [other accommodations] benefit from the promotion of Quebec and Montreal, it would be good to have them contribute, too,” said Paré.

This legislation stands to significantly bolster the province’s tourism industry. In fact, Vien has predicted the passing of this bill will see “hundreds of thousands of dollars” in lost tax revenue flow into the province’s promotion boards. “At this point we are really happy with the [proposed] legislation,” adds Paré. “We are hopeful the bill will be passed before Christmas.”

AT A GLANCE
Bill 67 redefines who is classified as a “tourist” and clarifies rules related to obtaining classification certifications that allow people to operate a lodging establishment. There are eight varieties of accommodation classifications in Quebec including hotels, tourist homes, B&Bs, resorts, youth hostels, educational institutions, hospitality villages and “other.” The bill will also see the number of provincial inspectors significantly increase. Sixteen new inspectors will be added to better investigate and enforce regulations. Under the proposed legislation, violators will also face updated penalties, including fines ranging from $500 to $100,000.

HOT SPOT
Montreal stands as Airbnb’s most popular Canadian destination. Hosts in the city have been offering their homes on the site since early 2009. An Airbnb study found that between April 2013 and March 2014, 2,900 Montreal hosts welcomed guests into their homes. During the same period, the Airbnb community contributed $54.6 million to the city’s economy. Montreal’s Airbnb guests also tend to explore other regions in the province, with 63 per cent reporting visiting Quebec City during their stay.
It's been a whirlwind year of expansion for Choice Hotels Canada, whose executive team revealed a steady pipeline and focus on driving loyalty during the company’s annual conference, which hosted 275 attendees in Montreal in October. “There's no doubt the overall Canadian economy has been bumpy, but we've seen positive trends on the travel and tourism front. The lower dollar and reduced gas prices have encouraged Canadians to explore their own country,” said Brian Leon, managing director. “We're in the midst of six consecutive years of positive RevPAR growth (up 3.6-per-cent for the year),” capping off a record-breaking year of portfolio growth, with 17 new units and six more slated to open by the end of the year, boasted Leon. “We want to lead the industry in growth. We want to continue to drive new-build growth and our Ascend collection,” he added. Leon has identified an additional 200 possibilities in the Canadian market that adhere to Ascend’s “boutique, unique, or historic” brand standards. Meanwhile, a new Quality prototype — a Canadian-led initiative that will feature leading-edge design that is value-engineered to optimize costs and ROI — is moving through the final stages of development. Modular building is also helping Choice grow in areas where materials are expensive, such as northern Quebec.

Choice is looking to wrap up 2015 with 321 hotels in operation and close to 26,000 rooms. “We want to increase our presence in under-represented markets and we want to drive overall Choice performance from a RevPAR standpoint and from a likelihood-to-recommend guest standpoint,” he said.

In 2015, partnerships with AOL Online, Bell Media, Microsoft sites and MSN Storyteller helped increase visibility in the digital space, and 2016 will bring new partnerships with Ticketmaster and the Canadian Hockey League. On the social-media front, the Choice marketing team is honing in on Facebook to grow its influence and has set a goal to gain 15,000 new followers in 15 months. “Three months in, we're hitting the right chords with more than 4,100 followers,” shared Julie Chan-McConnell, director, Marketing and Loyalty at Choice Hotels Canada. “To get there, we're working our way through a test-and-learn, to get sharp stories to share, digging deep into our segments and learning what best resonates with each group and contests with Choice Privileges to build our social community.” — Jackie Sloat-Spencer

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Expedia Inc. has released a new operator-facing mobile platform designed to help hoteliers manage their businesses using Expedia on-the-go. The PartnerCentral app allows operators to receive notifications and view up-to-the-minute information on their bookings, market and guest feedback. Users will also be able to compare performance against their competition, as well as promote last-minute inventory. “The Expedia PartnerCentral app was designed to complement the website experience for hoteliers on the go,” said Benoit Jolin, VP Global Product, Expedia Lodging Partner Services. “We aim to provide our partners with the information they need exactly when they need it, and the ability to quickly and easily take action.”
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The Chelsea Hotel, Toronto recently celebrated its 40th anniversary. A pioneer in Toronto’s hospitality industry, the hotel opened its doors on Oct. 15, 1975, featuring 808 guestrooms. Before long, the hotel expanded, boosting its capacity to 1,000 rooms and making it one of the largest in the country. In 1990, the hotel underwent an $80-million expansion that once again increased its room count to 1,590, establishing itself as Canada’s largest hotel. The property underwent further renovation after becoming part of the Langham Hospitality Group and was rebranded as the Eaton Chelsea in 2013, receiving a total investment of nearly $30 million. It appears that new, dramatic changes are in the hotel’s future as Langham’s parent company, Hong Kong-based Great Eagle Holdings, has plans for a new development on the site of the Chelsea Hotel. The proposed development includes four towers comprised of nearly 2,000 residential units, 300 hotel suites and more than 62,000-sq.-ft. of office space.

**InBrief**

Ivanhoé Cambridge is set to invest $140 million to revamp Montreal’s Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth hotel. The transformation will include the addition of a new business campus as well as restaurants, bars and an urban market...Amazon quietly shuttered its Amazon Destinations travel booking site. The company shut down the website’s services only six months after its launch, noting previously existing bookings will be honoured...Toronto-based Crescent Hotels & Resorts is now managing the 388-room Westin Prince, Toronto. The Starwood-branded property was recently purchased by a real-estate company from mainland China...Realstar Hospitality, based in Toronto, has opened the 41-room Days Inn Sylvan Lake in Alberta and a newly renovated Days Inn & Conference Centre - Renfrew in Ottawa...Toronto-based Crescent Hotels & Resorts is now managing the 388-room Westin Prince, Toronto. The Starwood-branded property was recently purchased by a real-estate company from mainland China...Realstar Hospitality, based in Toronto, has opened the 41-room Days Inn Sylvan Lake in Alberta and a newly renovated Days Inn & Conference Centre - Renfrew in Ottawa...Parsippany, N.J.-based Wyndham Hotel

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Group unveiled its new rewards program for meeting planners at the IMEX America conference in Las Vegas. Go Meet caters to both professional and casual planners across every hotel segment, enabling them to earn points for every dollar spent at participating hotels. The Best Western Plus Inner Harbour in Victoria, B.C. has been recognized with Best Western Hotels & Resorts’ M.K. Guertin Award.

People

Reetu Gupta has been promoted to COO of the Easton’s Group of Hotels and The Gupta Group in Markham, Ont. For the last decade, Gupta has served as VP, Marketing and Strategic Development at Easton’s Group of Hotels... Robert Housez is the new GM at The Chelsea Hotel Toronto. An industry veteran, Housez was recognized by the Ontario Hostelry Institute as Hotelier of the Year in 2015...William Ng is now specialist, Franchise Development Support for Choice Hotels Canada in Mississauga, Ont. Ng previously worked at Delta Hotels and Resorts as coordinator of Asset Management and Legal... Ron Pellerine is the new GM of The Langham, Boston. Pellerine previously served as GM of The Chelsea Hotel, Toronto where he oversaw the hotel’s brand revamp and a $30-million renovation... Arjun Channa has assumed the position of GM for the Westin Calgary Hotel. Channa previously served as hotel manager at the Sheraton Centre Toronto Hotel... Carlo Curto is the new banquet chef at the Sheraton Centre Toronto. Curto most recently served as banquet chef at The Westin Harbour Castle.

SupplySide

St. Paul, Minn.-based 3M has introduced its new 3M Stainless Steel Cleaner and Protector. The product is a water-based, oil-free cleaner specially formulated to clean fingerprints, smudges and stains from stainless steel and provides Scotchgard protection... Amsterdam-based Sealed Air’s Diversey Care division has earned a five-year contract to provide a full suite of cleaning systems, consultancy, training and support services to Toronto-based Fairmont Raffles Hotels International... New York-based Accenture and Redwood Shores, Calif.-based Oracle have partnered to release a new cloud-based product designed to help hospitality companies improve business management. Hospitality Finance Cloud Solution enables companies to access financial data in real-time from multiple sources and connects to existing on-site systems to automate workflow approvals and establish standardized operations processes.
The new Slim Jim® step-on range has an even slimmer profile. So now, you can fit one practically anywhere.
EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

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AWARDED REGIONAL HOTEL COMPANY OF THE YEAR 2015
The team at Best Western isn’t content to rest on its laurels. Executives showed off a rejuvenated brand identity, logos, masterbrand and a trendy boutique-inspired mid-scale concept to nearly 2,000 attendees during the company’s 2015 Convention held in Honolulu in late September.

“For more than two decades, Best Western has had a familiar, recognizable and visible logo,” said David Kong, president and CEO. “But with our investments in this 69-year-old brand during the last 10 years, we need to make consumers aware of the exciting improvements in our brand. We are embracing our future with a completely reimagined brand identity that clarifies our exceptional offerings and broadens our appeal with a contemporary, energetic and relevant look,” he said, adding, “Our logo has served us well but it doesn’t represent who we are today.” The new logos, which sport a 3-D feel with hand-drawn lettering and centerpiece globe, will be rolled out early next summer. In addition, the company name has been transformed from Best Western International to Best Western Hotels & Resorts to reflect the diversified portfolio of brands, which now includes an extended-stay (Best Western Plus Executive Residency), and boutique concept, Vib, launched last year, which has seven approved deals in the U.S.

Coupled with a successful year of RevPAR growth in Canada, up 3.5 per cent to $78.59, $122.23 ADR and 214 hotels in the North American pipeline, Best Western is positioned to take off.

Kong also announced a new “fresh and hip” mid-scale prototype called Glō. Other brands in the segment “tend to be cookie-cutter,” he said. “Some may even say they are boring. There is an opportunity here.”

Glō is Best Western’s seventh brand — a new-build prototype in secondary markets. True to its moniker, the exterior glows with LED-lit banding and a light-brite wall; inside, a back-lit front desk, bar and even showerheads radiate with built-in LEDs. A blue-and-yellow multi-use lobby flows into an integrated breakfast area that
can be transformed into a relaxation area. Smaller guestrooms (287 sq. ft. on average), feature centre-loaded bathrooms that save 40- to 50-sq.-ft. in construction costs, which amount to $65,000 per key, not including land costs. “We expect the ADR to be in the $90 range,” Kong added.

The team is going full-speed ahead on the digital front while it gets ready to premier a next-generation mobile app and a newly redesigned bestwestern.com in the spring of 2016. “With our new mobile website and apps we have built simple, seamless online experiences designed to increase bookings, create guest loyalty and set expectations for an exceptional guest experience,” explained Dorothy Dowling, SVP of Marketing and Sales. Features include an integrated GPS to highlight nearby attractions, a hotel-comparison view, an improved search function to filter results based on rate and amenities and integration with the Best Western Rewards loyalty program. To keep the brand top-of-mind, Dowling has forged an agreement with booking.com to distribute Best Western’s properties in North America, South America, Central America and Mexico; and achieved activation on Chinese travel site Ctrip.

Selfies are at the heart of Best Western’s new ad campaign, which encourages guests to snap a selfie at one of Best Western’s properties. Ad spots will use forced-perspective photography to make their subjects seem larger-than-life. “Selfies allow us to be scrappy and reach a global audience,” said Dowling. “The campaign allows us to lean into the idea of forced perspective: we are trying to change customers’ perceptions of Best Western.”

Next year’s conference will be hosted in October, just in time for the brand’s 70th birthday.

HOW THE WEST WAS DIVIDED

The Western Canadian Hotel & Resort Investment Conference examined highs and lows

STORY BY JANE MUNDY

While hotel investment in B.C. and Manitoba spells out opportunities for the upcoming year with increased occupancy, ADR and RevPAR, challenges will continue in Saskatchewan and Alberta with ongoing occupancy lows. The industry’s operating performance, transaction highlights and trends were examined during the Western Canadian Hotel & Resort Investment Conference in Vancouver this past October.

B.C. led the west in performance with a staggering 14.3-per-cent increase in RevPAR through August, followed by Manitoba, which posted a 5.6-per-
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cent increase. On the other hand, Alberta and Saskatchewan posted RevPAR declines of 6.7 per cent and 8.5 per cent, respectively.

Although not as strong as downtown Vancouver, Victoria experienced a healthy RevPAR growth, up 11.8 per cent through August, and 70-per-cent occupancy, while Banff enjoyed a 14-per-cent increase in RevPAR. “We expect competition with more hotels opening; existing hotels will have to keep up-to-date and others will struggle,” Carrie Russell, managing director, HVS, told nearly 300 attendees.

In 2016, struggling provinces will continue to see occupancy declines. Saskatoon is forecast to sink to a two-year low of 64-per-cent occupancy. Regina will weigh in even lower, at 60-per-cent occupancy, down from 62 per cent. Calgary is predicted to drop to 63-per-cent occupancy. B.C. and Manitoba will continue to boast strong supply growth, occupancies, ADR and RevPAR overall.

The audience also learned that resort development is back on the radar in the west. Although there isn’t much currently under construction, investors are revisiting dormant sites on the west coast, including the Sunshine Coast, Squamish and Vancouver Island.

Nationally, Canada is poised to surpass the U.S. in growth next year, Russell shared. Supply is predicted to increase by 1.7 per cent in 2016, nearly double what it was last year. “Nationally, expect RevPAR to grow by 4.1 per cent in 2015 and 3.8 per cent in 2016,” she said. “As for occupancy levels, demand will have the same growth as supply.”

Meanwhile, Destination Canada is honing in on the millennial market as the focus of new tourism campaigns. “Next year we launch a campaign to create destinations in Canada aimed at millennials,” said Gilles Verret, VP, Strategy and Corporate Communications of Destination Canada. “And we are targeting the international population to take advantage of our 150th birthday.”

“It’s an optimal mix — the airlines reinvesting to bring more people here and Destination Canada marketing Canada,” said Andrew Lind, COO at Muskoka Language International. “We are putting time and effort into raising more demand but alignment is important so that we don’t create too much demand. International arrivals are growing at almost five per cent each year — the best time for hoteliers across Canada is now.”

With ongoing tourism marketing and advocacy plans, a healthy economy and a growing appetite for travel, experts say Canada is well-positioned globally within travel markets — and Western Canada is ready for a slew of visitors. Case in point: the Vancouver International Airport is on track to receive 20 million visitors this year thanks to new developments and flight route expansions. Additional flights between Mexico City and YVR will take off this month and next May, WestJet will add flights in six cities across Canada. Finally, the Calgary International Airport is set to receive a new runway and terminal, slated to open next year.

PROJECT RUNWAY

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WITH TWO MAJOR ACQUISITIONS BY ITS PARENT COMPANY IN LESS THAN A YEAR, MARRIOTT HOTELS OF CANADA SOARS TO NEW HEIGHTS

STORY BY IAN HARRISON PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF KIRK
It’s been an eventful year for Marriott International. It started in January when the Bethesda, Md.-based behemoth announced it had acquired homegrown Delta Hotels and Resorts from British Columbia Investment Management Corp. for $168 million, and it culminated with the announcement in mid-November, just as Hotelier magazine was going to press, that the company had acquired Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc. in a $12.2 billion deal that would add a plethora of lifestyle-oriented brands to its portfolio.

The acquisitions inflate Marriott’s portfolio to 30 different brands, more than 5,500 hotels and 1.1 million rooms worldwide and spell out good news for the Canadian landscape, where Marriott Hotels of Canada is busily growing its portfolio of 128 units. “We have competed with Starwood for decades and we have also admired them,” Bill Marriott Jr., executive chairman and chairman of the Board of Marriott International, said in a press release. “I’m excited we will add great new hotels to our system and for the incredible opportunities for Starwood and Marriott associates.”

When the deal is complete, pending the necessary regulatory approvals, it will bring Marriott’s total unit count in Canada to nearly 200 hotels representing 45,000 rooms coast-to-coast, with the addition of Sheraton, Westin, W, Four Points by
Sheraton, Le Méridien, Aloft and Element, plus several more in the pipeline set to open in the next few months.

While some pundits mused the Delta Hotels and Resorts acquisition last spring came at an inauspicious time because of a decline in oil prices and consumer confidence, Don Cleary, who assumed the role of president of Marriott Hotels of Canada this past March, just before the deal was consummated in April, is more sanguine.

“We were really interested in Delta for two reasons. First, because of its great distribution in markets we haven’t already penetrated. Delta is a very well-known brand in Canada. It’s a household name and a respected name. That enhances Marriott’s reputation here. Second, Delta is an entry-level full-service brand that we can grow, not just in Canada, but globally. Obviously we have to finalize where Delta fits in our portfolio, but I think it’s a win for Canada, for both brands.”

Several months in, Cleary says the integration of Delta Hotels and Resorts is proceeding well. A blend of Marriott and Delta executives now helm the company, with dedicated teams focused on Eastern and Western Canada, based in Toronto and Calgary, respectively.

“Delta was a well-run company to begin with and has real compatibility with Marriott’s culture,” says Cleary. “Marriott puts people first, as does Delta. We’ve done so much to reach out and welcome them into the family already. We’re putting Delta in sales and marketing revenue engines and they’re live on marriott.com [since July] and other distribution channels. The last piece of the puzzle is the rewards program. We’re in the process of integrating it] and it should be completed by early 2016.”

Thanks to the Starwood deal, Marriott is now poised to flourish in the lifestyle segment, where brands such as W Hotels, Westin and Aloft will complement Marriott’s strong presence in the luxury and select-service tiers. Additionally, Starwood will benefit from Marriott’s worldwide development organization to reach a broader global footprint. “The transaction will form an even stronger, more efficient global company to compete in the rapidly evolving, global travel industry,” says Cleary. “The driving force behind this transaction is growth,” Arne Sorenson, president and CEO of Marriott International said in a press release.

Marriott International’s recent acquisitions come at a fortuitous time for the hotel industry in Canada. The most recent investment report by Colliers International affirms the industry is “all grown up” and “legitimized” thanks to eight $1-billion-plus years during the past decade. “We’re now a market that is $1-billion plus in hotel investment activity in what historically used to be $500 million on average and we see that continuing,” predicts Alam Pirani, Colliers Canada’s executive managing director. “It really is a function of larger product coming to market. Operating fundamentals are strong, the cost of debt is at an all-time low and there are more debt players participating in our sector than ever before.”

With more institutional investors, REITs, non-traditional buyers and foreign institutional capital in the mix, the message is that Canada is a safe place to park your money. Somewhere down the line, Marriott Hotels of Canada is poised to benefit. “The asset-light structure of Marriott, where we operate through a management contract or franchise, is deliberate,” says Cleary. “We don’t do real estate. There’s a vibrant ownership community in Canada that invests and develops hotels. We’ve had great success working with that community, with almost 130 hotels so far.” And counting. “Marriott has a very strong development pipeline and will open over 30 hotels in 2015 and 2016. We have full-service projects under construction in Vancouver, like the JW Marriott and Autograph hotels [part of a $535-million complex slated for 2016 adjacent to B.C. Place Stadium — the largest private development in British Columbia’s history]. We also have new projects under construction at the Calgary airport and other gateway cities.”

Much of Marriott Hotels of Canada’s growth in the country, however, ultimately resides in secondary and tertiary markets with select-service brands such as Courtyard by Marriott and Residence Inn. On the other hand, Starwood’s Specialty Select Brands encompassing Aloft, Element and Four Points by Sheraton, will continue to blossom in primary and secondary markets, with a shift to central Canada as activity in Western Canada has slowed.

Expansion aside, the company also plans to pioneer major IT initiatives at branded hotels across Canada. This includes mobile check-in and check-out. “We fully intend to roll out that out at Delta hotels, too,” says Cleary. “The next generation of that is mobile-service requests, the ability to view folios on mobile devices and keyless room entry.”

“Management by walking around,” is how Bill Marriott describes the hands-on style that became his trademark for more than four decades as CEO of his family’s company. This calm, measured approach seems to permeate Marriott north of the 49th parallel. Longtime industry insider Larry Mogelonsky says “Marriott is like a giant battleship. It doesn’t move quickly, but when it does, it knocks everyone out of the water.” Indeed, as Mogelonsky illustrates, Marriott entered Canada relatively late with the Toronto Airport Marriott in 1986. Three decades later, the
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For Lyle Hall, a hospitality industry consultant and managing director of Toronto-based HLT Advisory Inc., the Delta Hotels and Resorts acquisition was as much about the rest of the world as it was about Canada. “Delta on its own had one of the better urban footprints across Canada. They were represented pretty much everywhere. They had great coverage in Canada’s downtown cores. The acquisition gave Marriott another leg in their product inventory across the country. It also gave Marriott International a brand they could use to do various things. It provided them with something that fits in between their brands and a platform for additional expansion.”

Because of its sheer size, the Starwood transaction marks the synergy of strong products, strong systems and strong people. Time will tell how the merger will impact the Canadian landscape, says David Larone, senior managing director at PKF Consulting Canada, a CBRE Company. “In a lot of centres there’s going to be a very significant weighting of Marriott and Starwood assets. So I am not sure how that’s going to shake out.” But, it will bring

"WE ARE BULLISH ABOUT CANADA. THE INDUSTRY IS COMING OFF RECORD OCCUPANCY AND PERFORMANCE AS A WHOLE. WE SEE THAT GROWTH CONTINUING" DON CLEARY, PRESIDENT

various efficiencies. “This may give the combined brand a little more strength in dealing with the OTAs and managing the distribution channels, which ultimately may be a benefit that a lot of people weren’t looking at initially.”

Of course, there’s more to Marriott’s story than mergers, acquisitions and expansion. Marriott, whose founder John Willard Marriott was inspired as a Mormon missionary to start his company, humbly, with a root beer stand in Washington, D.C. in 1927, was at the forefront of corporate social responsibility before it was de rigueur. The company enjoys a fruitful partnership with the Children’s Miracle Network, a non-profit based in Salt Lake City that funds children’s hospitals across North America. More than $4.3 million has been donated to the charity in Canada since 2001.

While it’s too soon to know how the acquisitions will play out, and what the future holds, the forecast looks bright for Marriott Hotels of Canada. Is bullish the mot juste? “Yes,” affirms Cleary. “We are bullish about Canada. The industry is coming off record occupancy and performance as a whole. We see that growth continuing.”

Congratulations to Marriott Canada on achieving the 2015 Pinnacle Award for Company of the Year!
Pinnacle winners part of a very special equation

Congratulations and thank you for partnering with Ecolab
Steve Gupta has earned a bit of a reputation as a rule-breaker.

During a design meeting for his Homewood Suites by Hilton hotel in Vaughan, Ont., the Easton’s Group of Hotels president was presented with a hum-drum orange-and-brown colour palette. “That day I happened to be wearing a fuchsia and purple tie so I said, ‘let’s find something that will go with this,’” he shrugs. “Now [the decor features] unbelievable colours and we even had matching wallpaper done. The combination is stunning. Nobody else has this — now, Hilton brags about it,” he boasts.

Gupta has made a career out of side-stepping brand standards when he feels there is a better way. When dual-branded hotels began to pop up across the Canadian landscape, he presented Marriott with a set of drawings he created for a concept that housed both transient and extended-stay in the same building, with a shared reception desk. After a bit of persistence, last spring, Easton’s Group of Hotels opened the doors to the very first dual-branded hotel in Canada in the same building: a Courtyard by Marriott and TownePlace Suites by Marriott in Markham, Ont. It’s created quite a bit of development buzz, the hotelier says. “Every brand has come to visit this [location] and they are excited about it.”
EASTON’S GROUP OF HOTELS CARVES OUT A NEW NICHE IN THE MIXED-USE SEGMENT

STORY BY JACKIE SLOAT-SPENCER PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN HRYNIUK
The Punjab-born hotelier landed in Canada with $108 in his pocket and moonlighted as an insurance salesman before making the leap into real estate and hospitality. “When I was in grade nine I used to dream about owning a five-star hotel,” he reminisces. “That’s all they had in India those days.”

In 1979, Gupta purchased the Easton Service Centre station in Port Hope, Ont. and adopted the name for his fledgling business, Easton’s Group of Hotels. “I also changed my first name (from Suresh) to make it easier for people to pronounce because they were having a hard time,” he adds. Today, the Easton’s portfolio has grown to 15 hotels with Marriott, Hilton and InterContinental Hotels Group banners spanning the Greater Toronto Area, Kingston and Montreal.

“Our growth started escalating in 2009 during the recession when my dad opened three Hilton Garden Inns, and since then, he’s been building hotels everywhere. I would wake up and I swear, another hotel would be open,” laughs Reetu Gupta, Steve’s daughter and newly minted COO of the company.

Steve’s four children — daughters Reema, Reetu and Shelley, as well as his son Suraj — learned about the hotel and real-estate business from childhood. Reetu used to go to the office after school and practice rent rolls and administrative duties. Later, she shadowed GMs before assuming sales-and-marketing responsibilities for the company’s portfolio. “In hindsight, we were kids and didn’t realize it, but they were teaching us specific skillsets,” Reetu adds.

As the new COO, Reetu is helping transition the company as it launches its new real-estate brand, The Gupta Group, and building mixed-use properties. “Easton’s Group is not going anywhere,” Reetu clarifies. “That is our hotel arm, but because we are diversifying into residential we needed an overall encompassing brand.”

The Gupta Group’s recent projects have included the King Blue condo development (which was later sold to Shanghai-based Greenland Holding Group Co. for an undisclosed amount). It is also developing the first Canopy by Hilton lifestyle brand in Canada on Bloor St. in Toronto, which is scheduled to open in 2019. A second Canopy project is also in the works, but the location has not been revealed.

In the past 35 years, the Easton’s Group has channeled its own path. “We created a niche in the middle-market in the ’80s when there was the economic crash. Full-service hotels were hurting, limited-service hotels came in, so we took the limited-service hotel [prototype] and reduced the gap between the two,” Gupta says. “Marriott made a big presentation about us breaking their brand standards not once, not twice, but three times and that became their new brand standard,” he smiles.
Congratulations to Steve Gupta and Easton’s Group of Hotels on their outstanding achievement as 2015 Pinnacle Award Winner for Regional Company of the Year.

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“I have watched this classic entrepreneur take old properties and revitalize them into leading edge, profitable hotels,” adds Tony Pollard, president of the Hotel Association of Canada. “At the same time he has had the courage to develop new hotels in difficult economic times when many others would not take the risk.”

Breaking the mould became profitable, and the company capped off 2014 with sales of $109.6 million, a six-per-cent increase over the previous year. It starts with under-promise, over-deliver and then exceeding the expectations of their guests, Gupta explains. “Now we are redefining excellence and every project that we do has been different. I don’t want to do 100 hotels — if I do, they have to be different than everybody else’s.”

“I don’t know of a franchisee in Canada that’s left as big of an impact as Steve has in Canada,” says Thomas Lorenzo, VP and managing director - Franchise Development at Hilton Worldwide. “He’s very forward-leaning. He was one of the first to adopt the urban select-service in Canada.”

Right now the Guptas are pursuing development opportunities in Western Canada, as well as New York and several European markets. But wherever the Guptas grow, Steve Gupta himself will ensure that development is strategic and is centered on adding value to the company and to the bottom-line.

As part of another condo project in development at Dundas and Jarvis Streets, the Guptas will donate $1,000 from every suite sold to Ryerson University, capping out the donation at $1 million. (The same school honoured Gupta with a Doctor of Laws honoris causa degree this summer.) Gupta is also passionate about helping young entrepreneurs and immigrants get their start in Canada. He’s part of The Next 36, an entrepreneurs’ circle that provides mentorship and seed money to students and recent grads. He’s pledged $100,000 over four years to the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, which provides cultural access passes to new Canadians to let them experience the country’s rich cultural history. In addition, the Gupta family donates to causes in India, including eye camps — which treat diseases of the eye in rural parts of India — as well as sanitation projects.

It’s all part of leaving a lasting legacy, which will continue to be carried out by the next generation of Guptas who are taking the Easton’s Group of Hotels and The Gupta Group brands into new territory, he says. “We want to create jobs; we don’t just want to go make money. Money is not my driver; my driver is a sense of accomplishment, a sense of achievement and a legacy for my children.” But one thing’s for certain: “He’s still the boss,” Reetu chuckles.

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Not many places rival Monte Carlo, the fabled Mediterranean port along the French Riviera where the world’s rich and famous gambol (and gamble) under bright skies and sandy beaches — it’s hard to compete with multi-million dollar yachts, a casino culture and the glamour of the Grand Prix.

But that didn’t stop Robert Mercure from leaving it behind. Eight years ago, the 55-year-old was the hotel manager of the Fairmont Monte Carlo in Monaco when he received a call that would change his life: an offer to be GM at the 611-room Fairmont Château Frontenac in Quebec City.

Leaving Europe was a no-brainer, says the peripatetic, fourth-generation hotelier, who was raised in Quebec, and who has held hospitality positions in Boston, Savannah, Washington, D.C., Montreal and Toronto. “It was a dream come true to be a Quebecker who toured the world in the hotel business and to get the chance to head up, arguably, the flagship of Quebec,” Mercure says. “I often say, it’s managing more than a hotel, it’s managing an icon — it’s like the Statue of Liberty of Canada.”

The comparison is apt. Rich in history, the Château Frontenac dates back to the late 19th century when William Van Horne, the tycoon of the Canadian Pacific Railway, decided to build the luxury lodging as a stopover for train travellers. He enlisted
New York architect Bruce Price (who had also designed Montreal’s Windsor Station) for the job.

Since opening in 1893, the hotel, which is a UNESCO-recognized heritage site, has garnered praise for its inimitable elegance and world-class hospitality, attracting countless luminaries — including King George VI, Queen Elizabeth, former president of France Charles de Gaulle, Steven Spielberg and Leonardo DiCaprio.

Today the hotel is owned by Ivanhoé Cambridge, a subsidiary of the Quebec Pension Fund and one of the 10 biggest real-estate owners in the world. Mercure describes them as “wonderful owners who sold off a number of their hotel holdings, but retained the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal, as well as the Château Frontenac as a symbol of Quebec.”

But sometimes, even the grandest of dames needs a tweak. And not just a simple nip and tuck, but a $75-million facelift — the largest Canadian heritage-hotel renovation project in the history of Fairmont to date. (The monumental endeavour was captured on a CBC/Radio Canada documentary that aired this fall.)

Fastidious, passionate and with a proven track record, Mercure was the perfect man to oversee the enterprise. He had previously helped other Fairmont properties get their groove back, including a $47-million renovation to the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, which followed a $60-million revamp of the Monte Carlo.

With the Château’s reno, which lasted from 2012 to 2014, “the idea was to protect its heritage but also bring it up-to-date, whether in the areas of food-and-beverage or room design,” Mercure says. One particular focus was to expand the meeting space from 23,000 sq. ft. to 40,000 sq. ft. “We were refusing groups constantly. Not because the hotel was full, but because we couldn’t accommodate them,” says the hotelsier, whose ultimate goal was to draw awareness to the area’s history.

“People often think of the Château as a leisure resort, but it’s a wonderful place to conduct business when you’re in this beautiful, historic town.”

To this end, Mercure collaborated with Parks Canada to promote Quebec and Canadian culture by creating a mini-museum at the hotel. Its contents are made up of more than 10,000 artifacts that were unearthed under the site’s boardwalk by Parks Canada associates for Quebec’s 400th anniversary. Another unique offering allows people to book receptions in the original Fort Saint-Louis, occupied by Champlain.

“The market response to the changes has been stellar. This year we’ve had a record group year — it’s very encouraging,” he says. Incredibly, group room nights have grown by close to 25 per cent over previous years, while average rates have jumped 18 per cent. Occupancy has increased by several points, resulting in a RevPAR spike.
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of 20 per cent — an unprecedented level for the property. Compared to the other Fairmont hotels around the world, the Château has enjoyed the largest customer-satisfaction increase year-over-year since renovating. Nonetheless, in the hospitality world, aesthetics only go so far. “To have a good finger on the pulse of what’s going on in your operations, you have to take care of the day-to-day,” says Mercure, who strongly eschews an ivory-tower approach to management. “The culture of Fairmont follows the new school of management, where we focus on teamwork, communication and empathy — it fits with my style.”

Given Mercure’s proclivity to being everywhere for everyone, his involvement in the greater community comes as no surprise. He’s a founding board member of the non-profit Augustine Sisters Monastery Hotel, whose roots go back 400 years, and opened this past summer as a therapeutic sanctuary. Together with the David Suzuki Foundation, he’s also staged the Quebec Winter Summit, an environmental event. As a board member with Destination Canada, he helped land a $30-million investment from former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, which will go towards a U.S. marketing campaign.

He receives countless moving letters about his staff’s engagement. “They are the soul of the Château,” Mercure says of his brigade of 650. “My team has a great sense of humour. They genuinely enjoy interacting with clients ... clients will say, ‘The Frontenac is a beautiful, amazing building but it’s the team that makes the difference.’”

The respect is mutual. Francine Gauthier, regional director of Human Resources at Fairmont Hotels and Resorts, has worked with Mercure for eight years. “He’s not only great on the professional side, but he looks at each colleague not just as an employee but someone who has a life [outside of the hotel].” Work-wise, she is amazed by his vitality. “We see him everywhere — at the pre-shift in the housekeeping department, to the pre-shift in the kitchen to the maintenance department. I often joke, ‘Do you have a cloning machine in your office?’”

During the 15 years Christopher Spear has worked for Mercure in various hotels, the director of Sales and Marketing at the Château has been consistently impressed: “He’s the best boss I’ve ever had — he’s a fantastic leader,” Spear says firmly. “He’s very humble. He’s not your typical general manager with a big ego who needs to be the centre of attention to get his point across. The guests love him. If we’re doing a site inspection of the hotel with a prospective client, he makes a point of coming and welcoming them.”

The renovation was a particularly chaotic time at the hotel, Spear adds. “We had no lobby, no restaurant and annual galas, but the crème de la crème of Quebec still said it was the best experience.” Spear credits Mercure for smoothly leading the team through the mania, “for keeping us motivated and pumped. He is creative, inspiring and has a certain rigour about him but it’s always done in a very coaching and collaborative way.” Then Spear says without missing a beat: “I’m very loyal to Robert. I would follow him anywhere.” ◆
Our warmest congratulations to Robert Mercure, General Manager of Fairmont Le Château Frontenac, for receiving the Pinnacle Award for 2015 Hotelier of the Year!
RAISE THE ROOF
THINKING LIKE A HOTELIER HAS HELPED HOUSTON CONSTRUCTION WIN THE 2015 SUPPLIER OF THE YEAR AWARD

STORY BY SHANE SCHICK
PHOTOGRAPH BY MARGARET MULLIGAN
LOOKING SHARP

A keen eye to detail and quality is a driving factor for Houston Construction Ltd. president Peter (right) and Johnny D’Amato, VP of Operations.

When the team at Houston Construction finishes renovating a hotel lobby, guestroom or restaurant, operators can be sure the team hasn’t missed a single detail. In fact, the Concord, Ont.-based company has constructed a 35-year career by building trust with clients and becoming a preferred vendor by tracking every facet of their projects.

In the past, the family-run company typically marked down any lingering problems on a spreadsheet as they moved from room to room, looking for any deficiencies in the construction. But earlier this year, all that changed when Houston Construction began using a new software program to log issues by simply taking a picture with their smartphone.

“If it can’t be repaired at that time, we’ll log it for later,” says Peter D’Amato, president of Houston Construction. “We’re also able to assign people or trades to resolve that deficiency.” Painting issues, for example, can be assigned to a painter, while wiring problems can be routed to an electrician. Because the data is stored in the cloud, it’s accessible from anywhere. Workers are also held accountable with a subcontractor management tool. “Everyone is tracked. If the painter or the electrician takes care of something, they mark it as being complete and that’s the only way it gets removed.

SUPPLIER OF THE YEAR
from the list,” he adds. Although Houston Construction didn’t create the software, called Closeout, identifying its potential for the Canadian hotel sector is the type of outside-the-box thinking that helped the firm nab the 2015 Pinnacle Award for Supplier of the Year. Sales might be another: the company projects to finish the year with a 28-per-cent increase in sales, recording one of the most profitable years in the history of the company.

Houston Construction has developed its approach to vision and leadership over the past 35 years since the company was formed by John D’Amato and his son Peter, who set out to establish themselves as a premier hotel renovations company. The firm got a head-start when it was awarded a $6.5-million, 700-room contract with the Fairmont Royal York Hotel in Toronto in 1985. Since then, the team of 11 (plus a number of subcontractors and tradespeople), has renovated close to 17,000 hotel rooms, 300 guestroom corridors, 150 lobbies, 75 restaurants and kitchens and 80 ballrooms spanning Ontario, Quebec and Saskatchewan. It counts Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, Oxford Properties, Starwood Hotels & Resorts, Marriott Hotels of Canada and Fairmont Hotels & Resorts as some of its clients. Today, it is slowly transitioning to its third generation of leadership with Peter’s son Johnny as the vice-president of Operations.

Houston Construction’s success can be attributed in part to an internal renovation of sorts: not of its offices, but its client list. “It’s been somewhat difficult, but we’ve been repositioning over the last year-and-a-half to concentrate on clients that understand the hotel renovation business and what it means to work with suppliers and contractors like us,” D’Amato says.

Of course, becoming more selective about clients and projects meant sales declined initially, D’Amato admits. “In the past we were up against situations where we were asked to meet certain schedules or deadlines where we knew that wasn’t going to happen,” he says. “We always took the position of letting our clients know what we feel is doable and maintain the end results, which is a high-quality product without compromise.”

The high quality work has earned Houston Construction praise with local designers. “Over the past 14 years and countless hotel projects, Houston Construction has always been reliable, professional and solid in dealing with our office. At Moncur Design Associates Inc. we have never hesitated putting our name behind [their] outstanding work,” says Robynne Moncur, president of Moncur Design Associates.

Ian Kenny, president of Savannah Project Consulting in Toronto, says the reason Houston Construction has become a favourite with his firm is the team’s remarkable ability to think like a hotel owner. “They are, no question, a good, small construction company,” he said. “In the hotel business, there is always the issue of budget and how they deal with that, and of course in the hotel business you need to deal with the schedule first and foremost. But they also have excellent employees, personalities and experience that is so important to make [the relationship] work well.”

Though his father passed away several years ago, D’Amato says the way the company runs remains the same, though he admits the competitive landscape of today’s hotel industry would probably surprise him. “There used to be a lot of owners with two, three or four hotels, maybe five. Now we’re seeing groups like Oxford and Indus [in Columbus, Ohio] that have thousands of hotels.
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and tens of thousands of rooms,” he observes. “There’s more of a stronghold on ownership, but that’s not really a bad thing because the philosophy in a lot of these organizations is about a determination to make their branding, whether they’re three- or five-star, the highest possible within that category.”

Houston Construction shares that philosophy in its role as contractor. For example, the company tries to minimize and track the number of rooms unavailable at a given time and update the hotel as work progresses. “We understand that moving forward, they need to block off a bank of rooms, so with our rooms displacement spreadsheet they are able to see how many days a set of rooms are out of order,” D’Amato explains. “The more rooms they’re able to have on inventory, the better it is for their bottom line.”

The other Houston Construction trademark is “The List” — an itemized set of rules developed over the span of 20 years and given to the tradespeople it hires. It specifies protocols such as steering clear of guest-facing areas and reducing noise. “We want to make sure that if the hotel is under renovation, the clients that come in don’t feel that the hotel is under renovation if at all possible,” he says.

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PETER D’AMATO, PRESIDENT

The team also makes its mark in the community by setting aside 10 per cent of net profits for donations to causes such as The Children’s Miracle Network, women’s shelters and cancer research. The team also supports the Heart and Stroke Foundation through many of their projects. “What we’re trying to do now is work with hotels we’re currently going under contract with and making proposals to them that, along with the renovations, [our donations help] put in a defibrillator, whether that’s in the front or back of the house.” So far, the team’s donations have resulted in Heart and Stroke Foundation Automated External Defibrillator (AED) stations at the Vaughan Mills shopping centre, the InterContinental Hotel Toronto and the Courtyard by Marriott Toronto Downtown, with plans for 10 more by 2017.

Hotel owners who respond to such overtures are likely to become mainstays in the client roster. “We’ve been steadfast in relationship-building,” D’Amato says. “It’s a two-way street for us. We want to make sure we’re able to provide the best service and quality possible, but at the same time we want great clients that understand and appreciate what we do.” It’s a philosophy that rings true for its employee base, which is encouraged to take training courses. “If we take care of our employees, they will take care of the clients.”

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Congratulations to all winners of the 2015 Pinnacle Awards
For a long time, the collective consciousness has been preoccupied with the impact of the baby boomers, but a new force is coming into focus. While not as copious, millennials — born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s — are now more vital to the labour force than any other demographic.

“They have significantly different values, beliefs and lifestyles from the baby-boomer generation — differences our hotels are having to adapt to for the simple reason that millennials will dominate the workplace in the coming decade,” says Erin Haid, associate director of Talent Development at Stamford, Conn.-based Starwood Hotels and Resorts. “They like transparency,” adds Mike Oshins, associate professor of Boston University’s School of Hospitality Administration. “They like their companies to be connected to their values and the environment; they want the opportunity to move up, they want a clear path and they want to be continually challenged.”

“If you look at hotels’ corporate offices and common spaces and compare them to those of Google, Twitter or Facebook, we’re behind,” says Anne Larcade, president and CEO of Huntsville, Ont.-based Sequel Hotels and Resorts. “If we endeavour to hire millennials and keep them, we need to step it up with our associate cafeterias, break rooms and benefits that go beyond health and dental to things the millennials value, like yoga, self-help and alternative wellness,” she adds. “All of this has not been picked up broadly by the hotel industry, this desire for millennials to love...
where they work. It’s been a huge oversight and it’s something hotels need to address.”

Millennials are looking for “interesting, challenging and meaningful work,” says Eddy Ng, a professor and F.C. Manning Chair in Economics and Business at Dalhousie University in Halifax. He is also the author of a University of Guelph-funded study, “A Comparative Study of Work Values between Generation X and Generation Y,” which found this group doesn’t like to sit still long, they welcome mobility and they tend to jump ship. In fact, his research found that the oldest millennials held an average of seven jobs by the time they hit 30 (compared to four for Gen Xers and fewer for baby boomers). But that taste for novelty can be fed from within the machine. Hospitality is great for its different roles, says Ng. “This is the generation that has trouble concentrating. A banker does the same thing forever. In hospitality, you get to endlessly explore different aspects of the industry.”

Millennials are tech-savvy, no doubt. Deprive them of the latest technology, and you’ll see a lot of frustration, warns Kristi Thyssen, human resources manager at the Ritz-Carlton Toronto. But operators have to find a balance between allowing devices and ensuring that customer service isn’t disrupted. “It is no longer a hard ‘no’ with gadgets, Facebook and texting, but instead a negotiation into what is acceptable to the business,” explains Monica Stewart-Bittner, GM of Super 8 Calgary Shawnessy. “For example, cell phones are okay at the desk, but must be on vibrate and texting cannot be done in front of guests and in place of work.”

Flexible work hours, a range of roles and a chance to hone their expertise in different locations are other priorities for this generation. “They like to have flexible schedules and be able to trade shifts as much as they need to accommodate their personal needs,” Stewart-Bittner adds. “There is more emphasis on a work-life balance.”

Those who invest in their employees earn long-term loyalty, says Elisabeth Kelan, professor of Leadership at the Cranfield School of Management, in Cranfield, England. “Millennials are more likely to leave organizations when they feel they can’t develop there. But if [hotels] develop millennials, they’re keen to stay.”

This generation is motivated to work with sustainably minded companies that are connected to the communities around them, and are keen on helping them develop other skills in the workplace. In that spirit, the team at Starwood provides volunteer opportunities and training programs on subjects outside the standard job duties and responsibilities, such as service culture, emotional intelligence, conflict management, time management and relationship-building.

Starwood also unveiled the Starwood Student Experience last year. This program for current and new associates who are concurrently advancing their education offers them several ways to get experience with the company, from hourly positions to internships and positions in Starwood’s management trainee program, and sweetens the deal with discounted hotel rates for its associates.

But after they’re a part of the team, this generation enjoys consistent feedback, preferring daily input rather than annual or biannual sit-down performance reviews. “They want to know how they can get better — and they want specifics,” says Thyssen. “They don’t just want to hear that something isn’t right; they want to know what it will take to make it right.”

Employers can mine this characteristic to their benefit, says Kelan. While millennials are confident, they harbour a lot of anxieties. They’re anxious about their future job prospects and are keen to find a secure job with their current skillset. “This means they understand they have to be at the top of their game all the time, which makes them hungry for feedback and self-development. Employers need to understand that.”

And if they don’t, millennials will find a happy landing somewhere else. After all, the skills they learn in hospitality — customer service, service quality, leadership, management — are highly transferrable, says Boston University’s Oshins. “They’ll go elsewhere, get paid more and have better opportunities. It’s the ‘Googlification’ of North America: where’s the free lunch? Where can we play ping-pong and have our dry cleaning taken care of? If [hotels] don’t make provisions for this segment of their workforce — who are prepared to work long hours but also want to have fun — they’re going to lose them. Full stop.”

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**MILLENNIALS BY THE NUMBERS**

In 2014, millennials accounted for 7.2 per cent of Canada’s workforce of 18 million workers, reports Statistics Canada. By 2028, 75 per cent of the Canadian labour force will be made up of this cohort.

According to a 2012 Abacus study, “Are You Ready for Us: An Introduction to Canadian Millennials,” 56 per cent of other demographics describe millennials as materialistic; followed by coddled (50 per cent), lazy (37 per cent), while only three per cent describe them as loyal.

The same study found that owning a home and having free time are top priorities for millennials.

A 2010 U.S. National Association of Colleges and Employers survey of college graduates found that 41 per cent of job seekers turned down offers in 2010, concluding that millennials are not willing to compromise happiness and motivation for a job they don’t love.

According to an Edelman study, “The 8095 Exchange: Millennials, Their Actions Surrounding Brands and the Dynamics of Reverberation,” 74 per cent of respondents believe that new technology makes their lives easier and more than half feel it helps them be closer to their friends.
A new day in hospitality has arrived, one where big league players such as Hilton, Hyatt and Marriott are using words such as “artisanal” to describe their offerings. That’s because beyond decent service and a clean bed, the millennial guest is driving the proliferation of a new hotel offering: the very experience of travel itself.

Blame the new sharing economies where Airbnb has taken a bite out of the traditional hotel business — or perhaps the rise of independent, boutique hotels that grant visitors an intimate look into trendy neighbourhoods or historic locations. It simply can’t be denied — the hospitality landscape is changing, with a creative turn towards showcasing urban neighbourhoods.

Lifestyle brands, in a sense, highlight the obvious: no two neighbourhoods are the same, therefore, why should any two hotels deliver the exact same menu, design and services? The value of lifestyle-oriented properties is derived from highlighting what’s unique about a destination.

“Hotel brands have been seeing success with one-of-a-kind boutique hotels evident in every market,” explains Brian Stanford, senior managing director at PKF Consulting Inc., a CBRE Company. “These are smaller properties that have dining and food-and-beverage as key features of their stay. They address that consumer desire for something different than the big-box branded hotel.”

A DAY IN THE LIFE The slowly blossoming lifestyle segment succeeds in capturing a snapshot of the neighbourhood in its design, service and amenities. Such is the case with Groupe Germain’s Alt brand (above)
Stanford notes that in an effort to meet this guest demand, larger brands have been creating their own franchised version of the boutique experience, though the growth of lifestyle-oriented properties is still in its infancy in Canada. According to PKF research, in 2014 the 12 self-identified lifestyle hotels in the Canadian market posted an average RevPAR of $86.92. Taking into consideration current market trends and an increase in the development of lifestyle-oriented properties, RevPAR is projected to reach $101.30 in 2016.

“Alt by Le Germain, from a physical product perspective, is the largest lifestyle brand in Canada and by next year, they will account for about seven properties, including one in Winnipeg, Montreal and downtown Ottawa,” says Stanford. “But when we measure it on scale with other segments, it’s undeniably small for the time being.”

Nevertheless, the core deliverables of this product are similar across the board, says Stanford, including “local integration on the menu of [food] grown in that particular region, art tied into the local art scene and experiences tied to the downtown cores of each urban environment.”

That’s certainly the case with Canopy by Hilton, which is slated to enter key urban sites within the next few years — starting with a unit in Toronto by Easton’s Group of Hotels. Corey Mitchell, senior director of Development, Collection and Lifestyle Brands at Hilton Worldwide explains the concept that will generate rates of $120 to $190 per night. “Canopy is really about tapping into key urban neighbourhoods and the new experiences — culinary, artistic and so on — that they have to offer.” They’re also maximizing the potential of the easiest, and cheapest, means to advertise these experiences through the ever-pervasive use of social media.

Most recently, Canopy opened its first hotel in Reykjavik and kicked off a social media campaign, #MeetTheNeighbors to draw attention to its surroundings. “It’s a curated program that showcases interviews...
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with people who live or work within walking distance of the hotel,” says Mitchell. Within Canada, Starwood’s Aloft brand is targeting a similar demographic. “This is a consumer that prizes access over ownership,” explains Brian McGuinness, global brand leader, Specialty Select Brands for Stamford, Conn.-based Starwood Hotels & Resorts, which is set to be acquired by Marriott. “[It’s] what we call a democratization of service and different experiences and it’s driving a change in the way we design and operate our hotels.”

Like Canopy, Aloft finds the pulse of the local culture and delivers that to the consumer, whether it’s a locally inspired cocktail or an acoustic performance by a local band in the lounge. “Because so many people travel alone, it’s also really important for us that the lobbies, lounges and other public spaces have a vibrancy to them, so guests and locals will feel as if they are part of a vibrant social scene, with a sense of familiarity. In short, we are catering to the lifestyle needs of our guests,” he adds.

Hotel brands are looking towards adding lifestyle properties to their stable, says Marriott International’s Toni Stoeckl, VP of Lifestyle Brands. “One option that bigger brands have is the ability to purchase an already-existing
Sysco Guest Supply is committed to maximizing the guest experience at your property by offering an extensive line of hospitality products that enables you to provide the ultimate in comfort and convenience.
Marriott’s Renaissance brand — soon to pop up inside a refurbished post office in Montreal — delivers on local experiences. “We have what we call ‘Navigators’ or ‘lifestyle concierges,’ who connect guests to the cool part of the city,” explains Stoeckl. “These are people who will guide you to those restaurants, museums or bars you just wouldn’t find with a tour guide.”

Though many of their lifestyle properties are still in the development phase, there’s a significant number of projects coming down the pipeline. With the acquisition of AC Hotels, Marriott has imported the European brand to Chicago, Miami, Kansas City, and Washington D.C. with more on the way. There are 92 AC Hotels in development, including one slated for Montreal.

The emphasis on design will attract more snaps and posts on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, translating to direct and free advertising for the hotel. “It’s no secret that we want to be part of that social media conversation where people are taking pictures of their food or their one-of-a-kind cocktail and are posting it on Instagram or Pinterest,” says Stoeckl. “But to be inspired to do that, there needs to be a cool story to tell.”

Meanwhile, a less expensive, but design-forward Marriott lifestyle brand being developed in tandem with AC is Moxy. Stoeckl says that this brand, while more affordable, features smaller rooms (just 183 square feet) outfitted in what he calls “industrial-chic design built for the young-at-heart guest who values access to everything but doesn’t necessarily think he or she needs to own it.”

Unlike AC’s more sophisticated decor, which takes its inspiration from Italian fashion houses, Moxy’s industrial feel will showcase raw finishes, concrete floors, exposed or reclaimed wood and brickwork. “This is Marriott’s attempt to target a consumer in his or her early career, who doesn’t want to sacrifice style just because they may have a lower budget,” he explains.

While lifestyle properties bring a fresh new take on travel, Stanford says the emerging category has its own set of challenges. “The truth is that when you look at Canada specifically, there just aren’t a lot of markets for this brand to expand into,” he notes. “Once you have covered downtown Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Ottawa and the other top eight or nine markets, there’s nowhere really to go. Would this make sense, for example, in downtown North Bay?”

While it’s a great product, the opportunities within Canada aren’t even close to those in the U.S. or Europe, in fact, for at least the next 100 years, he adds. “That’s really this product’s biggest constraint — the small number of dense, urban locations in Canada.” Of course, there is still the rural “lifestyle” segment to be explored.
Any hotel operator who is serious about meeting and conference offerings has been quick to get on board with smart technology and innovative pricing. Today's work-friendly environment factors in size, comfortable furnishings, menu offerings, appealing design and plenty of electrical outlets, Internet ports and storage for the wealth of electronic devices and audio-visual equipment that have become essential to today's meeting spaces.

“Meetings are a big part of our business, especially here because we're connected to the Calgary Telus Convention Centre,” says Tiffany Richards, director of Sales and Marketing at the Calgary Marriott Downtown Hotel, which recently added 4,000 sq. ft. of meeting space and four meeting rooms to the property.

But, the renovation wasn't just about adding a few extra rooms. It also provided the impetus to introduce a new web-based tool called Meetings Imagined, an interactive site where potential customers can pick and choose decor, furnishings, configurations and menu preferences. “We met with customers to get their feelings on meetings and events. The response was, it’s generally boring. They want to get away from tables and chairs to have something more engaging,” says Richards.

Customers can click through an “inspiration gallery” to view different options based on the type of event, whether it's a celebration or a brainstorming session. The requests are then forwarded to the event manager who coordinates furnishings, technology, music, lighting and more. “It's great to be able to visualize what customers want,” adds Richards. Packages range from $100 to $135 per person. The $100 package, for example, includes a tripod screen, flip chart, continental breakfast, morning coffee break, hot lunch buffet with assorted soft drinks and an afternoon coffee break, complete with homemade cookies.

Additionally, the hotel offers a meeting services app called Red Coat Direct that can be managed via a smartphone or tablet. Customers can use it for everything from ordering coffee to regulating the room temperature simply by logging in via their device. “They can send a text through the app and the notification will go [to the department] right away for action,” Richards says. “Users can link to it three days prior to the event and start communicating with the event manager in real time to send notifications and updates.”
DoubleTree by Hilton West Edmonton is one of a handful of SilverBirch properties in Canada serving as a testing ground for the newly minted SilverBirch Conference Centre concept. To date, the response has been promising. In fact, the hotel won a Venue of the Year award at the Meeting Professionals International Greater Edmonton Event Management Awards for its innovative approach.

The West Edmonton location has 35,000 sq. ft. of flexible meeting and banquet space in a horseshoe design on the main floor, including a common area that serves as a reception and breakout space when needed.

There are also small chatrooms where guests can make personal calls or have one-on-one conversations," says Grant McCurdy, GM.

"The ambiance is enhanced by ample natural light throughout the venue. "We have windows or skylights in all rooms. Some meetings are very long so natural light helps a lot. We also offer lots of lockup closets and extra bandwidth."

All services, including audio-visual equipment, a concierge, meeting room rentals and food-and-beverage, are priced at a flat fee of $89 per person (including gratuities, plus tax). "It surprises a lot of people who are thinking there are always additional costs," says McCurdy. "Those who have experienced it love it because they know what they're getting into."

Once word of mouth got around, people were hooked on it, he adds. "It took time to get people to understand what the one-stop shop approach really is and how easy it is to budget around it."

McCurdy says the SilverBirch Conference Centre is an idea that came along at the right time. "Everyone is downsizing and working with smaller groups in locations across the country rather than larger Canada-wide events. With the economy the way it is, people don't want to be excessive in their spending. They're looking at value for their money and are careful about what they spend."

The SilverBirch Conference Centre is one of only two in Edmonton (the other is at the Radisson Edmonton South) that have piloted the concept, and now it is being slated for test markets in the U.S.

When it comes to smaller meetings, the Opus Hotel in Vancouver's Yaletown district is primed for business, having recently added a new meeting room called Opus III. While the meeting rooms may be on a smaller scale, (a 30- to 50-person capacity, depending on layout), the hotel offers a unique and intimate experience for its customers. "Opus III evolved when business centres went the way of the dinosaur," Nicholas Gandossi, GM explains. "So we got our sales and marketing people together to determine the best use of the space. Because it was a technologically advanced space it had a great synergy with the hotel."

In designing the new meeting space, the intent was to make customers feel they were somewhere special and being attended to, he adds. "We wanted the meeting experience to be one that is remembered for a long time."

The new boardroom-style meeting room can host up to 12 people, but it packs a lot of technology power, including a theatre-style, 70-inch plus flat-screen Smart TV. There's also a panel to control lighting, connectivity, temperature, music and other features in the room.

The crowning touch is a vibrant and a window that overlooks a small courtyard to give the impression of more space, along with an award-winning restaurant on the property that also supplies food for banquets. As Gandossi says, "We decided when we designed the new space to go big or go home. So we went big — and our customers love it."
Upon entering the Easy Rider suite at the Retro Suites hotel in Chatham, Ont., guests are greeted with a 1910 Hudson motorcycle suspended from the ceiling, while inside the bathroom, a giant Harley Davidson logo frames the sink. It's just one of 34 themed suites on offer inside the restored historic hotel. Ranging from urban chic, coastal charm, earthy cowboy, or even funky rock ‘n’ roll, it’s all about offering a one-of-a-kind hotel experience.

Across the country at the Opus Hotel Vancouver, an online ‘Lifestyle Concierge’ suggests guestrooms based on five different personality types; 11 distinct designs match each guest’s personal taste. The walls might range from cool blues or gentle earth tones to glitzy red or orange hues; the furnishings and fabrics span sleek minimalist to eclectic modern. The artwork might be colourful anime or soft nature prints.

When it comes to furniture, hoteliers are ditching the copy-and-paste mentality in favour of memorable pieces.

BY LIZ CAMPBELL

DIFFERENT STROKES

MIX AND MATCH Versatile furniture choices at Le Méridien (top and left) and Le Germain’s Alt brand (above) can transform a space to accommodate dining, socializing and meeting.
What these two very different hotels have in common is using decor and ambiance to personalize the guest experience. And while branding and loyalty programs may bring many guests back to familiar lodging favorites, there is a growing number of customers equally interested in design.

“I think people are fed up with copy-and-paste hotel decor,” says Louise Dupont, senior interior design partner with LemayMichaud Architecture Design in Montreal, who is revamping the Le Germain Hotel Toronto, slated to be completed in the spring. She has also designed properties in the Alt portfolio. “Today’s guests are searching online for hotels that understand their needs,” she says.

Beyond a comfortable bed and chic surroundings, co-president Christiane Germain has described her design aspiration as ‘enveloppante,’ meaning a comforting, cocooned environment — one that, as Dupont suggests, responds to the needs of the guest.

Designing for these needs might mean reconfiguring a classic room. For example, some business travelers prefer not to work facing a wall. “Their laptops are portable, so the desk should be too,” she says. They can connect devices to the wall-mounted TV screen to use the TV as their screen, enabling them to work from the bed with a glass of wine. The desk might be a spacious table that could also double as an eating space.

Julie Frank, global director of Design for Le Méridien Hotels, echoes this need for versatility. “We advocate for the high (or standing) desk, as it gives our creative-minded traveller the flexibility of the architect’s drawing table, being able to sit in a tall chair or stand,” she says.

Removing a large piece of furniture from the room creates a sense of openness, even in a smaller footprint. For example, in place of a space-hogging closet and dresser, Alt features a luggage rest in combination with hangers above and a drawer beneath, placed near the bathroom for convenience.

At the Element Vancouver Metrotown, room sizes are slightly

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**CARVING A NICHE**

Hotels are more than a home away from home. In its 2014 ranking of the world’s best hotels *Conde Nast Traveler* praised “a hotel that celebrates where it is in the world.” The properties below have found creative and unique ways to incorporate a local flavour with their furniture choices.

Hotel La Ferme in pastoral Charlevoix, Que., has charming touches such as grandmère rocking chairs and rugs evoking the woven rag rugs of rural Quebec. The farm theme is cultivated with milk bottle light fixtures and milk crate magazine racks in the public areas.

At Vancouver’s Listel Hotel, cedar headboards and armoires are carved using traditional native techniques. Textured Shoji screen window dressings and hand-forged ironworks showcase northwest artists and craftspeople.

At Saskatoon’s James Hotel, gold-topped tables and tan upholstery evoke prairie wheat, while the walls and floors reflect the blues and greys of winter skies. The striking onyx fireplace and lobby desk echo the rippling wheat. Custom furnishings in butternut and walnut are designed and crafted by local artisans and manufacturers.

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smaller. Aside from the king bed and kitchenette, the rooms are minimalist in nature, allowing space for socializing or activities such as yoga or Tai Chi. “The kitchenette helps them eat a little healthier on the road, instead of depending on restaurants all the time,” says general manager, Paul Gallop. “We’re finding guests are looking for space centred around health and wellness.”

Dupont’s latest project is redesigning the guestrooms at the Le Germain Hotel Toronto, first opened in 2003. She found that regulars didn’t want a drastic change, so she added simple, luxurious elements such as a high-end Raindance shower system by German manufacturer Hansgrohe and a lighted make-up mirror. LED strip lights provide general lighting on walls and new decorative LED light fixtures brighten the space. She included a chic, comfortable chair and ottoman positioned next to electrical outlets, a popular addition.

In fact, outlets are gaining a reputation as a must-have amenity. Gulliver, The Economist’s intrepid business travel columnist, has declared 2015 The Year of the Plug. “This may not seem earth-shattering. But given how inseparable we are from our gadgets, having somewhere to plug in our tablets and the like is an easy and effective way to please customers.”

Some hotels have purchased bedside lamps with built-in plugs, and high-tech touches such as a recharging surface on the bedside table can eliminate the need for extensive rewiring and provide power where it’s most needed.

Technology seems to be driving furniture changes in hotel lobbies at Le Méridien. “We view our Hub, our brand’s modern take on the staid hotel lobby, as a place for people to connect with one another, exchange ideas and enjoy morning coffee or aperitifs in the evening,” says Frank. “As people begin to travel more for work or work remotely, the public space of a hotel becomes the focal point of the guest experience.”

The Hub typically has three areas: a large table where groups gather; sections of furniture where people can hang out together and interact; and more intimate, coffeehouse-style seating. To achieve this, the furniture might be high tables and counter-height chairs, or relaxed lounge and accent chairs offset against (mid-century at times) inspired sofas.

In the lobby of Element are high-top, multi-use tables with outlets. “Often several guests will be working at these, and connecting with others doing the same,” says Gallop. “They’re stuck in front of a laptop for many hours but our guests come down to public areas, bringing their work with them. Here, they can chat with others and enjoy a glass of wine.”

Hotels are expected to be all things to all people, but as guests’ needs change, hotels must respond. “We’ve always gone through design trends like classic, modern, retro — like fashions for clothing — but from now on, technology will drive these,” says Gallop. “We will see designs in the future that allow operators to personalize even more.”

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It was during her last year of high school that Stacy Manning realized she wanted to work in the hotel industry. “I finished my last year in Europe, which connected me with a cousin who worked in hospitality. He had attended hotel school in London and inspired me to apply to the Hotel and Food program at the University of Guelph,” says Manning, who earned her Bachelor of Commerce in 1991.

Manning has spent most of her working life in resort developments, where she worked for behemoths such as Intrawest, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts and O’Neill Hotels & Resorts. These days, the outdoor-loving GM helms the 226-room Westin Trillium House, Blue Mountain, which overlooks the ski hill and is steps away from The Village at Blue Mountain.

Last month both the hotel and the hotelier celebrated their 10th anniversary. “I’ve been with The Westin Trillium House since pre-opening. I still have the pleasure of working alongside 10 other great people who also opened the hotel. It’s our collective baby,” she boasts.

When it comes to managing her team of 130 associates, Manning maintains a casual approach, perfect for running a resort where fun is the name of the game with activities such as skiing, snowboarding and snowshoeing. “Our largest segment of customers is families and couples coming to enjoy the resort and surrounding area events and activities,” she says. For those attending meetings, the hotel’s 10,000-sq.-ft. conference centre serves as an additional draw.

Manning believes success is about “continually challenging yourself to find empathy.” She’s garnered accolades with an ethos of “working hard, having a strong support network and finding new ways to approach challenges.” And, she adds, “making sure to have a good laugh every day.”

Certainly, being part of an industry that never sleeps is stressful, but Manning copes by “scheduling everything into one calendar regardless of whether it’s business or personal.” In her spare time, she watches her kids ski, play hockey, soccer or basketball.

She also manages to find time to sneak in runs and hikes (and snowshoeing in the winter) up Blue Mountain with her husband and/or dogs. “The Westin brand is focused upon wellness in travel and this aligns perfectly to our active outdoor location. I also do yoga with my friends, which must include a chat and a beer after class.”

Following last year’s multi-million dollar renovation to the resort, which included a redux of its fitness centre and lobby, Manning’s next project is a full-scale renovation of the case goods in the hotel suites, scheduled for next fall. As for the future, having spent the last two decades in ski resorts, “a nice sunny location with a beach has a certain appeal,” she laughs.
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