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Inside the Bible of luxury: CEO Filip Boyen tells the Forbes Travel Guide

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Born in Belgium, in his career he has crossed the world: from Bora Bora to Moscow, up to Peru. **Filip Boyen** has been CEO of **Forbes Travel Guide** (Ftg) since 2018 and has a deep understanding of the world of luxury hospitality. It recently announced the 2021 Star awards, the awards that select the best hotels , restaurants and spas, as well as the best workers and brands in the industry. Before joining Ftg, Boyen was CEO of Small luxury hotels of the world, for which he oversaw 520 exceptional hotels in 80 countries around the world. Previously, he had worked for 18 years with Orient-Express, Belmond's forerunner, as well as general manager of the Bora Bora Lagoon Resort in Tahiti.

Boyen, who currently resides in London, has built a global vision of the industry over the years. In fact, he began his career in the hospitality industry as a commis chef and remained in the food and beverage industry for ten years, where he worked in starred restaurants in Belgium, France and England. For a time he was even under the guidance of the French master **Joël Robuschon** . His ability to manage complex operations, in the ship and train sectors as well as in the hotel, gastronomy and wellness world, has led him to success.

"Being at the top of Forbes Travel Guide is a dream job," he says. "Quality has always been a passion of mine. We verify luxury, but we also support people who have a passion for service. We train and improve them ". Boyen also assures us that there is always room for "new generation" in a sector that, despite the crisis, is always winning.

Filip Boyen, CEO of Forbes Travel Guide (courtesy Forbes Travel Guide)

How does Forbes Travel Guide set itself apart from competitors?

Since 1958, Forbes Travel Guide has been helping travelers discover the best hotels, restaurants and spas. We are the only independent global rating agency for luxury hospitality, as we pay for all inspections and use anonymous hospitality experts to ensure they are treated like any guest. During their stay - minimum two nights in the hotel - our inspectors evaluate the properties according to 900 objective criteria. To ensure that our standards accurately reflect guest expectations, we have the Standards Advisory Board. It is a group of world leaders in the luxury industry, helping to refine our standards every year. The star rating system relies heavily on service. This is because the experience in a hotel,

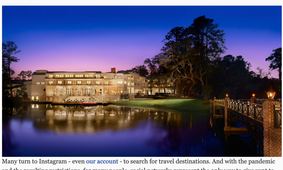
What is your concept of a luxury hotel?

Luxury means guests feel completely at ease, in every sense. Something as simple as adding coffee or water before they run out can make a difference. It is important to independently satisfy customers' needs, such as food or sleep, as if guests were in the comfort of their home. I never tire of pointing out that the way the staff makes the guest feel is the most important aspect of a luxury service.

What is the philosophy behind the Star awards?

Our Star awards honor the best of luxury properties from around the world. The star ratings are based on an algorithm that attributes 25% of the weight to the structure - for example, the quality of the furniture and bathroom products - and the remaining 75% to the service. Of course, we are careful not to expect the services to be flattened: we expect Beijing to be welcomed in a different way than in Las Vegas. The investment in the structure must be there, but a lot revolves around the service, which must be comfortable and natural, not robotic.

For 2020 and 2021 you have also awarded the Instagram hotel of the year. This year it was the Waldorf Astoria Maldives Ithaafushi, in the Maldives. Did you want to bring more attention to social media?



Many turn to Instagram - even our account - to search for travel destinations. And with the pandemic and the resulting restrictions, for many people, social networks represent the only way to give vent to the desire to travel. We wanted to encourage the armchair-bound to plan their next trip anyway and to acknowledge the wonderful efforts of the hotels that are inspiring us through their feeds.

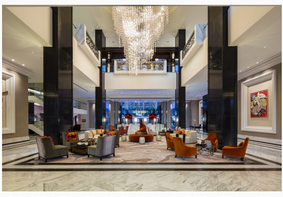
Tokyo is the city that has gained the most new five-star hotels. Why?

Since 2015, hospitality investments in Tokyo have grown a lot, with international brands entering or re-entering the market: Marriott, Ihg and Four Seasons, for example, have joined the city's traditional ryokan properties, such as Takanawa Hanakohro, a new five star hotel inside the Grand prince hotel Takanawa. Before Covid-19, many of these hotels dedicated themselves to improving service in anticipation of the Olympics - their work paid off.

The second annual Employee of the year award celebrates staff members who excel in serving guests and colleagues. Employee of the year was Hisashi Sugimoto, a master bartender at Tokyo Station Hotel. What characterizes excellent service in luxury hotels?

Hisashi Sugimoto has demonstrated a deep passion and dedication in guest service. He joined the Tokyo Station Hotel in 1958 and created many original cocktails at the property's bar. At 80, he continues to welcome guests and create their drinks: he embodies everything that is needed to achieve service excellence. On this level too, it is not the grand gestures that make the difference, but the small touches, such as memorizing a guest's favorite drink, remembering a person's name and, of course, providing a warm service capable of preventing requests.

How has Covid-19 changed the industry over the past year?



The Post Oak Hotel in Houston, Houston's first five-star hotel according to Forbes Travel Guide (courtesy Forbes Travel Guide)

We have made some permanent changes to the standards we require. For example, on the room service front, we've eliminated the need to remove plastic wrappers. We continue to work with our standards advisory board and look forward to 2022 - we will make new decisions based on the data that will arrive in the coming months. Official inspections will only start again in March. Although wellness is not a new trend, there is a renewed focus on it. We have therefore introduced a set of wellness standards for 2021 that will be part of the overall assessment algorithm.

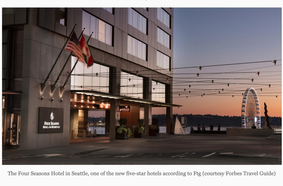
The FTG also has a list of the best spas. Employee of the Year was Najla Ceman, a therapist at The Spa at Four Seasons Hotel New York Downtown. What is asked of a person in his role to be recognized as a professional of excellence?

This award is a recognition for those who demonstrate a passion for service excellence, for those who are able to go further, every day. Najla, in particular, impressed us with her hard work and dedication to the craft when the spa was temporarily closed due to Covid. It has committed to certification in many health and safety-related courses to ensure it is ready to meet the new demands of the pandemic era as the facility reopens.

What will be the new trends in the field of spas and wellness?

There will be a continuous focus on well-being and sustainability. We foresee that there will be more outdoor spaces and common areas, a trend in progress not only in spas, but also in hotels and restaurants. Additionally, we see stronger demand for total wellness experiences.

Hilton Head, Houston, Montreal, Philadelphia and Seattle are the five cities that for the first time can boast a five-star hotel. Will these destinations attract more luxury travelers and become markets worth investing in?



The Four Seasons Hotel in Seattle, one of the new five-star hotels according to Ftg (courtesy Forbes Travel Guide)

Over time, of course. For the foreseeable future, especially in the continental United States, we anticipate strong demand for remote destinations. The trend of summer 2020 will repeat itself. Some large cities, such as New York, San Francisco, Chicago and, in the world, Rome, London, Paris and Macau, will take longer and will not return to the numbers of 2019 until international travel they will not resume at full capacity. On the bright side, we recognize strong demand for pent-up spending, and once the masses can travel freely, luxury accommodations in traffic-hungry locations will see strong growth.

What will be the keys to success in the hotel sector in the future?

The question that will have to be asked in the post-Covid era will be: "If we have to eliminate something from the traditional guest experience, how can we replace it with something new?". We see many hotels responsibly removing items that pose a health safety problem or threat quickly. However, we see fewer creative ideas on how to replace those elements. For example: If you are forced to remove a minibar, you need to find another, equally elegant way to provide the convenience of in-room food and drink upon request. Guests want to maintain a high level of comfort and luxury when traveling, despite all the changes brought about by the pandemic.

What will be the winning trends in the luxury hospitality industry in the coming years?

The theme of sustainability remained pending in 2020, but brands are starting to engage again on this front: they recognize the increasing importance that guests attach to being a good global citizen. People are also increasingly attentive to health and nutrition.

In the field of gastronomy, what makes a restaurant excellent?

Eating at a Forbes Travel Guide five-star restaurant is like watching a ballet. Everything is well choreographed, everything is studied in detail: the presentation of the napkin, the shape of the plate, the way a fish is facing when it is brought to the table, the toilets. But all this supports the star: food. The fare is a hallmark, it must be true to the style of the restaurant in every way. The staff are knowledgeable about the dishes, but not pretentious. The moment of ordering is like a consultation: all the attention is on the customer, on his needs and preferences, personalized without being too long or intrusive. Overall, the dining experience must be unforgettable.

What are Forbes Travel Guide's goals for the future?

Restoring confidence in safe travel is a top priority for the hospitality industry and for Ftg. Health safety will remain a vital issue for the foreseeable future, even with the encouraging news about vaccines. To this end, we have collaborated with the Sharecare company to create the "Verified with Forbes Travel Guide" badge, which certifies compliance with over 360 health safety standards, which include hygiene protocols, cleaning products and procedures, masks and dpi, ventilation, management responsibility and health safety communication with guests and employees. We provide reliable and independent verification of existing procedures in a facility. Consumers no longer have to crack the lengthy security measures of each facility - they can simply search for the badge.

Filip boyen, Forbes travel guide, hotel, Luxury, restaurants, travel

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