

A Life Of Luxury

Simon Casson has been with Four Seasons for 28 years, working up to his current role as President of Hotel Operations for EMEA. He believes the secret to luxury lies much deeper than a sparkling surface.

There's indulging in an extravagant holiday, and then there's hiring your own island. The difference between the two is not small in price, but one that an elite group of HNWIs can manage—and if the urge hits them, Four Seasons can provide the venue. Having opened its private island resort in the Maldives at Voavah, Baa Atoll at the end of 2016, it now has a second secluded paradise earmarked for 2018 at Desroches in the Seychelles. According to the President of Hotel Operations for Europe, Middle East and Africa, Simon Casson, the need is surprisingly strong. “We started to see a lot of demand from families that wanted privacy or people that had a birthday or a special event—they wanted the Maldives, but taken to another level,” he explains. “That’s the challenge of our business, it’s always aspirational. How can you keep raising your game?”

If having an island to yourself seems a bit dull and you'd rather hop around the globe with likeminded people, how about booking a seat on board the company's private jet? For \$250,000 per couple, the Four Seasons private jet experience caters for foodies, adventurers and explorers, all the while staying in Four Seasons properties across the world and travelling in ultimate style. “The jet has been an incredible success story,” says Casson. “We asked ourselves how can we curate something that is truly experiential? So we thought, well, let's have our own plane. Wherever you touch down there is a Four Seasons, and we expose you to things that you would not easily experience on your own.”

The target market for these extraordinary experiences is wider than one might imagine. Passengers on the jet range from retired couples spending their savings on something unforgettable to high-powered executives on romantic getaways. Casson reasons that “expensive is all relative”, it's the perceived value that counts. If you know you're getting something that cannot be bought, the price is almost immaterial. And that unpayable quality? Service—exceptional service.

Humble beginnings

It's all a far cry from washing dirty pots and dishes in a hot, busy restaurant kitchen, where a teenage Casson first caught the bug for the industry. Far from putting him off, the environment piqued an interest within him, leading to a long and successful career—one that may surprise his former school advisers. “Academically I was very poor. I remember speaking to the careers master and he said life's not looking good for you, have you thought about joining the army or fixing cars?” he laughs. Luckily his mum had faith, advising him to follow his passion. “There was something about the energy of the kitchen. It was noisy and vibrant, and I'd get this view through the doors the waiters came in and out of. I could see people arriving in beautiful clothes and pulling up in nice cars. Hear the sounds of celebration going on. Something clicked. I thought this is something that I'm interested in and that I think I could do.”

From the early days, the budding hotelier cut his teeth shoulder-to-shoulder with the best. Having learnt his trade at college and a selection of boutique hotels, he found himself on a management training scheme that earned him recognition as trainee of the year in a local trade magazine. As a result, he was headhunted by The Castle in Taunton, south west England, and interviewed by rising star chef, Gary Rhodes. “He was running the kitchen, I was running the restaurant,” Casson remembers. “We just had a lot of fun. Really learning about luxury for the first time.” The owner spotted his potential and encouraged him to branch out, writing a letter of introduction to the General Manager of the only Four Seasons in the U.K. at the time. In 1989, Casson hopped on a bus up to London, and the rest is history.

In the last 28 years, he has seen Four Seasons grow from less than 20 hotels to over 100—small compared to many groups, but with each property built true to the company ethos. “What I was told when I joined was remarkably simple: treat others as you’d want to be treated,” he tells me. “What success looks like, what it means, it’s never entirely about making money. The company is driven by people and the messaging has stayed the same.” And along the way Four Seasons has pioneered some true hotel staples—it was one of the first to include a hairdryer, soaps in the shower, a mini-bar—small luxuries that make a big difference to travelers.

What has changed is scale, on an international footing. In EMEA alone there are 36 hotels in 25 countries, and the first property in Kuwait is due to open this year, making Casson responsible for roughly 35% of the entire current Four Seasons portfolio.

Entering the region

Casson first made his mark in the Gulf in 2005, opening Four Seasons in Doha, Qatar. But he was nervous when breaking ground in Dubai. The sheer volume of luxury hotels in the metropolitan hub makes for tough competition. “I worried about it,” he admits. “No-one gives you a right to be the best.” Fundamentals such as partners and locations were chosen carefully. Seeking out single owner rather than government entity partners along a relatively quiet stretch of Jumeirah Beach took time, but the results were worth the wait, and closely followed by a boutique offering in bustling DIFC. Part of his strategy was to not just try and outdo the rest with bigger and better features and facades, but to create the kind of service culture that comes without a price tag. “If all it took was money every hotel would be great. I knew coming in that we’d be competing highly on location and product. I knew our opportunity was in service, and what I’ve always believed is that the leap from good to great is human,” he explains. “A guest knows that. They cannot pay for kindness, they cannot pay for someone to anticipate a need, or to go out of their way to do something special. The lifeblood that runs through the building is people.”

So, he personally handpicked every employee. Each of the more than 600 members of staff at Four Seasons Jumeirah Beach Resort—from gardeners to directors—had their final interview with Casson. The process took months and saw him travelling across the world to speak to people on their home turf, with more than 45 nationalities now represented at the hotel.

Casson’s predictions for the region’s future are based on a long-term vision. Although some spots may be suffering in the current climate, he believes that investments made now will pay off years down the line. “I think you’re going to get a lot of peaks and troughs. Putting politics aside I think what’s happened on a macro level will stimulate growth,” he muses. What Four Seasons won’t be doing anytime soon is moving into the mid-segment of budget

offerings. That's just not what the brand stands for. The possibility for expansion is extensive however—it's a case of where rather than what. Potential locations are being explored across Europe, the Middle East and Africa, in any corner where a Four Seasons guest may wish to go. But for Casson there will always be a favorite slightly closer to his heart. "If I had to pick one it would be the one in Florence, Italy" he smiles. "I met my wife there five years ago and I took her back there to propose." Not quite a private island, but an unforgettable experience all the same.

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