

Hospitality's Global Impact



Celebrating Tradition

An Interview with
Gail R. Isono, General Manager,
The Huntington Hotel & Nob Hill Spa



EDITORS' NOTE In 1990, before assuming her current post, Gail Isono joined The Huntington Hotel as a Sales Manager and soon advanced to Director of Sales and Marketing. With more than 27 years of experience in the hospitality industry, she is the first woman to serve in the top post of the 86-year-old property.



Gail R. Isono

PROPERTY BRIEF Built in 1924 as one-bedroom apartments atop San Francisco's coveted Nob Hill, The Huntington Hotel & Nob Hill Spa (www.huntingtonhotel.com) offers 135 guest rooms and suites decorated in an understated, yet elegant, style and includes amenities like complimentary chauffeured transportation to Union Square and the Financial District and access to Nob Hill Spa and the spa's indoor pool, Jacuzzi, and eucalyptus-infused steam rooms. The Huntington Hotel also features the award-winning Big 4 Restaurant. The luxurious hotel is a member of Preferred Hotels & Resorts Worldwide and Small Luxury Hotels of the World and is owned by Nob Hill Properties, Inc.

In terms of the impact the global economic crisis has had on hospitality over the past 24 months, especially in major cities, how much impact did you see for the property and is the market in San Francisco coming back?

I didn't expect it to last this long or to have such slow growth. It has led me to learn that we have to do a lot more layering and we have to fish in more ponds.

Our sales team has been dynamic about getting out there and finding out what is going on in the industry and the need we can fulfill.

But it's also an exciting time, because what we do well is coddle and take care of people, and during a time of uncertainty, that is what people are looking for.

So it's been a positive from that standpoint.

How important has it been to offer guests a modern feel while making sure you don't lose some of the heritage for which the property is known?

The stories for which the Huntington is known are always going to be those that regard its tradition; it's always going to be about the people who demand that service level and the reasons why they stay at the Huntington Hotel.

In terms of the modernization via technology, it has been a treat and a challenge. It means we have to look ahead as far as providing what makes one comfortable in the rooms technology-wise, while also making sure guests still feel cozy and warm.

But it doesn't mean the guest who has been coming here for the past 30 years won't know how to use the remote for the TV. It has to be simple enough from a usability perspective for the guest so the experience doesn't

fade away.

At a time when all luxury properties talk about the importance of the spa offering, how critical is the Nob Hill Spa concept and are you happy with how it has evolved?

It's so exciting. We've talked about taking wellness to the next level.

We recently introduced a new quiet and peaceful room. The Nob Hill Spa is great for the person who wants to get to know a friend and sit by the fireplace, Jacuzzi, or the pool and relax, but what it did not offer is a quiet, Zen room.

So we took out the yoga room and created a quiet space called Zen. It's about having a cocoon so people can sit in quietness, relax, and reflect on their experience at the Nob Hill Spa.

How do you keep your Big 4 restaurant concept fresh, and how important has it been to have a community following?

Both the local residents and the visitors to San Francisco find Big 4 Bar a great place for meeting people, making friends, and catching up with the bartender.

The fun part for us has been keeping up traditions such as Wild Game Week, where Chef Gloria creates cuisine that she knows best, as well as creating new experiences for people such as Mad Men Dinners, where people dress up and enjoy bubble gum cigarettes we provide.

You also have a selection of terrific accommodations, including suites. Would you talk about the vision behind the Mulholland Suite?

The Mulholland Suite was a collaboration with the Mulholland Company, a San Francisco-based leather company. They were celebrating their 20th anniversary and asked to collaborate with us on a suite.

We explained what the Huntington was all about: the tradition, retaining a dignified feel and making sure that dignitaries, opera stars, philanthropists – whoever stayed at the hotel – would be comfortable with it. Along with that, we wanted the San Francisco feel to be reflected in the colors of the room.

Designer Jim Neeley was great about putting it altogether. When you walk into the bedroom, the colors reflect a cold, foggy morning in San Francisco with rays of sunlight coming in with the silver splashes, and in the living room area, we have the open gold warmth of the Nob Hill Spa and that serenity of looking out the window and facing Huntington Park and the Bay.

Is it important to have a different feel suite to suite within your offering or do you try to maintain consistency?

There is some consistency within the feel, but each of them has their own personality.

We are suite heavy here. This was an apartment building when it was first built, so we have 40 suites. It's important for each suite to have a different feel so that every time you visit, you can have a different experience.

How much of a focus is corporate business for the property and how challenging has it been to build new business in that market?

The corporate market has quieted down since the good years, but there are still upper level executives who need to be away from their cities to meet people internationally and San Francisco has been a great spot to meet.

In looking at the future, we're finding that a lot of big corporations are leaving the primary cities and going to secondary cities. It's important for us to go to those secondary cities and make our presentation as to why San Francisco and the Huntington should be their next destination.

In the early days, if someone said that over 25 years later you would still be here, would you have believed them and what has made it a place you've wanted to stay?

Hoteliers don't stay in a hotel more than 20 years – it's unheard of. But I've been very fortunate. The position as General Manager has allowed me to learn so much, whether about construction, creating and marketing a spa, or seeing how technology is changing today's world. ●

The Huntington Hotel Entrance (left); Zen Space at the Nob Hill Spa (top and bottom center); The Pool at the Nob Hill Spa (top right)