

Hotel Artisans

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Hospitality Insights Series
Sales & Marketing

004



Il Sereno Hotel | Lake Como | Italy

Introduction

Coming from an international family, travel is naturally embedded in Carolita's DNA. After working for several media agencies & multinational companies she felt a yearning for something more and found her heaven in hospitality.

Sereno Hotels

Located in two of the most coveted vacations destinations in the world, Sereno Hotels is the private owner and operator of award winning properties including Le Sereno St. Barth, the Villas at Le Sereno, Il Sereno Lago di Como, and Villa Pliniana, also in Lake Como.

Interview

The interview was conducted on December 2020 by Kostas Panagakis | Words by resident editor Emma Hensley | 1st publication date 30.01.2021.



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Interview

Kostas Panagakis

Words

Emma Hensley

A citizen of the world following the dream of a lifetime in hospitality

While Carolita Urrestarazu, Director of Sales & Marketing for Sereno Hotels, was in Geneva, I sat down with her for an interview as she was in the process of re-opening Le Sereno in St Barths.

Her love for hospitality has taken her all over the world, starting with a summer spent in Laos at age 19, when she singlehandedly helped a small business owner put a hotel together in the jungle with no electricity.

Coming from an international family – her mother is Swedish-American, her father is Spanish, her grandmother was brought up in Mexico, and her great grandmother in Japan and Istanbul, then called Constantinople, as they were a diplomat family – travel is naturally embedded in Carolita's DNA. After working for several media agencies in Sweden, she found herself in Argentina coordinating the big Procter & Gamble South America account. Though she enjoyed being in touch with a variety of clients, and learning the fundamentals of marketing and communications, Carolita felt a yearning for something more.

"I always had a longing in my heart to work at a hotel, and a dream to live on an island."

St Barths was the island, and Le Sereno was the hotel. 7 years ago, Carolita moved abroad yet again and, in collaboration with General Manager Samy Ghachem, set up the new marketing department, following an innovative approach that prioritises continuous evolution. Though she's working for one brand, travel is constantly on the itinerary; when she was based in St Barths, Il Sereno on Lake Como was already being developed, as well as the Italian wedding Palazzo Villa Pliniana. Hurricane Irma became the cause to rebuild, remarket, and reposition Le Sereno in 2018.

"Even though it's a well-known brand it felt like a second opening."

Constantly on the move, Carolita is currently based in Geneva, from where she has full access to Il Sereno on Lake Como. Forging a relationship with the local community here is just one aspect of creating a luxury stay for guests and adapting to their experiential needs.

"Experiential hospitality has really taken off, travellers seek exposure to local culture but also interactions with locals, they tend to be very adventurous and eager to fill the day with activities."



Villa Pliniana | Lake Como | Italy

In order to draw visitors out to enjoy the lake itself, the hotel has crafted boats that are especially easy to steer and has even set up a water plane experience; one of their doormen is a fisherman who often takes the more adventurous guests out in a traditional craft to catch their dinner, in the company of his adorable dog.

Il Sereno also collaborates with regional wineries and farms, with the Chef personally sourcing the herbs and other key ingredients for his dishes from a handful of local producers; similarly to how bespoke chocolate, handmade from personally selected cacao beans, is offered to guests of Le Sereno on St Barths.

These special touches all come together to imbue an element of relaxed luxury. By studying travel trends, Carolita has found that the new generation is more educated in hospitality than ever before, and visitors often know exactly what they want from their experience; this is why it always helps to create a genuine human connection with them from the get-go, trying to 'know' every guest even before the moment of their arrival.

The hotel team itself is comprised of avid travellers with world knowledge, who are always ready to spark fascinating conversations with visitors; much of the staff circulates from Le Sereno to Il Sereno, making it all the more appealing to explore the brand's sister hotel.

“The guest can see you in the summer in Lake Como and then in the winter in St Barths and that's something very

unusual. No matter which hotel, you are still coming back to us”.

Carolita loves nurturing meaningful relationships between the brand and its repeaters, which means sending out personal emails from time to time and being responsive on social media, making sure that a favourite aspect of their previous stay is offered as a gift upon return, and, most importantly, grasping every guest's personal meaning of luxury.

“We have a lot of repeaters and I always say that we take pride in the personal connection with our guests, understanding their definition of luxury rather than dictating ours. Every client is unique.”

This means adapting to the personal characteristics of each individual; some are shy and prefer not to socialise very much but still would like to be pampered. Others love spending time with staff and talking about their travels or the experiences they should pursue during their stay; but no matter what, Carolita remains attuned to their wishes.

“Everything is done with a lot of love”.



Villa Pliniana | Lake Como | Italy

From the moment of arrival, visitors are in for a bespoke experience. Even the metal water canteens offered to them during their initial transfer have been designed just for the hotel, and are a unique gift to take home with them after their stay. This is actually a switch-over from plastic bottles, part of the brand's growing efforts in sustainability. Carolita considers it especially important to be eco-friendly, a part of globalisation that a lot of hotels are now including in their philosophies, among other modernisation activations.

This includes the wave of digitalisation that comes with building an international hospitality community. Carolita finds this to be very exciting, a great way to save time and make processes more effective whilst still retaining that valuable face-to-face connection.

“Technology should be used where it is needed. Sometimes people use it where it's not really needed and you lose the human part of hospitality which is so important. People love to see people.”

At the end of the day, nothing can replace that special, personal touch, which Carolita experienced first-hand during her visit to Petit St. Vincent in The Grenadines, as an affinity for the ocean always draws her to those magnificent island destinations. After a spectacular stay, the entire hotel team accompanied her to the boat dock to see her off and wave goodbye, including the General Manager, in a truly priceless gesture that will always be a treasured memory to her: “I felt like it was a family waving farewell to me. That's something that I will never forget”.

Though Carolita prizes lifechanging experiences above all, with an unquenchable spirit that takes her on adventures across continents – just like her time spent at a wildlife reserve in Uganda, in the company of gorillas and endless forests – hospitality holds a special place in her heart. Some of her favourite hotels are Amanpulo in the Philippines and Amantaka in Laos, a locale that's very dear

to her as it's where she took her first ever steps in hospitality.

These international endeavours are only part of what makes her a true citizen of the world, and there's truly no telling where her bright career will lead her next. As she's currently settled in Switzerland, her husband sometimes asks “Are you seriously planning to move somewhere else?” to which her answer is always “Yes, you know me”.

If one thing is certain, it's that she's definitely left her mark on the places where she's been, bringing the human element to hospitality in a way that makes her absolutely unforgettable for the guests who have met her; especially at Le Sereno.

“St Barths is very near to my heart because for me it was a life-changing moment, and I really created an emotional bond with the island and the property.”