

Christoph Franzen, GM Grand Hyatt Doha



It's a tough industry to work in hospitality. The hours are long and, unless you make it to the top, the pay is not great. Although most guests are reasonably pleasant, most take the service they receive for granted and some are impossible to please. Having spent a lot of time since leaving a career in health services (the UK's NHS), staying in hotels as a guest, having reviewed many hostelrys great and small and having interviewed a lot of staff, I see strong similarities between hospitality and nursing. So it stands to reason that it takes a combination of resilience, compassion and a very broad skill set to be a successful General Manager. Christoph Franzen is a perfect example of the breed.

Born into the hospitality industry in Zermatt, Switzerland (his uncle ran a hotel and restaurant there) he certainly had his eyes wide open when he decided to follow family tradition. Although he readily acknowledges the source of his inspiration, he certainly wasn't handed a career on a silver platter. He became a qualified Chef and Sommelier before heading off to Hotel School. There were early signs of the high standards he always strives for in his record of gaining the highest marks at Sommelier school in his region of Valais. After three years working for Hilton At Zurich Airport, his next move, to go to Canberra Australia for hotel school seems out of left field. In fact, like everything else about him, it was perfectly pragmatic. He didn't need to repeat the chef and sommelier training, wasn't a fluent French speaker and could save a year's fees at the same time as obtaining a prestigious Cornell University degree by studying down under. It also forced him to become fluent in English. He's not one to duck a challenge. Once again he got top marks and was thus selected to spend six months at Cornell's Ithaca campus before graduation.

Hyatt almost didn't catch him as he was on the verge of joining Intercontinental but an interview with a Hyatt GM convinced him that the smaller, more intimate culture would be more in keeping with his style and ambitions. He hasn't looked back since that introduction to Hyatt at the Regency in Dubai in 1999, moving to front office manager in Grand Hyatt Muscat (</grand-hyatt-muscat.html>) within a couple of years and then becoming Rooms Director at Park Hyatt Ararat (</ararat-park-hyatt-moscow.html>) in Moscow. He was back in the Middle East in 2007 at Grand Hyatt Dubai (</gh-dubai.html>) before getting his first command as GM back in Muscat, a place he still feels very attached to.

Nothing ever stands still for long though in this trade and he moved again to take over GH Doha (</gh-doha.html>) from his colleague Garry Friend (</garry-friend.html>) in January 2013. Having spent time in both Grand Hyatt Muscat and GH Doha I see a lot of similarities. Not only do they share an architectural style in sympathy with their surroundings and a grand central hall, they also both function as important resources within the local community. GH Doha has a wonderful range of eateries and the quality reflects Christoph's passion for food and authenticity. Isaan is a genuine Thai restaurant run entirely by Thai staff and Rocca is a real Italian Bistro.

The Qatar National Vision 2030 sets out a plan for Qatar to follow a path of development somewhere between the bling of Dubai and the more conservative principles of Sultan Qaboos' Oman. Tourism is set to be an important element in the plan to provide development and employment opportunities for Qataris. Grand Hyatt Doha has made its own contribution with an induction scheme for management trainees and a number of people have already gained experience this way. There are considerable cultural obstacles to overcome though for members of very conservative Muslim families considering working in hospitality. We had a long and fascinating conversation about Qatar and its future direction and Christoph is a very enthusiastic ambassador, whilst acknowledging the challenges. He clearly enjoys meeting people of all sorts but is delighted to be working somewhere which is the focus of so much development and a centre of interest for a number of sports. Handball world cup, motor racing and of course the preparations for the FIFA World Cup in 2022. In fact Qatar already owns Paris St-Germain FC and is a major sponsor of Barcelona. The presence of excellent sports medicine facilities and warm weather training grounds also guarantees a regular throughput of football celebrities, which he obviously enjoys enormously. Hamad International Airport is also extremely impressive and Qatar Airways offer great service at fantastic prices, bringing in ever more visitors who really ought to stay over and take a look at what's happening here.

Herr Franzen may be a very warm, friendly and personable man but he takes the work seriously, regularly putting in 14 hour days. Dig a little though and you find that Christoph has as many passions in his spare time as he does responsibilities in his work. Whether talking about following his beloved Liverpool FC or riding a very serious motorbike around Vietnam or Lesotho's mountains, his enthusiasm is engaging and infectious. Although he is a globetrotter he hasn't lost touch with his roots. He remains one of a select few Ambassadors for Tourism to his native Zermatt in Switzerland.

Qatar is going to be a very exciting place over the next ten years. We will certainly be coming back to find out more about this tiny powerhouse of a nation. We will undoubtedly stay at Grand Hyatt Doha when we do and I certainly hope to chat with this truly hospitable man again. He'll move again of course as all GMs inevitably do and we wish him well wherever he goes. Cheers Christoph and thanks for a great stay.