



The Westcliff celebrates ten years on top

Ten years at the top of your game as a five-star hotel is impressive by any standards. The Westcliff's GM Mark Holden chats to Susan Reynard about the growth of this iconic Johannesburg property during the past decade.

The Westcliff in Johannesburg is a luxury, landmark, city hotel belonging to the Orient-Express Hotels Group. It celebrates its tenth anniversary this year and features one of the best views in the city from its lofty location – across the Johannesburg Zoo and leafy northern suburbs.

GM Mark Holden has headed up the hotel for nine of its ten years. During this time, he has worked hard to build a reputation for excellence and maintain high standards, while ensuring the property remains accessible to a wider variety of clientele.

Holden stayed at The Westcliff on his first trip to South Africa some ten years ago and thought to himself: "God help the poor man who has to run this hotel!" The universe must have been listening because six months later he got a call inviting him to take up the position as GM.

The property was pitched at five-star world standards without apology or reservation, Holden says, but it had gone through a tricky opening phase. Firstly there was the redesign of what were originally luxury apartments into hotel accommodation built into a steep hillside. Secondly, the Johannesburg hotel market was depressed and oversupplied at the time and the Westcliff was one of six five-star hotels to open consecutively.

If those weren't challenges enough, the hotel's location, which started off as being ideal as it was close to Johannesburg's busy city centre, was soon considered far from the action when the business node suddenly shifted to Sandton.

However, the Westcliff hotel rose above all of this to secure a reputation as both a leisure and business hotel, thanks to Holden's early realisation that they needed to reinvent the establishment as a diverse resort.

"I came up with a business plan: Instead of allocating the top floors in the hotel to executive or premium guests, as is usually the case, we created the Orient-Express business wing, immediately opposite reception with its own pool. Access to parking is easy and it's equipped

The Westcliff hotel has risen above Johannesburg's changing environment to secure its reputation as both a leisure and business hotel.

with its own business centre with IT butlers," he explains.

He adds, "This was a marketing initiative to tell the world that we are not only open for leisure but also corporate business. This was the forerunner to launching Jacaranda Hill conference venue five years ago, which has been a runaway success and is now the city's most sought after special event venue."

To stand out from other conference centre hotels, they designed a venue that would be able to offer the same quality of food and beverage and service that the rest of the hotel is renowned for.

"We knew 100 to 150 people was about the scale that we could reliably deliver on in the same quality as La Belle Terrasse. We do smaller, more prestigious events with bigger budgets for important people, but do them exceptionally

well. That's what people come to us for," Holden notes.

"My vision and mission was both a personal one and the company one. When the Carlton closed in 1996, people can argue that Johannesburg lost its icon hotel. We wanted to bring back to Johannesburg its own Grande Dame five-star icon hotel, something that is synonymous with the city. We were always about providing the city with a hotel that could stand on its own and belongs to Johannesburg, which is part of the ethos of Orient-Express," he explains.

"We had the brand reputation behind us, chose a singularly unique location and development of a hillside village that is one of a kind. But hotels are not just bricks and mortar they need people, they need great leadership and this needs to be melded and fused into something where there is a personality, a soul and a character to the place. My job was to do that. Here I stand ten years later. We've come a long way. She's looking great," he enthuses.

"When we started, the hotel was a bit snooty and aloof. We are now welcoming, open, less pretentious and more real. Our reputation is primarily off the back of food and beverage and our restaurants, and we have a very strong following in the local market place. Your restaurants and bars are your business card, not just the location and amenities. To earn your reputation in your own backyard is often the hardest," he acknowledges.

One of the most challenging aspects of running a five-star hotel

is managing people's expectations, Holden maintains. As soon as you market a property as the best, you're almost setting yourself up for failure and everyone's version of the best is different, he adds.

Looking forward, Holden says you can never rest on your laurels but must constantly reinvent your offering. With the conference centre a success, the next big venture is building a world-class spa where the tennis courts currently are. This will be a couple of years in the making but when launched is expected to rival any top spa in the country.

Holden is optimistic about the future, as indicated by the booming economy, leading to strong hotel occupancies, demand outstripping supply and room rates achieved at better levels than ever before. The industry has enjoyed a return of the leisure market, extended stays, more diverse guest profile and greater profitability.

All this had led to more hotels being built and major international brands looking at entering the local market, Holden explains. He sees this as a significant indicator of the maturity that the local market is reaching to sustain these types of luxury hotels.

He says safety and security is something the country has not yet learned to successfully manage and control, but still thinks South Africans sell themselves short and have a lot to be proud of. He is worried too much emphasis is being placed on the 2010 Soccer World Cup, saying part of the country's appeal is its diversity and great natural beauty. ♦



career highlights

Mark Holden, his wife Silvana and their son Jeremy came to South Africa in June 1999 when he was headhunted to manage The Westcliff hotel. Opening GM Clive Webster had moved on the previous December, shortly after the hotel opened. At that time, Holden had been running the Nairobi Serena hotel for three years.

Holden started his career in London, training at the Savoy, Berkeley, Claridges and Connaught hotels. He has also worked for the Hilton Hotels and Regent in the United States, the Park Lane in Hong Kong and One&Only Le Touessrok in Mauritius before joining Nairobi Serena in 1991 in Kenya, where he realised all three of his career ambitions: to run a hotel in his home country, to open a hotel and to be GM before he turned 35.

"One of the most enjoyable jobs in my career was working for Prestige Hotels in Kenya that owned and operated luxury tented camps and lodges in Kenya's wilderness areas for Uhuru Kenyatta, the son of the late-president Jomo Kenyatta. It was like being paid to be on safari all year round," he says.

The Westcliff looks down over the Johannesburg Zoo and leafy northern suburbs. According to GM Mark Holden the hotel is now "welcoming, open, less pretentious and more real."

cover feature



The Westcliff has welcomed back executive chef Sven Niederbremer after a two-year hiatus. The degustation menus at La Belle Terrasse demonstrate this chef's creativity and change regularly.

the Westcliff – facts & figures

- Accommodation – 37 suites, 80 rooms
- Restaurants & bars – La Belle Terrasse and Loggia; the Polo Lounge and the Conservatory
- Jacaranda Hill conference centre – 150-delegate special event venue; 10-delegate boardroom/private dining room; four meeting rooms; Summer Terrace
- Rack rate – ±R3500 per person per night
- Average room rate achieved – ±R1700 per person per night
- Occupancy, annual average – 65%
- Accommodation/F&B split – 55% : 45%
- Local/international accommodation split – 50% : 50%
- Local/International F&B split – 80% : 20%

