



Michelle Woodley

Interview: Michelle Woodley, President of Preferred Hotels & Resorts

BHN caught up with Michelle Woodley, President of Preferred Hotels & Resorts, to find out about Preferred's 50th anniversary celebrations, as well as trends for independent hotels and the hospitality industry...

Congratulations on [Preferred Hotels' 50th anniversary](#). How are you celebrating?

We are very excited about our anniversary and are celebrating in many ways with guests, our hoteliers and associates! For guests, our year-long Golden Anniversary campaign kicked off in January with a month-long 50,000 bonus points promotion for I Prefer members, and that was a huge success. Other exciting Golden Anniversary initiatives that travelers can engage in throughout the year include a #PreferredCelebrates50 social media campaign; a Golden Anniversary package that offers a \$50 credit towards an on-property services or a 50-minute experience such as a cooking class, a spa treatment or an exclusive 50 minutes Champagne Sabering and Testing class. Later this year, we will be launching a new brand website and a direct bookings sweepstakes that will award lucky winners with one of five outstanding vacations.

We have also been celebrating with our hoteliers since the end of January. As our executive team travels around the world for media and sales events and hotel visits, we always take the time to raise a glass with our member hoteliers. I was in Mexico City in mid-March and will be in Singapore in May; and Lindsey, our CEO, just returned from a trip that included South Africa and India. The festivities will continue as we have a big party planned with our hoteliers at our Annual Conference at Pendry San Diego beginning on April 30.

We also have a dedicated [microsite](#) that serves as the hub of all related activity throughout the year, showcasing inspiring videos, messages from our executive team, and more. We could not be more excited about this milestone year and everything that lies beyond.

What are the biggest challenges faced by independent hoteliers?

Attracting and training talent within the hotel industry remains a considerable challenge. While the physical features of a property can make a very strong initial impression, it's really the on-property team that makes the most powerful impact on guests. We see a lot of opportunity for us to provide an advantage to our member hotels in the areas of employee recruitment, retention and training. Recently we brought on board a Senior Vice President of Human Resources who will be a critical part of these initiatives.

In the meantime, we have a few training and retention initiatives available to our hotels. We see revenue optimization as a critical strategy, which is why we offer a revenue management training program that includes a curriculum for the foundation of revenue management and a second curriculum for the more advanced. The program provides value to the hotel and to the individual attendee. For the hotel, the tools and processes we introduce through classroom and hands-on work result in stronger room revenue yields. For the individual this is an enriching experience and an opportunity to network with their peers at other like-minded hotels which they may otherwise not have the opportunity. From a retention standpoint, we have some General Managers leveraging the program by offering it to current or aspiring revenue managers.

What are the key trends in the hospitality industry to look out for in the coming year?

Residential stays continue to rise in popularity among all types of travelers. This prominent shift in the consumer mindset is a reason why residence rentals such as Airbnb have become so prevalent. From our consumer base, we see that they are looking for a residential experience with the features, comfort and safety of a luxury hotel. Our Preferred Residences collection offers more than 70 transient vacation experiences that combine the space, privacy, and flexibility of a home with the luxuries and convenience of a hotel stay. With three options available - Hotel Residences, Apartment Residences, and Holiday Residences - travelers can quickly identify the type of accommodation that will best suit their specific needs for each individual trip. We see Preferred Residences as more than just a trend.

You have spoken about an "aggressive" growth plan for Preferred Hotels. How do you plan to carry this out?

We have a very robust development pipeline for the next 24 months and beyond. Our approach is to strategically fill the gaps in our portfolio. Our brand strategy, which is driven by one master brand comprised of five experience-focused collections, allows us to analyze each market separately to determine the best growth strategy. We look at which collections under the Preferred brand would make the most sense for those respective markets, while also addressing the home vacation rental trend with Preferred Residences. Markets where we are seeing or have seen extreme growth in the past year include Mexico, China, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and areas of Europe such as Scandinavia.

In addition to growing the size of our portfolio, we have formulated strategies around revenue contribution to our member hotels. We continue to invest in our Group and Transient sales efforts and are taking a data-driven approach to decision making in these and other areas. I Prefer, our loyalty program which is currently the largest points-based loyalty program for independent hotels, is a critical piece of our strategy to grow the brand and provide value to our member hotels, global bookers and travelers. More than 2.5 million individuals have enrolled in the program thus far. Recent indications from the number of downloads of our I Prefer App and participation in promotions signal to us that this is a strong channel in which we will continue to invest.

We also see an opportunity to further consult with our hoteliers across many areas including sales, marketing, public relations, social media, revenue management, and asset management. PHG Consulting is a division of Preferred Hospitality Group which we are developing to provide these types of services to our hotels. Within the last 6 months, we have engaged with several hotels for revenue management assessments and strategy projects, as well as some for public relations activities. We are the perfect partner to move into this area due to our deep understanding of independent hotels and small hotel groups.

What's to come for Preferred Hotels & Resorts?

With 50 years of heritage and success behind us, we are committed to taking what we do to the next level with a consumer focus on desires and experiences. As part of this, we are dedicated to making our pineapple logo a globally recognized symbol, so that when travelers see it, they immediately connect it with the truly outstanding, memorable, and authentic independent hospitality that only Preferred Hotels & Resorts can provide. The pineapple's legacy as the universal emblem of hospitality dates back more than 500 years ago, when sailors were searching for places to rest during their explorations. Whenever they would stop in a port town, they realized that residents would hang pineapples in front of their homes as a sign that visitors were welcome, with the pineapples expressing the spirit of, "We are opening up our home to you and will be hospitable while you are here." There is really no better symbol than the pineapple to embody what our brand represents and our brand promise.