

# Influencers in Hospitality

**Influencers in Hospitality** is a regular RLA Q&A with movers and shakers of the hospitality world, providing enlightening industry perspectives whilst sharing some personal traits that have made them successful.

RLA's Influencer in Hospitality is David Harper, Head of Property Services of Hotel Partners Africa, the leading bespoke hospitality consultancy working in Sub-Saharan Africa. David is also the author of the books 'Hotels & Resorts: An Investor's Guide' and 'Valuation of Hotels for Investors'.

**RLA: Having valued hotels, picked apples and provided security services in your career, is there a particular skill or attribute that has helped you in your professional life?**

DH: I think the most important skill I have possessed in my career is the ability to listen carefully to what clients are saying, and then helping them discover what they actually need. Many clients come to me with a slightly unclear idea of what they specifically need, and with a little probing I am usually able to determine solutions which best serve their interest. Often, they don't know that the type of help they need is even available.

**RLA: How do you keep all stakeholders, particularly Owners and Operators happy?**

DH: When I am selecting an operator for a property I am very careful to explain to all parties that the arrangement is akin to a marriage. It is a long-term relationship that must benefit both parties if it is to work best. If either the owner or the operator does not get rewarded fairly for their investment then the relationship is bound to fail, to the detriment of both parties.

**RLA: As an industry what should we do more or less of and why?**

DH: As an industry we really need to listen to our customers more and react quicker to what they really want. For example, the roll out of reliable free Wi-Fi is essential to customer satisfaction in our industry, and yet some hotels still try to charge for the service, alienating their otherwise loyal customer base.

And conversely, we should try not to dictate to our customers what we think they want!

**RLA: In the next decade or two, what do you foresee changing about the Hotel Guest Experience?**

DH: An increase in technology, helping to improve the customer experience. More surprisingly though, I also feel that a slight backlash will be felt, with certain hotels making a name for themselves as technology deserts, where "old-fashioned" customer service is treasured by guests looking for something different.



David Harper



David Harper with Roger Allen, RLA Group CEO

**RLA: What should change?**

DH: Slow check in and check out at hotel receptions. Poor menu choices in hotel restaurants. Slow room service delivery.

**RLA: During your long career, in how many hotel transactions have you been involved, and which country was the most complicated to getting the deal done?**

DH: I have now worked in 169 countries, managing numerous single asset transactions as well as some of the biggest hotel portfolio deals. Every transaction can be complicated, but the secret is to have great advisors working on the transaction. One of the most difficult deals I have had to unlock was in Italy, where all the paperwork was incorrect, incomplete, or just missing.

**RLA: What is the best piece of advice you have ever received?**

DH: Always travel with just carry-on luggage...essential in some of the African countries I work in!

**RLA: What do you think is true that many people might disagree with?**

DH: Our industry is one where to be successful you have to really like people. Hospitality is about looking after people, and if you don't really like people you cannot "fake it" long term.

**RLA: In our industry where can we find additional or hidden value?**

DH: By responding to what the client really wants. If you can find out what a customer is really after, and then supply it, you can get yourselves a loyal customer for life. Think Apple...not just a computer, but almost a way of life and way of thinking about yourself.

David has worked for over twenty years in the hospitality industry and is passionate about the difference that a well-run hotel can make. "It is essential that a hotel makes a reasonable profit if it is to be a long-term change for good in a local community. If the fundamental business model does not work, structural changes need to be made. Naturally, as the owner needs to get a return on their investment, but the customer cannot be expected to pay above market rates to enable such a return."



David organised a charity challenge in 2014 and was it was proclaimed the world's highest ever game of cricket at the top of mt Kilimanjaro. Over £190,000 was raised for Cancer Research.

Photo courtesy of AFP

**RLA: What is the most unusual thing you've had to do to "make it work"?**

DH: On one project the stated goal was to develop new hotels to improve employment opportunities for locals. In the end, we designed a set-up where local community groups became landlords, local people were trained and employed in the hotel industry. The customer base was such that local craft stores and restaurants benefitted from significant trade. At the same time, the revenue generated was ploughed back into animal conservation, which meant that the "safari experience" that the customers were seeking was not only delivered, but also safeguarded for the future.

Taking care to involve a very wide group of stakeholders, where all parties' interests were directly

aligned meant that everyone was pulling together. Poaching in the area declined, literacy and general education in the local population increased significantly, investors made good, solid returns, while customers were very happy with the experience, and offered higher levels of repeat business than in other similar types properties.