





Harbour Plaza Hotels & Resorts
celebrates ten years of distinctive service

By Mark Caldwell



the true meaning of

Hospitality

WHILE THE HARBOUR PLAZA Hong Kong hotel was being built, an exquisite marble staircase that had previously graced the Hong Kong Hilton Hotel, was transplanted, slab-by-slab, into the new hotel. When the doors opened on 22 July 1995, the staircase was the centrepiece of its spacious, sunny lobby.

It is this kind of attention to detail that makes the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong a truly special haven of hospitality.

In the past 10 years, a who's who of statesmen and superstars have passed through its doors and climbed the grand staircase.

Today, Harbour Plaza Hong Kong is the flagship property owned and managed by Harbour Plaza Hotels & Resorts group (HPhR) – a joint operation of Hutchison Whampoa Limited (HWL)'s property arm and Cheung Kong (Holdings) Limited. "Before 1994 we didn't have hotels under our own management," recalls Raymond Chow, managing director of Hutchison Whampoa Properties Ltd (HWPL). "Initially we had hotel investments such as the

Hilton and the Sheraton. Then we established the flagship hotel, and created a hotel management company to take care of it."

The Harbour Plaza Hong Kong was part of The Harbourfront, an upmarket office and hotel complex on reclaimed land in Whampoa Garden, Hung Hom. It was an integral part of HWL's initiative to transform the district from a run-down dockside into the premier residential, commercial and retail location that it is today.

Starting from scratch, the developers designed a luxurious, modern hotel equipped to the highest standards. To ensure that it was also operated to the highest standards, the Group decided to go it alone instead of looking for an operator to manage the new hotel. Thus the Harbour Plaza hotel brand was born. It was an audacious strate-

gy for a newcomer but HWL had a proven track record of successfully building new businesses in difficult markets. The company immediately set about recruiting talent to operate the new hotel. As the HWL-owned Hong Kong Hilton Hotel in Central had just closed in May 1995, to be rebuilt as the Cheung Kong Center, the Harbour Plaza was able to tap a rich vein of experienced staff to join the new team.

All eyes were on the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong when it opened.

“In those days, if a hotel was not in Tsim Sha Tsui, Causeway Bay or Central, no-one went there,” recalls Ms P C Koh, finance director of Harbour Plaza Hotel Management Ltd. “But the response to the new hotel was better than expected and by the end of the first year of operation, it had achieved an impressive portfolio of corporate customers.”

With its flagship providing a distinctive blend of comfort, elegance and understated luxury, it was apparent that the group had what it takes to succeed in the international hospitality arena. There were several opportunities for expansion as the group was developing new properties in Hong Kong and Mainland China.

In 1998 the 390-room Harbour Plaza Chongqing opened, marking the group’s first new hotel construction in the Mainland.

The following year, the 1,102-room Harbour Plaza Resort City began operations in Tin Shui Wai, making it the largest hotel operating in Hong Kong at that time. More recently, the group purchased The Kowloon Hotel from the Peninsula Group in 2004 and HPHR took over management in February this year.

The group has also developed two hotels in Tsing Yi, the Mexan Harbour Hotel and Rambler Garden Hotel, which opened under HPHR management in December 2004 and February 2005 respectively.

Today, HWL has interests in 15 hotel properties in Hong Kong, Mainland China and The Bahamas.

HPHR is active in the development and ownership of hotel properties as well as hotel management. Although the group has succeeded in establishing a highly respected brand with Harbour Plaza, its approach to building its hotel portfolio is very flexible. More than half of the hotels in which it has an interest do not carry the



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Harbour Plaza brand name.

“On the one hand, we are an investor and we don’t necessarily put the hotel under the Harbour Plaza management company,” Mr Chow explains. “We find whatever is the most appropriate management company to benefit the hotel property. On the other hand, we are trying to expand the Harbour Plaza fleet and grow our brand name. The parent property division can, meanwhile, advise on rentals and areas like project costing, so we don’t need separate administrative teams.”

“HPHR is a hotel operator group like Hyatt or Sheraton,” Ms Koh adds. “It was formed primarily to manage hotel properties owned by Hutchison or Cheung Kong. Third-party management came about through circumstance. For example, when we sold the Harbour Plaza Kunming the new owner wanted us to continue management.”



The early years presented challenges. Between 1997 and 1999 the industry was reeling from the Asian crisis and the global hospitality business was in decline.

“We came into this business during the downturn and to be competitive, had to be efficient right from the start,” says Ms Koh. “Management and staff in our group are very conscious of costs while still maintaining quality services. We aim to give good value and strive to give our guests an experience they will always remember.”

It’s a winning formula. In less than 10 years, HPHR has become the biggest hotel operator in Hong Kong with about 5,300 rooms in seven properties currently under management. The group now operates and manages seven hotels in Hong Kong and two in mainland China.

HWL also owns the The Westin and Sheraton at Our Lucaya Beach & Golf Resort, the biggest hotel operations on Grand Bahama Island.

“It was run-down when we acquired it in 1997,” says Ms Koh. “We helped finish the US\$430 million development. It targets guests substantially from the United States, so we contracted with Starwood, which has strong experience in the American market, to take over the management two years ago.”

HPHR is now profitable and the group is actively looking at other sites.

“There are some key Chinese cities that we hope to become involved in, such as Shanghai,”

STAR QUALITY

OVER THE YEARS, the hotels in the Harbour Plaza stable have played host to a who’s who of famous guests.

It all started when Jiang Zemin, then President of China, chose to stay in one of the two presidential suites at the flagship Harbour Plaza Hong Kong during the handover on 1 July 1997. President Jiang returned twice, in 1998 and again in May 2001. Another top Chinese leader, Premier Zhu Rongji, stayed at the hotel in 1997.

International leaders have included the King and Queen of Tonga. Chinese astronaut Yang Liwei (pictured with hotel staff) enjoyed the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong’s hospitality soon after his historic trip into orbit.

The hotel is also a firm favourite with local performing artistes, including Andy Lau, Aaron Kwok, Leon Lai, Alan Tam and Kenny B. International stars

have included Whitney Houston and famous Korean artiste Bao Yong Joon.

On the sports scene, the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong has hosted Manchester United, Brazil’s national football team and tennis stars such as Martina Hingis, Mary Pierce and Anna Kournikova.

The neighbouring Harbour Plaza Metropolis can also boast a long list of star guests. They include the cast and crew of international musical “Mamma Mia”, The Eagles, Sammi Cheng, Jay Chou, Boney M, the China National Women’s Basketball Team, Li Ning, Li Xiaoshuang, F4, Jolin Choy, Cliff Richard, Yang Mi Kyung, A-Mei Zhang and Teresa Carpio.

Across the water, the Harbour Plaza North Point has hosted Sarah Brightman, as well as the casts of Saturday Night Fever and Chicago.



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says Ms Koh. “We have been approached to manage hotels for other owners but so far have turned them down. Our primary strategy is to combine ownership and management but we do not have an ego that says we have to manage everything. For example, we could have managed the Grand Hyatt Beijing, but decided the Hyatt group would be a more appropriate brand in that city. We work quite well with the other managers to maximise cost efficiencies, management skills and purchasing power.” According to Ms Koh, the group will continue to focus on Hong Kong and Mainland China.

“There is no question that China is going to be a

big market,” she says. “The property group is growing tremendously in China. We are looking for the right locations and the right properties. Of course, we will always keep our eyes open worldwide for the right opportunity.”

Ms Koh is particularly bullish about Hong Kong. “If we were not positive, we would not have acquired The Kowloon Hotel recently or opened the Rambler Garden Hotel. Disneyland is opening, which will mean increasing numbers of visitors to Hong Kong. China is also continuing to relax its travel restrictions for PRC residents.”

HPHR has proved adept at providing different properties to appeal to a broad spectrum of the

HONG KONG'S OASIS

WITH AN UNPARALLELED LOCATION on the Hunghom waterfront and amazing views over Victoria Harbour, the luxurious Harbour Plaza Hong Kong made a big impact as soon as it opened on 22 July 1995.

Its distinctive blend of relaxed sophistication, discreet luxury and first-class service have made the Harbour Plaza renowned as a haven from the bustle of Hong Kong, offering the ultimate in understated style and comfort for discerning guests.



“Many people see us as an oasis,” says Jonathan Wilson, who has been at the hotel for seven years and General Manager for four. “Our location gives us the edge. Many of our guests prefer our quieter, less bustling and more ambient waterfront environment and the fresher atmosphere here. And our guests truly appreciate the fact that we have the only dining terrace right on the harbour.”

Furnished to the highest standards and equipped with the latest business and communications tools, the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong features two 3,500 sq ft Presidential Suites famous for their luxury and panoramic outlook. There are seven fabulous restaurants, a well-equipped fitness centre and a glass-sided rooftop pool where guests can enjoy the view and soak up the unique atmosphere in absolute privacy. In partnership

with upmarket skin-care brand Jurlique, the fitness centre has recently introduced a full range of spa services.

Just three years after opening, Harbour Plaza Hong Kong was named one of the “World’s Ten Best Hotels” by New York-based *Leaders Magazine* and in 2001, it was *Travel Trade Gazette’s* “Best Business Hotel”.

Harbour Plaza Hong Kong caters mainly to business guests but is also home to a growing number of leisure travellers. There has been a significant increase in guests from Korea, driven by the hotel’s support for Korean entertainment industry initiatives such as a Food Festival based on the television programme *Jewel in the Palace*, and its participation in a new television production called *Hong Kong Express* (currently airing in Korea and Japan).

But it is the core value of service in which the management takes the most pride, and which ultimately drives the business.

“We are at guests’ service from the moment they reserve their room – whether we’re providing champagne for a limousine ride from the airport or booking a yacht for a customer who wants to get even closer to the harbour,” says Wilson. “Every staff member is dedicated to this principle.”

“When we look for new candidates to join our team, we focus on friendliness. Academic qualifications stand people in good stead but it is their attitude that will take them, and us, to the next level.”

As the longest established property in the group, the hotel can offer supporting services to sister properties. “Our experienced staff and complete back-of-house facilities mean we can provide services ranging from creating chocolate showpieces and pastries for festivals, to handling extra laundry operations or the design and production of marketing materials,” says Wilson. “Our position as one of the leading hotels in Hong Kong is testament to our excellent team of professionals.”

No longer the “new kid on the block”, the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong has established itself both as a luxurious landmark on the Hunghom waterfront and as a hotel with a big heart. And on 22 July this year, the champagne corks will be popping to celebrate the 10th jubilee.



market. The flagship targets business customers and meeting groups generated through the nearby office towers. Harbour Plaza North Point targets corporate customers who work around Hong Kong island. On the Kowloon side, Harbour Plaza Metropolis is adjacent to the Kowloon-Canton Railway and attracts long-stay guests who work in Guangzhou. It is also close to the Hong Kong Coliseum, so many performing artistes stay there.

Harbour Plaza Resort City was a pioneer in developing the 'Smart-Living Plus' concept, catering to long-stay guests by providing the convenience of a hotel with a residential feel. The formula has proved popular with niche market clients, such as foreign teachers and aircrew.

The group is constantly gauging the market and can quickly adapt operations. With the hotel industry picking up, HPHR has been reducing its long-stay exposure in some hotels as demand for hotel rooms increases.

"Every month we look at supply and demand at HPHR," says Mr Chow. "We were the first hotel group to offer a dynamic mix between serviced suites for long-stay guests and hotel suites, and it



has proved highly successful. Our hotels are designed to give us the flexibility to convert them into long-stay suites if required. We want to maximise usage of hotel rooms on both a short- and long-term basis."

HPHR also knows that service is key in the hospitality industry. For example, to cater for increasing numbers of female business travellers, the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong is now providing more spa facilities. Another charming example is the goldfish at Harbour Plaza North Point, where fish bowls are placed in the rooms of long-stay individual travellers to keep them company.

To provide the best available service to guests, the group relies mainly on local talent but also deploys experienced professionals from around the world. "We rely on our frontline staff to come up with new creative ideas. It is up to individual hotels to think of new ways of improving services to

their guests," says Ms Koh. "If a hotel has more Japanese visitors, then we will recruit some staff who speak Japanese."

The combination of top-end properties, service excellence and adroit management has seen the

HWL'S HOTEL PORTFOLIO

OWNED AND MANAGED

Harbour Plaza Hotels & Resorts group (HPHR) develops, owns and manages a range of hotel properties in Hong Kong, China and The Bahamas.



Harbour Plaza Hong Kong
Whampoa Garden,
Hung Hom, HK
521 rooms



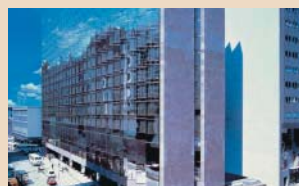
Harbour Plaza North Point
North Point, HK
643 rooms



Harbour Plaza Metropolis
Hung Hom, HK
690 rooms



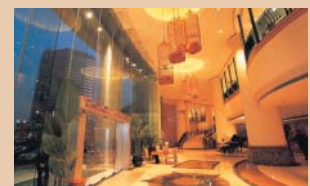
Harbour Plaza Chongqing
Chongqing, PRC
390 rooms



The Kowloon Hotel
Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon, HK
736 rooms



Rambler Garden Hotel
Tsing Yi, HK
800 rooms



Harbour Plaza Resort City
Tin Shui Wai,
New Territories, HK
1,102 rooms

A PLACE TO CALL HOME

CAPTAIN ROGER CARMICHAEL is a flight operations inspector with Hong Kong's Civil Aviation Department (CAD) and has long called the Harbour Plaza home. He shares his story with *Sphere*.

"I was a fighter pilot with the Australian air force and went on to work with Qantas for 33 years. In 1964 I started flying to Hong Kong. Then in 1996, I took a job with the CAD and suddenly my wife Helen and I were looking for a more permanent residence in the city.

We chose the Harbour Plaza in Whampoa Garden, Hunghom, and have never looked back. The hotel had been open just a year when we moved into a serviced suite, so we are now among the hotel's longest staying guests.

I've never come back from overseas and not wanted to be here. I travel regularly for business, and also keep a home in Sydney, where my two children and four grandchildren live. But I just need to walk in the door of the

Harbour Plaza and it lifts my spirits. This hotel is a breathing space in Hong Kong.

The service is superb and it is anticipatory. The staff will attend to your needs before you have to ask. I have never had to make a complaint, and we have had an instant response to anything we have ever asked for.


In fact, two of my most precious memories involve this hotel. The first is of the Hong Kong handover, where we and other guests were able to enjoy the fireworks from the hotel's unique vantage point, and then watch the royal yacht Britannia sail past, marking the end of British rule. Then there was my 65th birthday. My wife and I were whisked to the hotel's prestigious presidential suite by the general manager, where we enjoyed dinner with friends, watching a typhoon lash the city from the suite's full-length windows. It was an amazing experience and a memory I will always treasure."

hotel portfolio go from strength to strength.

"Ten years from now we would like to be an established hotel chain with a strong reputation in the market," says Ms Koh. "Our plan is to continue to support the growth in the group's portfolio and, with our hotels becoming popular destinations for travellers, we are making an increasing contribution to the property group's overall profits. We know our strengths and at the moment our strengths are in Asia."

However, the group does not plan to limit its

activities to Asia and the Bahamas alone. "The team is looking at various places around the world," Mr Chow confirms. "We have submitted bids for a few hotels in London and in Paris, but we have not yet been successful. If the right opportunity comes up, we don't mind expanding our international hotel operations. It all depends on opportunity. The hotel division has a bright future."

As the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong begins its second decade in operation, the signs of future success have never been better. 

UNDER HPHR MANAGEMENT



Mexan Harbour Hotel
Tsing Yi, HK
800 rooms



Great Wall Sheraton Hotel
Beijing, PRC
850 rooms



Horizon Suite Hotel
Ma On Shan, HK
831 rooms



Sheraton Hong Kong Hotel and Towers
Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon, HK
782 rooms



Harbour Plaza Kunming
Kunming, PRC
299 rooms



Grand Hyatt Beijing at Oriental Plaza
Beijing, PRC
839 rooms



The Westin at Our Lucaya Beach & Golf Resort
Grand Bahama Island, The Bahamas
749 rooms



Sheraton at Our Lucaya Beach & Golf Resort
Grand Bahama Island, The Bahamas
522 rooms