



Euro vision: EHMA celebrates 40th anniversary

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Over 300 of the continent's top hoteliers and friends will gather in Milan in April to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the birth of the European Hotel Managers Association. Phin Foster talks to EHMA president Peter Bierwirth; Ezio Indiani, general manager of Milan's Principe di Savoia; Johanna Fragano of Rome's Hotel Quirinale; and Michael Gray, general manager of The Churchill in London, about EHMA's past, present and future.



EHMA members convene at the organisation's first general meeting in Rome in 1974.



Two founding members draw up the inaugural EHMA statute.



1982 patron King Juan Carlos of Spain.



The 17th general meeting took place in Berlin in 1990, the year after the fall of the Berlin Wall.



Petersburg.

EHMA's commitment to global expansion led to its 38th general meeting being held in St

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The year is 1973 and the first in a series of enlargements of the European Communities is underway. Negotiations around the establishment of a directly elected European Parliament are gathering pace and the introduction of the exchange rate mechanism the previous year has even prompted speculation regarding a universal European currency.

All the talk is of a united continent promoting the free movement of people, goods, cultures and ideas. In Rome, five of the city's top general managers begin meeting at the Hotel Ambasciatori to discuss what their role might be in this fast-changing landscape.

If a number of decisions are to be taken at an international level, how does one guarantee a voice in proceedings? Furthermore, if we really are witnessing an increasingly laissez-faire attitude towards borders and sovereignty, might it not be an idea to explore the possibility of collaboration with our brethren across Europe. If nothing else, it should make for a great party.

They conceived this uncomplicated, proudly elitist concept: "An association of professional managers operating first class or luxury hotels of international repute committed to fostering fellowship and fraternity."

So, the following year, representatives from some of the continent's grandest hotels gathered at the Ambasciatori for the first general meeting of the European Hotel Managers Association (EHMA). But questions were raised regarding the pan-European nature of the group; among its first 40 members, only ten were non-Italians.

By the 20th general meeting in 1992, however, total numbers had swollen to around 380 members drawn from 20 nationalities. Fast forward another 20 years and EHMA, under the presidency of Peter Bierwirth, is gearing up to celebrate its 40th general meeting. It now boasts 425 members from 25 European countries, representing 350 hotels, 90,000 rooms, 70,000 employees and an annual turnover of some €6 billion.

While its founding principles remain undimmed, the luxury hotel sector looks remarkably different to that of the mid-70s. Its centre of gravity has shifted towards the Middle East and China; large international operators have become ever more prevalent; revenue and operating models are unrecognisable; human resources and technology costs continue to skyrocket. In order to remain fit for purpose, evolution has been necessary.

"It's long been clear that we must do a lot more than gather together for delicious dinners and a few nice bottles of wine," says Bierwirth. "The internationalisation of the hotel sector has helped to professionalise EHMA as a body. The soul of hospitality remains the European way of hotel-keeping - but the brain is increasingly American: marketing, controlling, the legal aspects and so on. We must find a way of merging these two philosophies in order to continue improving and bring the most out of ourselves."

The exchange of ideas

Members seem to be in general agreement that this is best achieved through harnessing a network of top professionals in order to share best practices, discuss challenges, exchange talent and build long-term relationships. The delicious dinners and nice bottles of wine are simply an added bonus.

"That's the real meaning of EHMA," declares Ezio Indiani, general manager of Milan's Principe di Savoia, which will host this year's general meeting in April. "When I first joined 18 years ago, it was more a case of contemporaries coming together for friendship and a bit of fun. That's still very important, but we now share a lot more information and there's a real focus on learning. If you're a member, there's no question that you're extremely good at what you do. Being able to learn from the best in the business is a privilege."

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The criteria surrounding EHMA membership guarantees excellence. Not only must a prospective candidate be nominated by two active members, he or she also requires at least a decade's industry experience and a minimum of three years spent as general manager at a deluxe or first-class hotel "of international repute". Applications must also be approved by the applicant's national delegate and EHMA's management council. Such exclusivity has long given general managers something to strive for.

"I'd been following the progress of EHMA since its foundation and it was something I'd always aspired to," says Johanna Fragano, EHMA treasurer, former president and general manager of Rome's Hotel Quirinale, where the association's headquarters are located.

"Being a member remains an honour and a privilege. Over the years, the group has become a lot more hands-on, academic and less based on the social side. There is strong focus on education, sustainability, the exchange of staff, recruitment and retention of talent. We're working in a globalised market now and having this family dynamic engenders a higher quality of service. It has opened up an entirely new world for me and my colleagues," she adds.

But in a particularly difficult operating environment, the argument for membership needs to be stronger than ever. Bierwirth acknowledges that there has been a small dip in numbers as a direct result of the financial crisis - "Some feel they have to cut all but essential expenditure" - and national delegates must work extremely hard to re-establish EHMA's traditional pattern of growth.

"I've been told there's some 156 associations linked to hospitality in this country," says Michael Gray, national delegate for UK and Ireland, and general manager of The Churchill, a Hyatt Regency property in London. "That makes it difficult to get recognition, but you can't overstate the benefits of being international. In these days of the eurozone, with many rules and regulations coming out of Brussels, we have to stay abreast of what is being decided on our industry's behalf by others. Having European-wide input is invaluable."

Having joined EHMA in 1993, Gray believes that working in a large international chain makes no difference to the value of membership.

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"There are over 400 members spread across Europe only an email or phone call away; that's a much wider footprint than Hyatt," he says. "As contemporaries, we face the same issues and challenges, and members will go out of their way to help one another. If I have guests visiting a city where there isn't a Hyatt hotel, the first thing I do is call an EHMA colleague who's based there. That sense of camaraderie and alliance is very strong."

Education and expansion

Another major area of collaboration is work exchanges, and a general focus on education and talent development. EHMA has long-established partnerships with a number of schools, including Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne, the Glion Institute of Higher Education, Cornell University and Stenden University. Two annual awards recognise top students at Lausanne and Glion, the recipients winning a stage shadowing senior management at a luxury European hotel under the supervision of an EHMA general manager. As the war for talent intensifies, leveraging the association's strengths and relationships is extremely valuable.

"Costs have never been higher, particularly in human resources," says Fraganò. "That means we need to focus on both improving the people already working for us and try to recruit the very best people entering the industry. It's the only way one can maintain standards at a time when you see so many corners being cut."

The increased influence of fast-growing economies has also made recruitment and retention much more of a challenge. Far from viewing the globalisation of the luxury sector as a threat, however, EHMA sees plenty of opportunity. Efforts have been made to reach out into China through partnerships with groups such as the Golden Key International Alliance. Closer to home, the increased strength of Russia and the CIS presents a significant opening for expanding membership.

This was reflected in the decision to hold the 2011 general meeting in St Petersburg and Bierwirth has identified further market penetration as a priority during his presidency.

"Moving into those eastern bloc countries takes time and development has not been as fast as I'd like," he acknowledges. "We do have a number of members in those markets, but many are expatriates; they stay for a few years and then return to the West. As the market matures, I hope we'll see more members in cities such as Sofia, Kiev and Warsaw, where the luxury hotel sector is really gathering pace."

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Life begins at 40

In the meantime, present EHMA members are gearing up for the 40th birthday celebrations in Milan. "I know they'll push the boat out this year and send everyone away inspired," says Gray. "One thing you can guarantee at the EHMA general meeting is that you'll be entertained."

If there's one person a little less anticipatory than most, it's the man charged with ensuring everything goes according to plan.

"You have the best general managers in Europe staying at your hotel," Indiani exclaims with mock horror. "I cannot imagine more intimidating critics. We are working as hard as possible to ensure that it's perfect. By the time everything is over, I will need a holiday."

The theme at this year's programme is 'Reinventing the luxury hotel', a suitably ambitious, forward-looking subject for an association founded upon continuous self-improvement.

"The best information is always gleaned on a personal, one-to-one basis," says Bierwirth. "We live in a world dominated by technology and remote communication, but I also sense a counter-trend: a craving for personal links and relationships. We have built a non-profit organisation consisting of excellent hoteliers managing excellent hotels throughout Europe - there's nothing else comparable. That's something of which we're justly proud and will continue to build upon."

Well over 300 people will be present to raise a glass to that sentiment in Milan on 28 April.