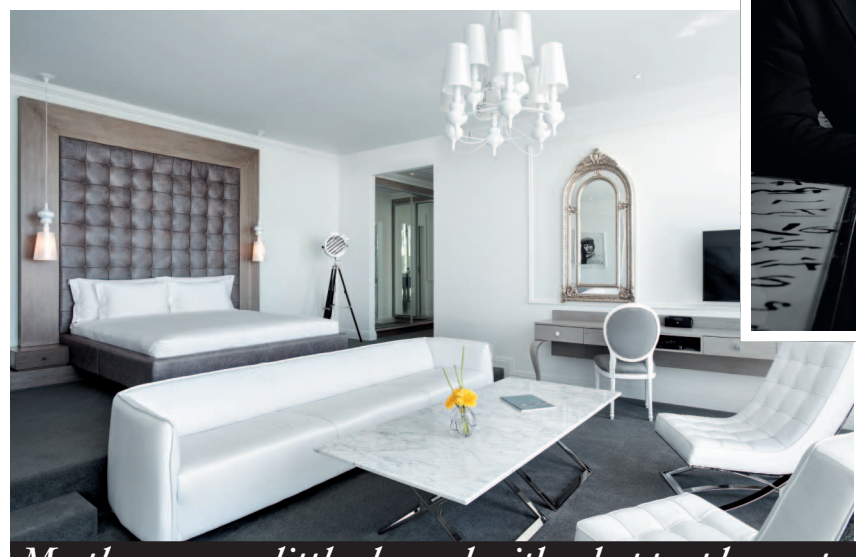
Alphen Hotel. Kove Collection owner Paul Kovensky. The Marly



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York. Schrager's skill with design and his talent for translating it to hospitality was so informative and enduring that it catalysed the entire boutique sector.

His commitment to the modern lifestyle is best expressed in his mantra "good design is good business", and through a series of pioneering concepts: the hotel as home away from home, the hotel as theatre, cheap chic, lobby socialising, the indoor/ outdoor lobby, the urban resort and the urban spa — all traits claimed by the boutique sector and fecund inspiration to what has now been joined by scores of independent and small-chain competitors.

Schrager has taken the best of the luxury, boutique/ lifestyle and select service sets and created a new breed of hotel in which everything has been rethought. This brand is defined by the experience it creates, rather than by a business classification or price.

With a similar background as a former club owner and restaurateur, Paul Kovensky describes boutique as the meeting point of the best of size and service. "In a saturated, competitive market the switched-on customer is looking to interact with service and product that has competitive advantage," he explains.

Judging by his Kove Collection, which includes the elegant but funky 19-suite Alphen Hotel in Constantia Valley and the 11-suite The Marly in Camps Bay, and a complement of eight bars, cafés and restaurants, he understands what keeps guests returning.

It is arguably Kovensky's background in hospitality that attunes him to guest needs where "you need to keep continually reinventing yourself and your product". His investment in people, design, décor and service is, he believes, the differentiator in the boutique market, and his natural enthusiasm to serve shines through. "I love showing people a good time, whether eating, drinking or partying. It gives me great pleasure to keep other people happy."

Neil Markovitz, founder and MD of Newmark Hotels, believes boutique is all about an approach. "It's about finding the sweet spot where you can make a hotel under 50 rooms work," he says. His extensive portfolio includes the Victoria and Alfred (94 rooms), the Queen Victoria (35 rooms) and Dock House (six rooms) all at the V&A Waterfront, together with La Splendida (24 rooms) and Sótano restaurant in Mouille Point, Motswari Private Game Reserve (16 rooms) in the Timbavati Kruger concession and Coral Lodge (10 rooms) on Ilha de Moçambique.

"It's when you stop ticking the boxes and you start listening," he explains. "Mostly, we are a little obsessed with what people want — this allows us to react to the personal experiences and requirements of our guests."

Markovitz explains his differentiators clearly. "Where we've been successful is keeping executive management very close to the ground and not in management silos.

"Another important component in boutique properties is a different approach to the fiscal relationship. For example, your yield management strategy is different in that you need to be more strategic and trust your historical information that helps guide you in order to make the correct decisions. There can be no short-term decisions. In addition, you have to find other revenue centres, your F&B (food and beverage) cannot be a loss leader, and your overall experience needs to be captivating."

Confirming the constant hunt for quality, recurring guests, he reveals: "Generally, I'm less fixated on chasing occupancy — you can't take occupancy to the bank." Intriguingly, he has recently added the 48-room Drostdy Hotel in Graaff-Reinet, seeing potential in the town to become the Franschhoek of the Eastern Cape, and indicative of his pursuit of a true boutique portfolio vision.

Another innovator with an extensive boutique portfolio is the inimitable Liz McGrath with The Collection, including The Cellars-Hohenort, The Marine in Hermanus, The Plettenberg and soon to be The Lord Milner in Matjiesfontein. "Most often they are owner run and managed," says McGrath of boutique properties, "and as a result they offer a personalised, exceptional experience to the guest of which the destination is key. An organisation like the Relais & Châteaux, with an exclusive collection of more than 520 of the finest hotels and gourmet restaurants in 60 countries, embodies this category."

McGrath's sage counsel for success in this challenging sector is simple. "Hard work. Having a passion for SA and what we can offer to the rest of the world that is unique. I also have had life-long passion for food and travel which has allowed me to experience the best in the world and bring back what I have learnt and experienced to SA and to The Collection."

Newmark Hotels MD Neil Markovitz. Dash Restaurant & Bar at the Queen Victoria