

BTN talks to Tehmina Adaya owner of the Shangri-La, Santa Monica

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The Shangri-La Hotel in Santa Monica, California was the place to be in the 80s. Made famous as the favoured place of Sean Penn and Madonna's affair and as the setting to those classic Calvin Klein photographs that epitomised the decade. The 90's began to see the iconic hotel get a little dated. So in need of a little rejuvenation it has just undergone a US\$30 renovation. Mary Aziz talked to Tehmina Adaya, one of the owners, to find out where Shangri-La belongs in the Noughties.

BTN; Tell me about the hotel and its facilities?

Tehmina; Well what's amazing about our hotel is location location location. We are right on Ocean Avenue, which overlooks the beach and the ocean through the view of palm trees and it's absolutely beautiful. It's the quintessential Californian view that you see in every movie about California or Santa Monica.

In addition we have world class shopping just half a block behind us, the famous Palisades Park that's in all the movies with its running track and cycle path is right in front of us and direct ocean access with stairs leading straight down to the sea.

That's the beauty with Santa Monica, it is the only pedestrian-friendly city in Southern California so you actually see people walking, jogging, riding bikes, skating, and I don't think you see that kind of active life style anywhere else in the world

BTN; And how about the rooms?

Tehmina; We are a small boutique hotel with 71 rooms; we have just completed a full US\$30 million renovation keeping the architectural integrity of the hotel which is a rarity in this day and age and at the same time we have modernised it without taking away the character.

BTN; When was it built?

Tehmina; It was originally built as a hotel in 1939 as an apartment hotel and then in 1945 it became army barracks. In 1949 converted it back again. My family bought it in 1983 and we did a small renovation, just a lipstick and rouge job and it really took off and became huge. All the celebrities stayed, we had Madonna and Sean Penn conducting their affair there, Randy Newman, who wrote I love LA stayed there for two years, the video was shot from the hotel. Bruce Webber did all his famous photographs there for Calvin Klein, the ones that are quintessentially 80s. Tom Cruise used to stay there and President Clinton when he was Governor Clinton and Governor of Arkansas. Even had Diane Keaton stayed there for six months; it was just the place to go probably because at the same time as being really fun it was the kind of place where no one bothered you, because it is a secluded beach hideaway.

Then in the 90s it became very tired and dated and combined with the fact that the building was going to be 70 years old this year I thought it was best to bring it up to date with all the modern amenities like HD TV's, more phone lines and faxes, double glazed the windows to shut the noise out and we put wooden floors everywhere. We are one of the only hotels that have hardwood floors which make us very green because it's not toxic and hypoallergenic.

For a thousand dollars a night you get 15,000 sq ft which is two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a living room and kitchen dining area so it's really very affordable for what it is.

We have great views from all our windows and the clever design means that all but four rooms have views of the beach.

All our rooms are individual and we provide from one bedroom suites with kitchen or without, two bedroom suites, two bedrooms without the suite, which is very popular with families, simple deluxe rooms smaller deluxe room, all different configurations and because it's a historical hotel, it has so much character and provides something for everyone.

BTN; Restaurants?

Tehmina; Our restaurant is called the dining room, which is very 30s. It serves California fresh organic cuisine, we have a farmers markets twice a week outside the hotel and our chef will go out and buy the food fresh from the farmers and its on a plate in a couple of hours.

The restaurant goes out and around into the courtyard and there is a pool menu as well giving a good variety of places to have your meals.

BTN; Tell me about the Pool

Tehmina; We provide one beautiful pool that is surrounded by jasmine for the most wonderful smell and a 14 person Jacuzzi. We are the only pool that doesn't have closing hours and I think one of the nicest things to do is sit in the cool Santa Monica evening air

in the Jacuzzi with your wine glass, especially if you are suffering jet lag or just want to make the most out of your holiday.

Also signature to Shangri-La is our Suite 700, our converted penthouse suite that we have turned into a rooftop lounge which will open next month. It will open at 4pm everyday and serve high tea and then go into cocktails and snacks. It is the only open rooftop lounge in the city of Santa Monica.

On the 4th July which is our national holiday Pepsi Cola had a huge party and the place was absolutely packed so all our hotel guests were asked to come up and sunbath on our roof which they all loved, it was really fun.

BTN; Which nationality do you find predominantly at the Shangri-la?

Tehmin; We have urbanites from all over the world but right now we are hosting mostly English and French and some German, we are also building clients from Australia and New Zealand.

We have a lot of fashion industry that stay with us and also people interested in architecture because of the wonderful structure of the building.

BTN; How long has the hotel been operating?

Tehmina; We reopened in December opening ten rooms at a time, floor by floor. We finished two weeks ago and our suite 700 will be the last thing to be unveiled which will be next month.

We had our soft opening and we will be having the grand opening sometime in August which we are all looking forward too.

BTN; What's the peak season?

Tehmina; Santa Monica is always pretty temperate. It never gets too hot and never gets too cold, the hottest month is August and the wettest between March / April. Peak season comes in June –November. It's never too dry, there it is always moisture in the air that's perfect for the skin without being humid and making your hair frizz, just beautiful. The coldest it gets is about 70 degrees Fahrenheit around 20 Centigrade in the winter.

Time Magazine listed The Shangri-la among the top "100 Greenest Buildings" in the world. Tell me about the efforts the Shangri-la makes towards sustainable tourism?

We were mentioned in Time magazine as being one of the "100 Most Important Green Designs in the World" and as only 6 of those buildings were hotels it was a great honour. Green is a big thing for us that we are very proud of, for example we have low flush toilets using different power depending on the need, our amenity bottles are made out of cornstarch not plastic so they are biodegradable and our pool is solar heated and has metal balls in it that keep the temperature warm as well as looking absolutely beautiful.

I think the most signature aspect of our hotel is that we are the only one that gives a very metropolitan vibe in a leisure destination. Most are very family, touristy suburban, out in the middle of no where and not in a very young vibrant fashionable crowd, we have a very fashionable crowd surrounding the Shangri-La for example as well as Pepsi Cola's big launch we also had Allure Magazine and Christian Dior hosted launch's there that included people like Kim Kardashian, Andrew Herman and Emma Roberts as well as many others so a very big fashionista crowd and you don't usually find that in a leisure destination.

Mario Testino one of the world's most famous photographers has recently done shoots with Kira Knightly on the cover for Vogue and Shannon Taylor, the new GI Joe, for the August issue of American GQ at the Shangri-La, so you can see why it has become such a special and very iconic place.

The other thing is that when you come to LA you almost always have to pick between the dynamism and exuberance of Hollywood or coming to the beach, and we have a combined of the two, we have the dynamism and exuberance ON the beach, which is why our tag line is Hollywood's Ocean Front Hotel.

BTN; What brings people to Santa Monica?

Tehmina; Cultural events that bring people to us include the American film market in November which is the place where all the movies are sold and is very big.

We also have the pier which is 100 years old brings people from all over to spend time on it, we have a lot of fashion events and art galleries and of course the beach itself.

Santa Monica is a very popular destination itself, within LA, within California, because there is not that many beach cities that have that urban edge to it like we do. And also don't forget that Santa Monica is where skate culture started, it's is where surf culture started, it used to be called Dog Town, so you will see that culture still purveys there and its right next door to Venice which is famously active as well.

In the last couple of years we have had a real lift from Santa Monica, where before you wouldn't look to go out in Santa Monica, now you have a choice of great restaurant, great stores, great hotels; it's a good time and a great resurgence.

Don't forget also we have the free Twilight Dance which will be 25 years old this year and will feature special performances from Patti Smith and Joan Baez

The downturn from 9-11 was terrible and it took us a while to get over it, everything died for a year and a half, hotels airlines all the tourism trade but we are doing well again now and despite the recession we are 95% full right now. However we are lucky we have an amazing product, sensible pricing on the most amazing location that's so safe and has great amenities. What more could you ask for.

BTN; What gives your hotel the edge over the competition?

Tehmina; We are famous for being a place you can come for great service without ridiculous prices and in order to maintain it you need a good team and we have the one of the best.

A place where you can reconcile your vacationing dichotomies as we provide everything you could want or need with a totally Zen experience out of the window.

BTN; What do we have to look forward to in the future from Shangri la Santa Monica?

Tehmina; We are starting Sunrise Yoga at the pool and Sunset Thai Chi classes on the roof terrace also Sharon Stone and Denzel Washington have already booked their charity party there and I'm hopeful that in the next five years you are going to be seeing a more hotels from our wonderful brand.