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WOMEN LEADING HOSPITALITY

AS AN INDUSTRY THAT HAS BATTLED FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY AND GENDER DIVERSITY THERE ARE MANY WOMEN WHO ARE LEADING FROM THE TOP. WE SPEAK TO SUCCESSFUL WOMEN GENERAL MANAGERS TO UNDERSTAND THEIR JOURNEYS

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO





GURNOOR BINDRA
GM, Raffles Udaipur

Hospitality appealed to Gurnoor because it is a dynamic industry that brings together people, cultures and services. Over the years, her journey has been shaped by being part of multiple hotel openings, gaining global exposure, and continuously investing in learning. Her academic experience at institutions like Cornell University and IIM also helped strengthen her understanding of longevity leadership and management.

Working across diverse operational and leadership roles gave her valuable insights into guest expectations, team management and brand standards. "Staying curious, open to learning and embracing new challenges at every stage helped shape my leadership journey and eventually prepared me for the responsibility of leading a property like Raffles Udaipur," she says.

Hospitality thrives on diversity, and Gurnoor focuses on creating a workplace where everyone feels valued and heard and where different perspectives are encouraged.

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"Membership, equal growth opportunities and open communication are key to building this culture. Supporting women and under-represented team members to take on leadership responsibilities and providing them with opportunities to grow professionally helps create a more confident and empowered team," she explains.

Gurnoor's vision is to position Raffles Udaipur as a distinctive luxury destination that blends the heritage and culture of Rajas that with the timeless elegance of the Raffles brand. With its private island setting and immersive experiences, the resort is designed to be a destination not only for special celebrations and occasions, but also for travellers seeking refined luxury and meaningful experiences in Udaipur. ➔



"FOR ME, LEADERSHIP IS NOT ABOUT AUTHORITY; IT IS ABOUT ACCOUNTABILITY – SETTING A CLEAR DIRECTION, UPHOLDING UNCOMPROMISING STANDARDS, AND CREATING ENDURING VALUE FOR GUESTS, THE ORGANISATION AND THE PEOPLE WHO BRING THE HOTEL TO LIFE EVERY DAY."



PREETI MAKHIJA GM, The Leela Palace New Delhi

Hospitality has always inspired Preeti because it is at once personal and transformative – a space where people, cultures and experiences intersect in meaningful ways. From the earliest days of her career, she was captivated by how thoughtful, intuitive service can turn a simple stay into a lasting memory. The ability to create such experiences for guests is what drew her to this industry.

Preeti's journey with The Leela Palace New Delhi began during its pre-opening phase in 2011, when she joined as a duty manager. "Being part of a hotel from its very inception offered a unique perspective on every facet of luxury operations – from guest experience and rooms management to conceptualising and launching The Leela Club. Each role deepened my understanding of operational excellence, strategic vision and the importance of building teams that share a commitment to elevated service," she explains.

Moving through these roles over the years ultimately shaped her path to becoming General Manager. "For me, leadership is not about authority; it is about accountability – setting a clear direction, upholding uncompromising standards, and creating enduring value for guests, the organisation and the people who bring the hotel to life every day," she says.

Inclusive leadership is both a responsibility and a strategy. Women in hospitality bring empathy, attention to

detail and collaborative insight – qualities that strengthen teams and elevate the guest experience. "At The Leela Palace, New Delhi, we focus on mentoring emerging talent, creating opportunities to lead meaningful initiatives, and ensuring that recognition and growth are based on merit and capability. By cultivating a culture where diverse perspectives are valued and every team member feels supported, we empower our people to perform at their best – which in turn shapes the exceptional experiences we deliver to our guests," says Preeti.

The industry has evolved, and women are increasingly shaping strategy and operations at every level. "Today, I see my role not just as leading the hotel, but also as mentoring others – helping the next generation of women leaders gain confidence, grow into opportunities and thrive in a sector I am proud to be part of," she informs.

In the local market, The Leela Palace New Delhi is recognised as a sanctuary where luxury, culture and heritage come together seamlessly. Signature dining experiences, cultural programming, luxury weddings and high-profile events reflect the hotel's commitment to timeless elegance while catering to today's discerning travellers.

"My vision is to continue the legacy of one of the capital's premier luxury destinations. Drawing on decades of refined Indian hospitality, we focus on evolving thoughtfully with modern luxury trends – blending operational excellence, immersive experiences and meticulous attention to detail. The goal is to create moments that are not only memorable and engaging but also resonate with the warmth, elegance, and authenticity that define the hotel," Preeti concludes. 🌟



NEHA CHHABRA
GM, Sofitel Mumbai BKC

Hospitality attracted Neha because it blends people, culture and the art of creating memorable experiences. Though her entry into this field has been by chance and unplanned and as a curiosity to see what this path would unfold. She has grown over the years to love what she does, and after the years of hard work it is this passion which keeps her going.

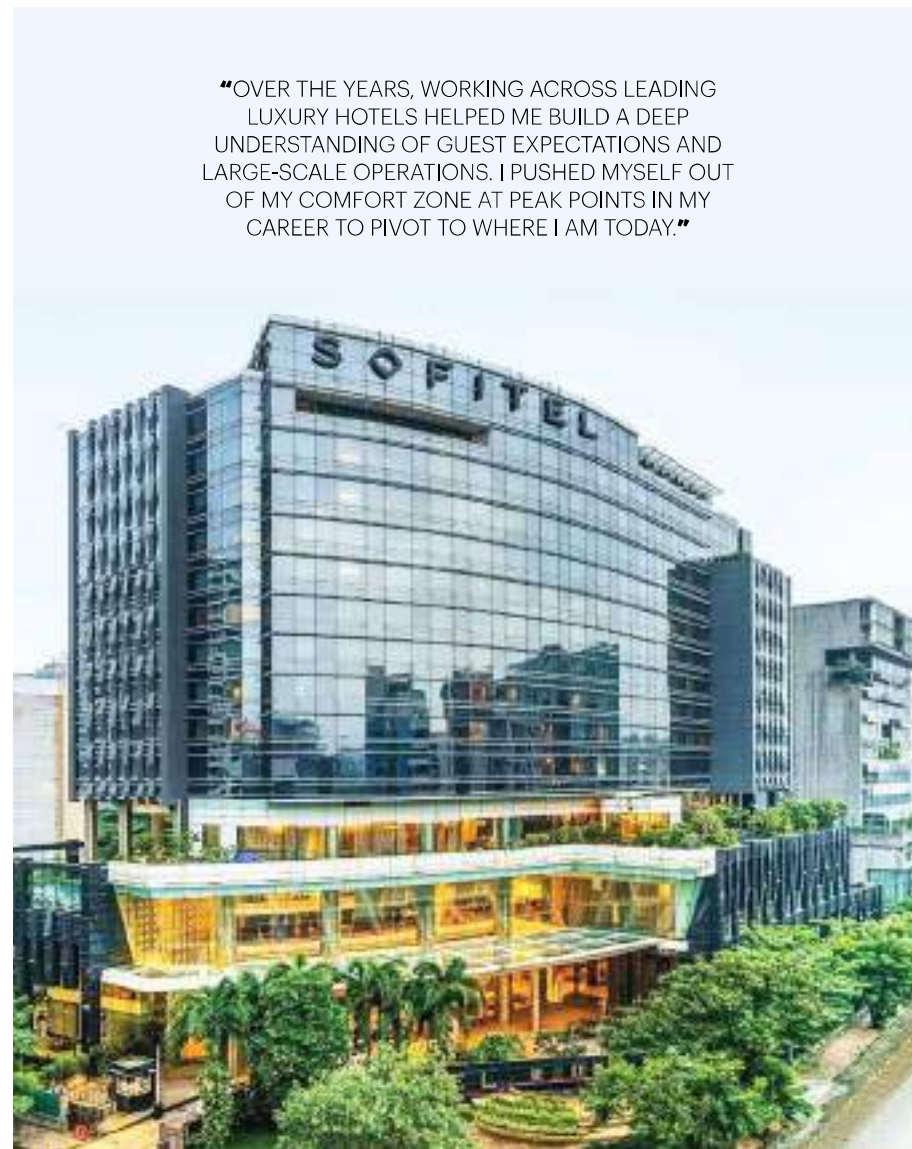
“My journey began at the Oberoi Centre for Learning and Development, where I developed a strong operational foundation, particularly in food and beverage,” she says. “Over the years, working across leading luxury hotels helped me build a deep understanding of guest expectations and large-scale operations. I pushed myself out of my comfort zone at peak points in my career to pivot to where I am today. At Sofitel Mumbai BKC today, that experience translates into creating refined hospitality that reflects Sofitel’s French art de vivre while staying connected to Mumbai’s vibrant social and business landscape.”

Over the years Neha has been lucky to have the most supportive family, who encouraged her to fly. “My leaders at every level have believed in me, and the trust they entrusted in me gave me the confidence to never give up. I have focused on building credibility through performance and strong team leadership. Today, it is encouraging to see more women stepping into leadership roles across the industry, bringing diverse perspectives and leadership styles that strengthen the sector,” she explains.

Located in the heart of the Bandra Kurla Complex, Sofitel Mumbai BKC is uniquely positioned to serve both global business travellers and the city’s discerning social audience. “My vision is to further strengthen the hotel as a refined lifestyle destination through distinctive dining, cultural programming, and immersive guest experiences that blend French elegance with warm Indian hospitality.”

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“MY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RELIES ON CONTINUOUS LEARNING AND MY ABILITY TO WORK WITH COLLEAGUES TO ACQUIRE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT EMERGING INDUSTRY ADVANCEMENTS. THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE IN THE PRESENT TIME REQUIRES BUSINESSES TO PROVIDE THEIR CUSTOMERS WITH HIGHLY CUSTOMISED SERVICES THAT INCLUDE STRONG TIES TO THEIR COMMUNITY.”

SUSHMA KHICHAR GM, Sheraton Grand Bangalore Hotel at Brigade Gateway

Sushma's interest in hospitality developed from her passion for studying how hotels create spaces that connect different people and cultures and various experiences. She started her professional journey by acquiring operational knowledge through hands-on work, which permitted her to gain department-wide experience and learn operational details that impact guest satisfaction.

She explains: “My path to becoming General Manager developed through my operational knowledge, which I gained through mentoring relationships and executive leadership training. Creating an inclusive culture needs active listening to all people while providing equal opportunities for personal development. I promote mentorship programmes along with open communication channels and opportunities for leadership experience to help team members, especially women and young professionals, develop confidence in their ability to

handle more demanding work duties.”

Sushma faced leadership perception challenges, which many women in operational roles experience, because she worked in traditionally male-dominated fields. “My dedication to preparation and performance and resilience creation enabled our team to achieve success without needing to showcase our results,” she says.

Her professional activities involve participation in industry forums and professional networks while she tracks changes in customers' needs. “My professional development relies on continuous learning and my ability to work with colleagues to acquire knowledge about emerging industry advancements. The most significant change in the present time requires businesses to provide their customers with highly customised services that include strong ties to their community,” she informs.

The Sheraton Grand Bangalore Hotel at Brigade Gateway is dedicated to minimising its environmental impact and striving for net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, in line with Marriott International's Serve 360 sustainability platform. “Our strategy emphasises responsible operations by reducing waste throughout the hotel, conserving water and implementing renewable energy initiatives,” Sushma says. ♻️



HOTELS



PRATITI RAJPAL GM, Ronil Goa – A JdV by Hyatt Hotel

Pratiti comes from Jodhpur in Rajasthan and was fortunate to be born into a joint family. From a very young age, she was drawn to creating moments that made people feel welcomed, cared for and truly seen. Hospitality felt like a natural extension of her personality – a space where warmth, curiosity and human connection come together every single day.

“That’s what inspired me to pursue a career in hospitality, which wasn’t well received by the family initially; however, I was destined to be here, and hence, after completing a master’s in marketing, I joined hotels via the marketing communications route,” she says.

Pratiti’s journey to becoming a General Manager has been shaped by a mix of learning, unlearning, and constantly stepping outside my comfort zone. “I was fortunate to be part of iconic Hyatt hotels like Park Hyatt Goa Resort & Spa, Andaz Delhi, Grand Hyatt Mumbai and

more wherein I discovered the real heartbeat of a hotel – its people. Every role I was assigned pushed me to understand the business from a new perspective, which helped me evolve. What truly guided my growth was the wonderful mentors who inspired me, towards staying committed to leading with empathy rather than authority. Over the years, I’ve learned that leadership in hospitality isn’t about perfection – it’s about presence, adaptability and creating an environment where teams feel empowered to shine,” she explains.

Becoming a GM wasn’t a single milestone; it was a series of small steps, perseverance and meaningful relationships that shaped who she is today. And through it all, her inspiration remains the same – to create a place where both guests and colleagues feel at home. One of the biggest challenges has been navigating assumptions about how a woman should lead or what her strengths should look like.

“Early in my career, I often felt the need to overprove myself, to be louder, tougher, or more assertive than what felt natural. Over time, I learned that my strengths – empathy, calmness, clarity and a peoplefirst approach – were not limitations but differentiators. I stopped trying to

fit a mould and instead focused on leading in a way that felt authentic to me. What helped me overcome these moments was staying resilient, seeking mentors who believed in me, and reminding myself that leadership isn’t about gender – it’s about impact, intention and the way you make people feel,” Pratiti says.

For her, Ronil Goa – JdV by Hyatt is more than a lifestyle resort; it’s a place with its own heartbeat. “My vision is to nurture that energy and make Ronil Goa a space where guests instantly feel a sense of belonging – effortless, joyful, and a little unexpected in the best way. I want the resort to feel like a true reflection of Goa’s spirit: warm, colourful, a bit whimsical, and full of moments that feel unplanned yet perfect. Whether it’s the music, the design, the people, or the small surprises along the way, I want guests to experience Ronil Goa as a place that lifts their mood the moment, they walk in,” she sums up. 🌟

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HOTELS



RACHITA SOOD
GM, Novotel Mumbai International Airport

Rachita's journey into hospitality began with a fascination for the industry's nature. As a young professional, she was drawn to the elegance, global exposure and dynamic environment and, moreover, how it is fundamentally about service and meaningful human connections. The opportunity to interact with people from diverse cultures and create memorable experiences for guests became a powerful source of inspiration for her.

"One defining trait that shaped my career is my belief in never settling. I have always believed that growth comes from continuously challenging yourself and striving to do better each day. Consistency and discipline have played a crucial role in my journey. I strongly believe in self-reflection – regularly evaluating your own performance, understanding your strengths and areas of improvement, and holding yourself accountable," she says.

Creating an inclusive and supportive workplace is something she feels strongly about as a leader. The hospitality industry thrives on people, and the more diverse and empowered our teams are, the stronger the organisation becomes. "My approach begins with



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creating an environment where everyone feels safe to express themselves, share ideas and contribute confidently to the team. One of the most important steps is empowerment. I encourage team members – especially women and individuals from under-represented groups – to take ownership of their roles and speak openly about their aspirations and challenges. When people feel heard and valued, it naturally builds confidence and engagement."

In a constantly evolving industry like hospitality, staying updated with trends and innovations is extremely important. "As a leader, I believe continuous learning is essential to stay relevant. I rely on multiple sources to stay informed. Reading industry magazines and hospitality publications is one of the most consistent ways I keep track of emerging trends, new technologies and global best practices," she explains.

Rachita's vision is to position the hotel as the perfect blend of efficiency and comfort – an abode where business travellers can work seamlessly while also enjoying moments of relaxation. This means focusing not only on operational excellence but also on personalised guest experiences that make every stay memorable. ➡

HOTELS



LAKSHMI SRIVIDHAR
GM, Novotel Visakhapatnam Varun Beach &
The Bheemili Resort – Managed by Accor

For Lakshmi, hospitality has always been about genuine care and the thoughtful gestures that make guests feel welcomed and remembered. She began her journey as a general manager's secretary, a role that gave her a valuable view of hotel operations from both a strategic and operational lens. Over the past 22 years, she has worked across guest services and revenue functions, learning that leadership is about understanding both the team and the guest experience.

Lakshmi also actively encourages women on her team to trust their instincts and confidently take on leadership opportunities. "Consistency comes from a shared sense of ownership. At Accor, we call our team members 'Heartists', reflecting the artistry behind service. While digital tools help track quality, empathy and attention to detail ensure every guest experience feels personal and seamless," she explains.

Earlier in her career, the industry could feel male-dominated. "I chose to focus on delivering results while staying authentic to my leadership style – one rooted in



Novotel Vishakhapatnam Varun Beach

"I CHOSE TO FOCUS ON DELIVERING RESULTS WHILE STAYING AUTHENTIC TO MY LEADERSHIP STYLE – ONE ROOTED IN COLLABORATION AND EMPATHY. TODAY, I SEE IT AS MY RESPONSIBILITY TO SUPPORT AND UPLIFT THE NEXT GENERATION OF WOMEN LEADERS."

collaboration and empathy. Today, I see it as my responsibility to support and uplift the next generation of women leaders," she says.

Lakshmi's vision is to reflect the dual character of Visakhapatnam. Novotel Visakhapatnam Varun Beach serves as a vibrant hub for business and celebrations, while The Bheemili Resort offers a tranquil coastal retreat. Together, they capture the complete spirit of the destination. ¹



Bheemili Resort Managed by Accor - Facade