

The Boss: Dee Patel's No. 1 lesson – ‘There’s no perfect day’

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When Dee Patel decided to take a permanent job at The Hermitage Hotel, she asked to be in charge of housekeeping. It was something the hospitality veteran hadn't done before. She wanted to help the renovated, reopened historic hotel land five-star and five-diamond ratings and to challenge herself to master another part of the industry. Today, she runs all elements of the city's only five-star hotel, as the Hermitage's general manager.



NATHAN MORGAN | NASHVILLE BUSINESS JOURNAL
Dee Patel is general manager of The Hermitage Hotel.

Tell me about a typical day. Typical day sort of varies. But it starts off, I do a full hotel walkthrough, check in with the team, catch up on emails. We have an operations meeting first thing in the morning, which is really an essential start to our day.

I don't know if you can answer this one, but who's the most famous person who has stayed here? I can't. However, I do get the question quite often, "What's your favorite celebrity encounter?" Honestly I think I've just become so immune to the fame or the celebrity of a person that each person who walks in, they're just human. And we've become sort of an outpost for celebrities to find that they can be relaxed, find that they can be normal. ... I will say that my most favorite encounter was with a guest that had stayed with us when she was young, maybe 8 or 10. And she was celebrating a significant milestone, and I got a chance to meet her. ... She was turning 100. ... To me that was an encounter that I was just blown away by.

What is the hardest part of your job? There's no perfect day. ... You are reliant on the human element, and mistakes are going to happen. How we overcome them, and what we do to overcome them, is the most important part.

How did you get into the hospitality industry? Back then there was a school called Johnson & Wales [University] that was in Charleston; it's not [in that city] anymore. ... Initially I was looking at commercial hotel real estate, and thought that going to a hospitality school would give me this exposure into the industry that I wanted to at some point get into. Johnson & Wales, when I was there, they would have four-day school. ... And I was just bored. So I started working at a hotel as a hostess. ... I fell in love with the operations of the hotel. It just sort of became intriguing, it became interesting, it became a little addictive. I wanted to learn more and know more.

And then what brought you to Nashville? I knew Greg Sligh. ... He had become my mentor. He was opening The Hermitage Hotel ... and I was approached by him and the team [and asked] if I would be willing to be a part of an opening team. ... I was left with a very difficult decision. Greg said to me, "What's it going to take for me to get you to [move to] Nashville, and be a part of the Hermitage Hotel?" I remember sitting my hotel room — I was in room 210.

And it was a really very difficult situation. So I pulled out what I know best, my lined sheet of paper and I did a pros and cons list. ... I came to the decision that The Hermitage Hotel was the right place for me, and I could really learn and develop.

What's your favorite way to unwind? It's a toss between at home and with friends. We have a few friends who the wives, the husbands, the children all have common interests. ... It's really spending time with people we enjoy. It's not so much the place, but the company.

What's your favorite place that you've ever gone on a trip? Málaga, Spain. My husband and I, this was before kids — he's from England too — and we went to England for a family wedding. We were there for two weeks. If you know anything about Hindu weddings, weddings are not one-day deals; it's a weeklong event. And we have a lot of family there, so we did all of our socialization, and then my husband's a spontaneous travel booker. So he decided to book Málaga, Spain, the night before we were leaving. ... I'd never heard of Málaga. ... It's the locals' place to vacation. ... There was something very charming to me about this city. Still to this day if someone said to me, "Where do you want to retire?" I'd say, "Málaga."

What is your go-to order at the restaurant here? I love our sweet onion bisque. Just can't go wrong with a staple, hearty, delicious simple soup. We have a great farm salad, that's sort of my go-to. It's light, it's easy, it's fresh, it's local. A lot of the ingredients are pulled from our own garden.

Do you read much? I do more audio listening. The benefit of the traffic is I get a little more time in the car, and listen to a lot of different books. "The Goal" by Eliyahu Goldratt is a fun, easy book to listen to.

Age: 36

Title: General manager

Company: The Hermitage Hotel

Address: 231 Sixth Ave. N, Nashville 37219

Web: thehermitagehotel.com

Employees: 180

Hometown: Coventry, England

Education: Johnson & Wales University, B.A. in hospitality