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Q&A: Ritz General Manager Allan Federer Enjoys Moscow Reception

By Irina Filatova

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Federer got hooked on hotels while working as a delivery boy in Montreal.

Sitting in a quiet restaurant at his hotel a stone's throw from the Kremlin, Allan Federer pours himself green tea from a snow-white ceramic teapot.

"I first tried green tea in Asia, and now I can't live without it," he said smiling.

A hospitality industry veteran with over 30 years experience, Ritz Carlton Moscow general manager Federer piled on the jokes and shared memories of his youth during an interview with The Moscow Times. He also talked about his life in Moscow, where he arrived in September after managing Ritz hotels in Canada, Turkey, the United States, Spain, the United Arab Emirates and Singapore.

Allan Federer

Education

1974 — University of London, degree
in history and literature

Work experience

Occupied senior management positions with international hotel chains across North America, Europe, Middle East and Asia before joining the Ritz Carlton Hotel Company, a subsidiary of Marriott International, in 2001.

Favorite book: It's like asking me who is your favorite child, I love them all.
Reading now: "The Revenge of Geography: What the Maps tell us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate" by Robert D. Kaplan (2012)
Movie pick: Les Miserables (2012), directed by Tom Hooper
Favorite Moscow restaurant: Uilliam's (Malaya Bronnaya Ulitsa, 20 A)
Weekend getaway destination: The Bulgari Hotel in Milan

"This is my eighth Ritz Carlton hotel," said Federer, 57. "I go to where the company sends me and it's taking me to very interesting places."

The 11-story Ritz Carlton, a luxury brand in the family of the Marriott Hotel Group hotels, appeared at the intersection of Tverskaya and Mokhovaya Ulitsa in 2006 on the site of the demolished Intourist Hotel, which had been built in late 1960s to accommodate foreigners.

The last guest to check out of the tacky Soviet era establishment had reportedly come from Canada, just ten years before Federer, also a Canadian, began his job in the newly constructed modern building decorated with glassy arcs and columns on both sides of the entrance.

Federer, who was not aware that the last Intourist guest was a fellow countryman, called it "serendipity," and said he did not believe in superstitions and symbols.

But his life has had its share of symbols, with one of them — the Ritz Carlton Hotel in his native Montreal — having become a turning point in Federer's career plans and aspirations.

The 100-year old Montreal icon, the first hotel in North America to bear the Ritz Carlton name, inspired 14-year-old Federer, who just got his first summer job as a courier, to become a hotelier.

"In downtown Montreal, a big bank sent mail boys to deliver envelopes and things between branch offices. The chairman of the bank was also the chairman of the board at Ritz Carlton Montreal, and since the hotel was between where I lived and his office, every morning I had to go in and pick up his papers for him," Federer said.

He recalled with nostalgia that the hotel employees were very kind to the adolescent coming in every day with a small brief case. He was always treated to a piece of cake or a croissant.

Federer said he felt extremely honored when he entered the back of the hotel — the part which is usually hidden from the eyes of regular visitors: "At the end of the summer I said: that's it, I don't want to work in a bank, I want to work in a hotel."

Federer's life story could have been a perfect plot for one of Theodore Dreiser's novels, with the only difference that his American dream came true.

Thirty years after he was enjoying pastries at the Ritz Carlton kitchen, Federer returned to that Montreal hotel as general manager, where some employees still remembered him as a delivery boy.

"The hotel had lots of employees with more than 40 years of service, and they remembered me," he said, adding he was very happy to see his old friends.

Federer learned how to cultivate his own happiness from his parents, who insisted that he study history and literature after school, despite his commitment to the hospitality market.

"My parents' thinking was that a liberal arts education was the most important thing one could get, because it prepared you to think. They had a feeling that it was a good platform to build a happy life and pursue whatever you wanted afterwards."

They were right. After a few summer jobs and vocational courses under his belt, he easily landed a job with one of the Montreal hotels following his graduation. It was the starting point of a career that eventually led him to Moscow.

Apart from Russia's traditional red tape, which Federer said has turned into a daily headache, his other challenge is the language, which he is trying to master.

Federer said one of his favorite pastimes while sitting in traffic is looking at shop signs and trying to figure out how to pronounce what is written on them.

But since his efforts to speak Russian have yet to bear fruit, Federer finds salvation in Google's translation app on his smartphone.

"I go to the grocery store, and I type in whatever I need, and then it translates it into Russian," he explained. "I hold it up to the lady behind the counter, then she looks at me and says "Da!"

"That works everywhere; it never lets me down," Federer said.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What makes Moscow different from all the other locations where you have worked?

A: Moscow can't be compared with any other place. Moscow is as different from Singapore as Dublin is from Arizona. Certain parts of it are jarringly different, there's no question about that. When you see buildings like the seven sisters Stalinist skyscrapers, it's hard to realize that the architecture on that level existed here during the Soviet period. When you see the Moscow State University building on Vorobyovy Gory up close, you can't help saying "Wow! That's very special." And you're looking at the building, which is in itself magnificent, and then you turn around and you look at the panorama of all Moscow — I don't think people understand what a huge metropolis this is.

And you have this beautiful architecture here that's just waiting to be redeveloped. You can drive down the street and see these lovely little palaces in yellow and green that haven't been restored yet. One day, real estate developers are going to come in and turn those into great lofts, condominiums, boutiques and shops — they will be terrific to live in.

Q: How would you describe Russian hospitality?

A: Those who work in the hotel business must love people or they don't do well. We have highly competent ladies and gentlemen — that's how we call employees at the Ritz Carlton. They're brilliantly well educated, they're culturally astute, they're fully engaged with their tasks and like all Russians they are very, very patriotic.

They are hospitable as well, but translating Russian hospitality to international guests is still a work in progress. As a Nordic nation, Russians are very polite people, like Canadians. In some countries there's a demarcation line between being polite and being friendly. So if you go the Ritz Carlton Montreal, the staff is very polite, as when you come to the Ritz Carlton in Moscow. But if you go to the Ritz Carlton Central Park South in New York, the staff is really warm and they will likely greet you as an old friend.

Russian hospitality is very specific. My experience has been that Russian hospitality starts after people get to know you. It's even true in a business relationship. At first, there's little bit of a distance and standoffishness, but as you get to know each other the full warmth of Russian hospitality emerges. And once that has happened, you're friends for life.

Q: Which of your hotel guests have been the most memorable?

A: Our ladies and gentlemen here run a program called "Community Footprints," which is a program through which they give to the local community. They volunteer their own time.

At the end of last year, we sponsored a music competition for Russian children who are handicapped. They came from different places across country, and we provided the guest rooms. Our staff were organizing the event, and it was deeply touching that these children, which were brilliant musicians but in many cases handicapped — they were so happy with their experiences of staying at the hotel that they insisted on putting on a impromptu concert on the roof of our O2 bar for our employees who took care of them. Things like this are deeply touching — both for people who work here and for the guests as well.

Q: What is most challenging for you about working in Russia?

A: Paperwork. Oh my Lord... I spend half my day signing documents. The paperwork is unbelievable. I used to work in Turkey, which was part of the Byzantine Empire, and when we say "byzantine" we mean "complicated," because the Byzantines were generally known for their intricate procedures for resolving the easiest problems. But that was a piece of cake compared to Moscow.

If you stand outside my office on any given day, you will see five hundred documents that require immediate signature. It's not like I can sign them tonight or tomorrow — I have to sign them right now. The paperwork is unbelievable... It seems that it is never ending. It's like a tsunami of paper coming over you.

Q: Could you describe any difficult situation that you've encountered while working in Russia?

A: We often receive requests from government delegations, heads of state wanting to stay over. The problem is that we only have one presidential suite. It is a very special suite overlooking the Kremlin, so you can imagine that it's in high demand.

But there are times when we need to have two or three presidential suites at the hotel, because these heads of states are coming sometimes to see each other, as well as meet the leaders of the Russian Federation. So one of the challenges that we're working to overcome now is building the second presidential suite in the hotel.

But you know, if two people want the same first-class ticket on an airplane and there's only one seat left — it's the one who gets there first.

Probably the biggest challenge so far is balancing how we provide our facilities to these very important high-profile delegations. Generally speaking, we provide alternatives and then let them decide what they would prefer.

Q: What high-profile guests have stayed at the hotel since you've been here?

A: I won't tell you. It's not permitted. It is an absolute policy of the Ritz Carlton Hotel Company that we protect the privacy and confidentiality of our guests at all times. If guests choose to say that they stayed at the Ritz Carlton, this is their privilege. Otherwise, we never disclose the names of our guests — famous or not.

In fact our staff are not allowed to tweet: "Oh my Lord, so and so just checked into the hotel!" or "I just saw this actor and he's so beautiful and the president of this country just came down the red carpet and he is so short!" It is a very serious disciplinary breach to talk about these things.

But I can tell you that 90 percent of the performers playing at Crocus City Hall over the last six years have stayed with us; 96 percent of top foreign dignitaries on state visits over the last six years have stayed here. Guests attending virtually any movie launch you can think of stay with us. There are probably less than five days a year when there isn't one star at this hotel.

Q: What advice would you offer a foreign investor interested in Russia?

A: There's nothing to fear in Russia. I'm a big believer in Russia's future, particularly on the tourism front. There are so many smart young people here, and with so much distance

from one end to the other, from the tourism perspective this could be a great national destination. You've got a huge Asian powerhouse on one side, you've got Europe on the other, you've got the Middle East south of the Caucasus; it's a tremendous basin to draw guests from.

And if you look down the road, I believe that there will be five-star resorts for hunting and fishing for international guests. I think there's going to be ski destinations on some of your great, undeveloped mountains. I think tremendous ecological tourist camps will appear on the Pacific coast. It's such a vast country, so much to offer. If we think about how it will look 50 years from now, we'll be so happily surprised about the tremendous development that's going to be occurring.

Now the visa issue is very complicated; It's hard to become a tourist to Russia. I think if it were easier to be a tourist to Russia it would be a very good thing, it would promote a lot more travel, and travel promotes understanding and cross-fertilization.

You know it's easy for me to get on a plane and fly to Berlin, Milan or Vienna for a weekend. But if you're a German in Berlin or an Austrian in Vienna, it's very difficult to get on a plane and fly to Moscow for a weekend. I think openness is going to promote a lot of development

Q: Where do you usually stay when you travel?

A: I always stay at Ritz Carlton when I travel on business because I want to see how those hotels are run around the world. I'm always glad to stay at those managed by my brothers — you see it's kind of a family business.

When I travel personally, I try to stay at other hotels to see how the competition is doing. In some cities there are hotels that are worth looking at not from the service perspective but from a product perspective. But in most cases, when I'm on vacation I prefer not to stay at a hotel at all but rent a villa or a condominium just to change the ambience.

Q: What's most difficult about living in Moscow from a foreigner's perspective?

A: No Crest toothpaste. Everybody uses it in North America. I'm joking of course, it's a small thing. But it's very difficult to import things here. If you want to buy a book from Amazon.com, for example, it will be difficult have it delivered here. But other than that Moscow has everything.

Q: Who or what inspires you every day?

A: We have 400 ladies and gentlemen working here, and working with them inspires me, energizes me and rewards me in every single way. I love them because they are engaged, they are selected to have in their heart the need to show others genuine care and comfort. I get to see tremendous examples of generosity, and kindness, and innovation and encouragement every day, and that's very inspiring to me above all else.

Q: What's your secret of managing people successfully?

A: I try to manage work and not the people. I say: where do you think we should go next and how are we going to get there, and then I provide the resources and encouragement

and skills to people to accomplish those goals. And I think you don't manage any two people the same way; everybody is different. You have to recognize those differences and to get the best out of people, on an individual basis.

I also try to live by a vision, so that everybody can see the vision of the hotel in the long term and the role that they play in it. It's not my vision, it's everybody's vision.

Q: What's the main difference between hotel employees in Moscow and other countries where you worked?

A: There's a very high level of education of employees here in Moscow. They're deeply knowledgeable, they're numerate, and as a result they are able to think in a greater depth and more creatively about the work they do. Russians are very well-educated, and they are generally very well-read people. They are an extremely intelligent workforce.

Q: After 30 years in the hospitality industry, how do you see your professional development?

A: I'm learning something new every day. My goal this year, for example, is to understand better how hotel real estate valuations impact value. I start every year with three or four development goals. That's one of mine for this year.

The second one that I have this year is to go to the Harvard program on negotiation and relationship building. You never know enough about building relationships with your partners, and no matter how good negotiator you are, you're never as good as you think you are.

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