

**The Basics:** Situated between the iconic Lake Tahoe and the majestic Sierra Nevada, the resort has about a dozen indoor meeting spaces and six outdoor spaces, most overlooking the pine-covered mountains.

**Wow Factor:** The resort has a nearby lake club where up to 40 guests can enjoy an outdoor whirlpool, beach access, a private pier, kayaks and stand-up paddleboards.

**Amenities:** The luxurious guest rooms and suites have gas fireplaces and floor-to-ceiling windows.

**F&B:** Manzanita is a fine dining restaurant with dishes like pan-seared Alaskan halibut, filet mignon and crab pasta. For more casual fare, Backyard Bar & BBQ offers wood-fired pizzas, burgers, bratwursts, cocktails and local craft beers. At night, guests gather around a big central fire pit for s'mores and Champagne.

**Activities:** Beyond the famed skiing, guests can take a scenic gondola ride directly from the resort to the Village at Northstar California Resort, which has an ice-skating rink, fire pits and a variety of shops, restaurants and bars. In summer, there's fishing, rock climbing, water-skiing, sailing, windsurfing, river rafting and hiking along the stunning Pacific Crest Trail.

## BANYAN TREE MAYAKOBA

Situated just outside Cancun on the shores of the Riviera Maya, this luxury resort is sandwiched between the Caribbean Sea and a series of winding canals, lagoons and mangrove forests pulsing with wildlife.

**The Basics:** Banyan Tree is one of four resorts located on the 1,600-acre Mayakoba property, which is only about 40 minutes south of Cancun International Airport. It has seven indoor and outdoor meeting venues, all with state-of-the-art AV equipment and LCD projectors. The largest space can accommodate 600 people standing.

**Wow Factor:** It's like a floating city, with a collection of two-story Southeast Asia-inspired buildings clustered around a central water plaza where, as the name suggests, a towering banyan tree rises from the water.

**Amenities:** All 123 villas feature private pools, along with outdoor bathtubs and spacious layouts. Guests can easily reach the resort's private beach via a short golf cart ride, on foot or by using one of the bikes assigned to each room. There's also an 18-hole golf course and a village square modeled after the historic colonial plazas in Mexico, with charming boutiques and restaurants.

**F&B:** Signature Thai restaurant Saffron overlooks a mangrove lagoon. Another highlight is Oriente, known for its international breakfast buffet.



# Grand Stand

Richard Kessler explains what sets properties apart when creating luxurious experiences.

By Michael J. Solender

Richard C. Kessler is longtime chairman and CEO of The Kessler Enterprise Inc., a group of wholly-owned subsidiaries of development and operational companies including The Kessler Collection, a portfolio of memorable themed hotels and resorts.

Kessler's more than 50 years in hotel development and management include nine years as president and chairman of Days Inn of America. Kessler oversees a portfolio of 10 luxury boutique properties in Alabama, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina.

In 2010, Kessler, in association with Bill Marriott Jr. established Marriott's Autograph Collection. He initiated the brand concept launch by franchising the first seven hotels in the collection and is currently the collection's largest franchise operator in America. Kessler talks about delivering luxury across differing demographics, and how staffing his properties with "grand performers" is key.

## How do you define luxury and the luxury experience for your guests?

I like to answer that by starting with what I think the result of luxury should be, and that is: exuberant guests. Luxury should just make that happen—exuberance. If there's no exuberance

and no excitement about the experience, I doubt if it's really luxury.

We try to create an existence—an environment—so a broad age span can experience luxury in the way they interpret luxury. What we do with our properties is what I call a blend that goes from a very European classical feel, which many times the older guests identify with, and then we also throw in a splash of funk, something unexpected, something that's a little funky and contemporary that appeals to a younger guest.

## Luxury in a certain sense has become commoditized with beautiful properties, rooms, decor and meals. What differentiates the Kessler Collection properties in this space?

A large part of our market is the creative class. The creative class is looking for experiences and to learn something. We bring in collections that bring entertainment value and offer a learning experience. We focus on art and music as two major elements in all our hotels.

An example is our curated hat collection (A Century of Hats) on display at the Mansion on Forsyth Park in Savannah, Georgia. It took us two and a half years to build that collection of 100 years' worth of women's hats of different styles, starting from the 1860s all the way through the 1960s.

In terms of music, we have Rob Gibson on staff full time as our music director. Rob was the executive and artistic director of the Savannah Music Festival for 16 years and the founding director of Jazz at Lincoln Center. He curates [music programs] for every one of our hotels.

## Speak to luxury in terms of the service aspect of what you do.

We're in the entertainment business, and as such we refer to our associates as grand performers. And whether you're at the front desk or making up the beds, you're onstage always. Every person needs to be able to speak to a guest and be very attentive to their needs and anticipate what that guest needs before they even ask for it. Intuitive service is a big deal with us; we really stress that in our training.

