

Young hospitality talent immersed in unconventional culture

Swire Hotels offers cross-border management training to the select few

by Grace Chan

In preparation of the grand opening of two new properties in Hong Kong, Swire Hotels is inviting a handful of young graduates to take part in its specially designed two-year management trainee (MT) programme.

A wholly owned subsidiary of Swire Properties, Swire Hotels opened its first boutique hotel in Beijing last summer, followed by a 117-room luxury hotel in Pacific Place and a 345-room business hotel to be opened in Island East next January.

New to the hospitality industry, Swire Hotels takes pride in its untraditional corporate values and culture. Unlike traditional luxury hotels, Swire Hotels aims to make a difference and so underscores the importance of lateral thinking. "In the face of intense competition, we must come up with new concepts to attract customers," says Dean Winter, general manager of Swire Hotels.

For example, a guest experience department is installed in place of the usual concierge and reception. "Our guest experience department is a paperless operation. Staff there will not be required to do any paperwork. They just need to concentrate on giving our guests the best service and

a memorable experience," Mr Winter notes "But first thing first, we must have the right people to make that first impression."

Launched in 2007, Swire Hotels' MT programme takes in about five trainees annually. In line with its unorthodox management style, the hotel group is looking for young talent with a playful and creative disposition.

"The hospitality industry is well-known for long working hours and it's getting harder to attract young people to join the industry," Mr Winter notes. With an attractive career development scheme, however, the group is confident that the MT programme will appeal to young aspirants who share the group's corporate values.

Beijing experience

The Swire Hotels MT programme incorporates an unprecedented placement experience in Beijing. The exposure is second to none, Mr Winter stresses. "Graduates who achieved outstanding academic results usually have had lots of experiences from an exhaustive list of extracurricular activities or even overseas internships. Naturally they have high expectations for the MT programme," he adds.

Trainees experience on-the-

job training in both Hong Kong and mainland China, in addition to some classroom training. Alongside departmental rotations, MTs help conduct research for tourist attractions and local competitors in Beijing. When in Hong Kong, they are expected to assist in the opening of the two hotels.

In order to hire only the cream of the crop, the group requires all applicants to take a written test on its website. "This helps us to assess the candidates' English skills and creative writing ability. Those who pass the test will be invited to join a series of interactive meetings where they play a variety of games," Mr Winter says. "By observing their behaviours, we can identify the most desired personality traits and find us the perfect match."

Short-listed candidates then meet an interview panel and are engaged in casual conversations, which allow them to demonstrate aspirations and display their potential. "We ask about their experience of good and bad service and see if they truly understand what customer service is," Mr Winter expands. "We're also concerned if they have the confidence to look into our eyes, as eye contact is essential while talking to guests."



Dean Winter, general manager, Swire Hotels
Photos: Wallace Chan

Recruitment Procedure

27 Feb to 14 March	Advertisement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Newspaper Swire Hotels website
March	Career talks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School of Hospitality Management, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Chinese University of Hong Kong
	Online written test	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Answer 3 questions in English Topics may include hospitality, environment and property Test candidates' English proficiency and creative writing ability Sample questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How important is customer relationship? Comment on the importance of branding. What's the importance of the relationship with the travel and airline industry? Comment on the sustainability of the hotel industry.
Mid March	Application closed	
	Interactive meeting (20 candidates)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group discussion Case studies Presentation Games, team-building activities, role-plays Assess candidates' personality attributes
April	Panel interview	Management team engage candidates in conversations
May	Confirm offers	Starting salary: HK\$14,000 Number of vacancies: 5 to 6

Training Structure

Total duration	2 years	
Orientation	1 month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Familiarise with the Swire Properties Limited and Swire Hotels company culture Hotel visits—gain insights about the market mix, hardware, service levels and operations in different hotels
Attachment (Beijing)	6 months	Training in departments including guest experience, restaurant and bars, as well as other administration departments to learn the operations and the hotel's brand
Attachment (Hong Kong)	1 year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On-the-job training at different departments to identify areas of interests Duration depends on projects and potential of individual MTs
Final placement	5 months	Position depends on individual MTs' areas of interest
Assessment	Continuous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fill in post-departmental training evaluation forms Submit training log Bi-monthly meeting via video conference or meeting Mentoring and coaching by senior management Learning by reading Regular meetings with the people development department
Others		Attend professional training and seminar

Cynthia Li Management trainee 2007

When I joined the MT programme, the Swire Hotel in Beijing was just preparing for its opening and for about 16 months I had the opportunities to work and learn in different departments which helped me to think and develop into an all-round person. I was really excited to witness the hotel being built from the ground up and have a chance to help with the soft opening. I valued that the management team respects our ideas. During my training there, I also learned to adapt to a new environment. Those are precious and unforgettable experiences.



Carmen Chan Management trainee 2008

I was initially attracted by the placement opportunity in Beijing, which gave me the chance to polish my Mandarin skill and learn more about Beijing's culture. Since I joined the programme, I've received training at four departments. I'm expected to be a fast learner with comprehensive skills and knowledge. Now I'm working directly with the general manager and this is a rare opportunity for a fresh graduate. I can feel the trust from the senior management, who constantly give me feedback that helps me improve.



Sea Chen Management trainee 2008

I really enjoy the working atmosphere here, as we've built a very close relationship with each other. The company hires people with similar personalities. Everyday I look forward to coming back to work. Throughout the training, I have been given various tasks and I learned to adjust my mindset while working at the different departments as part of the team. The learning process has been exceptional and it has helped facilitate my personal growth. Now, I'm looking forward with great anticipation to the placement in Beijing.



Karen Ng Management trainee 2008

Swire is an established brand and I was attracted by the rare opportunity to help with the opening of its new hotels. During my attachment at the people development department, I assisted in building up documents such as employee handbooks and screening job applications. At the finance department, I learned a lot about the hotel operations in financial terms. I enjoy being part of a team and I appreciate the comments and feedback from the management which motivates me to go the extra mile. Given ample opportunities, I believe I can grow along with the company.



Avis Wong Management trainee 2008

I was impressed by the distinctive and energetic image that Swire Hotels projects. It's totally different from traditional hotels. To me, an established hotel brand requires followers but brand new hotels are more likely to welcome new ideas and practices. My first year's training has already confirmed this. The MT programme is designed to give us extensive exposure internally and externally. Given the confidence of the management, we're assigned various responsibilities. Personally, I'll take the chance to groom myself and won't limit my interests to any particular department. With an established company like Swire, there's every opportunity for growth.

