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## HOTELS People Issue: Beating the corporate world

By [HOTELS Editors](#) on 5/4/2015

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If it hadn't been for Barry Sternlicht, [Alexander Mirza](#) probably wouldn't be helming one of the sexiest hotel startups in Asia. In all likelihood, he wouldn't even be in the hotel business. The CEO of Cachet Hotel Group had seen the industry with the 20/20 vision of an outsider during his years as a management and creative consultant, and he didn't like the view.

"The hotel world is a conservative old boys' network at the top," Mirza says from his Hong Kong headquarters. "They all know each other. That leads to more conservative hiring decisions down the line — especially in Asia, where most general managers are European men, with just a handful of women or local residents."

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However, a consulting assignment for Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide in the late 1990s showed Mirza something else. One look at the way Sternlicht (then Starwood's CEO) was channeling innovation in technology and branding into redefining how big chains played in the hotel sector, and Mirza was hooked. "That experience at Starwood taught me how complex and multifaceted the hotel world can be, and I loved it," he says. "I never planned a career in this business, but the mental stimulation of being an executive or an entrepreneur in such an intriguing and global arena became, and continues to be, an endlessly appealing challenge."

From working alongside Sternlicht and a whiz-kid team at Starwood on strategic planning for the then-nascent W and Westin brands, Mirza took his entrepreneurial expertise to Hilton Worldwide to strategize the launch of the Waldorf Astoria brand and reinvigorate the F&B offer with a global menu of celebrity chefs. Ready for a new challenge by 2005, he decamped to Caesars Entertainment, first to spearhead its non-gaming division, and later to head its hospitality ventures and Caesars Global Life division.



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The pay-off for a two-decade learning curve came in 2011 when venture capitalist Robert Roche tapped him to be president and CEO and of his ready-for-rollout Cachet Hotel Group. Mizra stepped into the new company's corner office with a portfolio of one property — Shanghai's first carbon-neutral hotel, URBN — and a mandate to shake up the region with a family of cool, locavore Asian lifestyle brands. This would be the acid test for whether he could beat the corporate hotel world, or whether he'd end up having to join it.

Not surprisingly, he saw a new kind of executive team as a critical differentiator from the ex-pat contingents.

He and Roche also know that, especially for a new and as-yet-unproven voice, money talks. They put skin into their project and are in the process of developing a real estate fund.

And forget about dipping a toe in the pool of hot Asian markets. From the single URBN hotel, the company has already opened hotels under its own Cachet brand and the URBN flag as well as creating r.hotel. Several more mixed-use urban developments are in the works. If that's not enough, Mirza also has an eye on the resort space. Going too fast?

"No," Mirza says. "The speed of the Asian market is a constant challenge, but it's the pace of innovation. From discount airlines to Alibaba, this is where change is coming from."

*Editor's note: This profile is part of [HOTELS first People Issue](#), which highlights a dozen up-and-coming hoteliers.*



The penthouse at URBN in Shanghai is just one highlight of the city's first carbon-neutral hotel.