

Asli Kutlucan

Meet the new European CEO of TFE Hotels, a seasoned hotelier with a passion for the extended stay segment. Asli shares her thoughts on the past, present and future of the hospitality industry.

“Did you choose hospitality or did it chose you?”

I grew up in a vibrant entrepreneurial family, inspired by my grandfather's leadership. Our family ran several businesses, each managed by different family members. One of these was a charming resort hotel on the Turkish Riviera, overseen by my aunt. When I was 15, I spent a summer working there. It was during that time that I discovered my true calling: hotels and hospitality. Now, with over 30 years in the industry, I feel fortunate to have found my passion so early and to have spent my life doing what I love.

Is there anything you would change about the hospitality industry today?

I truly believe that the heart of hospitality lies in keeping up with the times and delighting our guests with innovative experiences. Let's be honest: our industry has been on the back foot for decades in innovation and technology. If I had to choose one area for us to focus on, it would be weaving the latest technology into our services, while preserving that special personal touch that makes hospitality so wonderful. At TFE Hotels, we are working through our new innovative brands with this in mind.



What would you be doing if you had not followed the hospitality path?

I have always been deeply interested in politics and international affairs, which would likely have led me to a career as a diplomat. Additionally, my time spent in Rwanda during the post-genocide rebuilding period gave me first-hand experience of the profound positive impact that strong NGOs can have on the lives of people in developing or war-torn countries. This experience could have easily inspired me to dedicate my life to working in that field.

Is there one business or career decision you would change?

I would frame this not as a business decision, but as a life decision. I chose to move to Rwanda when I was 30 to pursue something beyond business and to contribute to the world. In hindsight, I wish I had taken this opportunity in my mid-twenties, allowing me to spend more time there. The experiences and lessons I gained from the Rwandan people and from Africa profoundly impacted my life. During my years there, I learned a great deal about myself and the world, shaping my perspective and values in ways I never anticipated.

You became a lecturer on hospitality for a women's institute in Rwanda. Why Rwanda and why is it so important to ensure women are given these sorts of opportunities?

Rwanda holds a special place in my heart for its remarkable resilience and commitment

to progress, particularly in the aftermath of challenging times. It was a deeply fulfilling experience to contribute to the education and empowerment of women in such a dynamic and forward-thinking environment. Ensuring that women are given opportunities in sectors like hospitality is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it promotes gender equality and fosters inclusive economic growth by tapping into the full potential of our workforce. Women bring unique perspectives, talents, and skills to the table, enriching our industry in countless ways. Moreover, empowering women in hospitality is a catalyst for broader societal change. When women are given the tools and opportunities to succeed, they become agents of positive transformation within their communities, driving progress and prosperity for all. In Rwanda, where the hospitality sector plays a pivotal role in the country's development, investing in women's education and employment is not just a matter of equality; it's a strategic imperative. By harnessing the talents of women and providing them with the resources they need to thrive, we can create a more resilient, vibrant, and inclusive hospitality industry that benefits everyone.

How do you balance people (human impact) with profit?

I like to think of my approach as the "triple bottom line: people, planet, profit." Our business revolves around people—both those who work with us and those who stay with us. Whenever we make a decision, the first question

WORDS OF WISDOM

What advice would you give to those from more diverse backgrounds trying to step up in their career?

Firstly, embrace what makes you unique – it's your biggest asset! Believe in yourself, even when things get tough. Look out for mentors and allies who can offer guidance and support along the way – they can be real game-changers. And don't be afraid to shout about your achievements – you've earned it! Keep on learning and growing, whether it's through formal education or just diving into new experiences. When challenges come knocking (and they will), stay resilient and never lose sight of your goals. Lastly, build a strong support network of friends and colleagues who've got your back. With determination and a supportive tribe, you can achieve anything you set your mind to!

How do you maintain a good work/life balance?

Ultimately, maintaining a good work/life balance is about being present and fully engaged in whatever I am doing, whether it's a business meeting or spending time with my family. This approach helps me to be more effective in both my professional and personal life.



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we ask is whether it benefits our people and how we can make it even better for them. It's often said but not always practised: "Look after your people, and they will look after your customers." When our teams are happy and satisfied, they deliver the best service possible, creating fantastic customer experiences. This naturally leads to more profit because happy customers keep coming back. For me, this has always been the key to success in hotels and hospitality. So, we focus on looking after our team, supporting their personal development, and ensuring they work in a fun and engaging environment. And while we're doing this, we're also very conscious of our environmental impact. Thinking about people and profit always includes considering the planet.

What do you think the real estate and hospitality industry needs to do more of to promote and retain diverse leaders?

As a female CEO in real estate and hospitality, I see the need for a few key moves to promote and keep diverse leaders. Firstly, it's all about creating inclusive vibes where everyone feels valued and heard. Then, we've got to level the playing field by giving everyone fair shots at climbing the ladder, offering mentorship along the way. Education on topics like unconscious bias is crucial, helping us all to understand each other better. Diverse leadership needs to start at the top – we've got to lead by example and champion diversity in everything we do. Lastly, clear paths for advancement are essential; we need to actively seek out

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and support diverse talent at every level. These steps can help us build more diverse and inclusive workplaces, driving innovation and success.

Work from home, work from office or hybrid?

I am in the people business, and being with others energises me, so I am definitely not suited to working from home. However, I am also not very good at spending extended hours at a desk. My ideal work balance is split between working in the office and visiting our teams and hotels in different regions.

If you could take one place from any of the countries you've lived in, and move it to Berlin, what would it be and why?

If I had to choose a museum, it would be Voorlinden in The Netherlands. It's hands down one of the best modern art museums I've ever visited. From the serene grounds to the airy and grand exhibition areas, it's so inviting and stunning. If I could bring a restaurant, one of my absolute favourites is a seaside fish restaurant near Cesme, my hometown in Turkey. It's a place where the fish are caught and delivered daily by the fishermen, where everyone knows your name, and dinners last for hours.

What's your favourite new spot in Berlin?

Our neighbourhood. We live just by the Museum Island, an area full of history, beautiful architecture and amazing cafes and restaurants. I'm looking forward to spending more time around Berlin and discovering the famous lakes this summer ■ ”

The hospitality market certainly had its fair share of struggles during the Covid-19 pandemic. How has the European market recovered/changed in the wake of this?

The Covid-19 pandemic undeniably posed significant challenges for the hospitality sector throughout Europe. Nevertheless, it's inspiring to witness the resilience and adaptability demonstrated by our industry in the face of adversity. While the “Meetings and Events” segment has experienced the slowest recovery, we're now observing a positive uptick in this area. One of the most intriguing new trends emerging in the post-Covid era is the impact of flexible working arrangements on hotel stays. More individuals than ever before are embracing the Work From Anywhere (WFA) option, leading to extended weekend getaways that incorporate Thursday and Monday evening stays. This trend allows them to work from the city they're visiting on Friday and Monday, resulting in longer stays and a unique blend of work and leisure.

What is hospitality's next obstacle? What's its next opportunity?

Hospitality's next obstacle as well as its next opportunity is tech and AI. We are in the midst of a phenomenal shift in technology led by AI. Thus, those companies who embrace, learn and incorporate all available tech into their business as early adopters will be the winners, whilst those who delay their integration will lose out on the opportunities. We are launching our newest brand MM:NT and its core DNA is to provide hybrid-hospitality with tech at the forefront of the brand without losing the essence of pure hospitality. Currently, we are running our test lab in Berlin, which will then become a mini-hotel in Beta version from July onwards and will start accepting guests. This approach will provide us greater insight into the new tech and hospitality integration, and we will continuously test what

works and what can be improved. Eventually we will integrate this into our new GXP (guest experience platform) globally.

Why are aparthotels/extended stay so crucial to the changing hospitality market?

The aparthotel and extended stay segments play a crucial role in the evolving hospitality market by offering guests flexible, comfortable, and cost-effective lodging options that cater to the modern traveler's needs and preferences. The growth in this segment has encouraged travellers to look beyond traditional hotels. A prime example of how extended stay accommodations have transformed the hospitality market is the increased appeal to families travelling with young children. Previously, families often had to book interconnected rooms, which were not only scarce but also strained their budgets. With the advent of extended stay hotels, families now have more practical options, such as booking one-bedroom suites. These accommodations allow for cooking and preparing light meals, significantly enhancing the convenience and affordability of travel for families. This shift has made travelling easier and more accessible for families, highlighting the significant impact of the extended stay segment on the hospitality industry.

As the market and the world becomes more environmentally focused, how will this impact travel and hospitality, more specifically?

People are already much more conscious and seeking out more environmentally friendly travel options, such as using trains versus aeroplanes, choosing hotels that are committed to greener operating models such as those with “green key” or similar certifications.