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I need extra TLC – Tender Loving Care : How Slovenia's Hospitality Is Coping with the Covid-19 Crisis

Gregor Jamnik, General Manager of Best Western Premier Hotel Slon Ljubljana and member of the advisory board of BWH Hotel Group Central Europe, talks about coping with the Covid-19 crisis, corporate culture and completely new customers.

Ljubljana, Slovenia / Eschborn, Germany, March 2021.

Mr. Jamnik, how have you experienced the past year with the first and second wave of Covid-19 as General Manager at Ljubljana's oldest and very established city hotel, Best Western Premier Hotel Slon?

The pandemic has hit Slovenian tourism severely. According to numbers, we are one of the most affected countries in the world when it comes to tourism. Best Western Premier Hotel Slon is a city hotel and we have been facing an epic situation since last spring which has never been seen before. In its history of almost 470 years, Hotel Slon was forced to close its doors for the first time in 2020.

What is the situation these days?

Right now, we are the only hotel in the city center of Ljubljana which is open. Our usual occupancy has been about 10 to 15 percent during the past months, so of course, we are making a huge loss. However, our loss would be even bigger if we would be closed.

Do you think keeping your hotel open will give you any advantages?

Yes, I definitely believe that hotels will experience a better restart phase and recover much quicker when they remain open. In fact, we get a much higher recognition by potential guests. People who plan their future trips are looking for hotels that are open today and book for later.

How is your staff coping with the crisis?

Unfortunately, I had to let go 60 percent of my employees. By keeping the hotel open, I keep my team busy and this is very important to me. To send them home for months would be fatal as only trained staff is good staff as the quality of service depends on this. And keeping our level of quality is my top priority. I also hold up a certain corporate culture at Best Western Premier Hotel Slon. A restart with staff who have not set foot inside the property for weeks would be much more difficult and expensive. Also, the government is supporting us with a substitution of 100 percent of staff salaries at the moment.

How do you hold up your corporate culture?

Of course, I have to go the extra mile to keep people motivated. I need extra TLC, as I call it – tender loving care. But as an effect over the past months, we have grown much closer. We check on each other, we have regular zoom calls and also share private things. This was not possible in 2019 as we were always busy. But now, we are like a family and I think this is beautiful.

What have you learned from the past months and which were your biggest innovations?

One of our big innovations was to survive. Luckily, our basic revenue covers our fixed costs. We also cut our costs dramatically by 90 percent, and reorganized our operations, all without damaging the guest experience. For example, we had a very close look at our services: Which were not used at all and which are used only rarely by our guests? We cut those completely. But we kept all the little details which shape the guest experience of Hotel Slon, for example fresh flowers in the lobby or our gourmet breakfast. We even managed to keep the breakfast buffet, of course with all safety measures regarding Covid-19. And the feedback of our guests is spectacular. We still receive the highest recommendations, especially for our breakfast.

What was one of your biggest challenges during the crisis?

We faced a completely new guest in 2020. Ljubljana is usually visited by foreigners, many coming from overseas. But when the lockdown was lifted last summer, people travelled here from a vicinity of about 500 kilometers maximum, and many came from our own home country. Normally, Slovenians are not interested in Ljubljana as an overnight destination; they have seen it all on daytrips. We had to make a stay attractive for customers who were completely new to us and we were completely new to them.

How did you approach these new guests?

We developed completely new touristic products. Our greatest success was the Zoo Package as Ljubljana is the only city with a zoo in the whole country. We have also organized touristic experiences for visitors, for example boat tours on the river Ljubljanica with family picnics, live music and dancing, or a DJ. We have launched a gourmet fine dining package and cooperated with a nearby fine dining restaurant as well as local shops and gave out shopping vouchers when regional travelers booked their accommodation. Coming up with these totally new experiences and appeals for these new customers was definitely our greatest innovation of summer 2020.

You are a board member on the advisory board of BWH Hotel Group Central Europe, representing the Best Western hoteliers in your region. How was the exchange within the cooperation during the past months?

I am in regular contact with the BWH offices in Eschborn and Vienna, and I have also had a very long chat with the Quality Assurance department in regard to coping with everything. The BWH Hotel Group as a cooperation partner is very interested in our issues and our problems. They are like a shoulder to cry on and have huge sympathy and empathy for the hoteliers' situation. They help in any way they can and really understand hoteliers' issues as financial gaps and the like. Also, the waiving and extending the payment of the fees was highly appreciated in the past year and a big support.

And are you in touch with fellow hoteliers in your region?

I am in touch with the Best Western Hotel Kranjska Gora, the group's only other hotel in Slovenia, and Best Western Hotel Astoria in Zagreb on a regular basis. But it is very difficult talking to people. Survival mode is on. People do not know if they have jobs tomorrow and if they are closed for good. It is very difficult for me to listen to those stories, as some hoteliers are in a really bad situation. Not everyone will reopen – I think, we should be realistic here.

What are your tips for a successful restart?

Even if there is obviously no big financial leeway, we will have to invest in our product and our staff to overcome this crisis and have a successful restart. Also, it is important that our staff is trained. They have to be aligned with each other and need to stay involved, even if restart of tourism will – as in my opinion – move

further into June. Then short-haul leisure trips will come back first, so we are getting ready for that by extending our marketing strategies towards European markets. Innovative and creative marketing concepts will play an important role here. We are greatly supported in this by our partner BWH Hotel Group with international campaigns and marketing activities.

What is your opinion on the future of hospitality after the pandemic?

Unfortunately, direct human contact will be avoided for a longer period, but people will still be searching for any other forms of interaction. We have implemented some additions for a more digital experience, for example an early online check-in prior to the arrival or a WhatsApp chat which is reachable around the clock. Right now, we are looking into apps that will guide our guests not only through the hotel stay, but also through the destination. The hotelier is the friend in the destination, he has tips and recommendations to share with the guest. And I think the future of hospitality is to be in touch with your guest 24/7. So, a digital service is a real upsell for our services on the long run.

About Gregor Jamnik

Gregor Jamnik has been holding the position of General Manager at Best Western Premier Hotel Slon since 2007. The well-experienced hotelier is leading, organizing and controlling all work processes at the historical hotel in the heart of Ljubljana and is assigned as the managing representative of the share holding company Hotel Slon d.d. Jamnik is also an elected member of the advisory board of BWH Hotel Group Central Europe (Best Western Hotels Central Europe) with over 230 hotels in ten countries. In this role, he is representing his fellow colleagues from Best Western Hotels in the Central Eastern European region. Additionally, the 46-year-old is keen to shape the Slovenian hospitality and tourism landscape by actively engaging in major positions and offices of various industry organizations in his home country. Since 2012, he has been the President of the Slovenian Hoteliers Association. He is also a member of the supervisory board of both, the Slovenian National Tourism Board as well as the Ljubljana Tourism Board, and he is the President of the British-Slovenian Chamber of Commerce.

About Best Western Premier Hotel Slon Ljubljana

The Best Western Premier Hotel Slon, meaning "Elephant" in English, is situated directly in the centre of Ljubljana, only a few steps away from the Old Town, the castle of Ljubljana and all major city attractions. The spa and fitness club with modern Technogym-equipment is open 24/7 and the sauna completes the offer. With its five universally applicable conference halls the hotel is ideal for events for up to 250 people. The hotel's own restaurant serves modern Slovenian and international cuisine with a great variety of top-class wines.

The following press picture is available for download:

Caption: Gregor Jamnik, General Manager of Best Western Premier Hotel Slon in Ljubljana, faced a historical moment in the past year: "In its history of 469 years, Hotel Slon was forced to close its doors for the first time in 2020."

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About BWH Hotel GroupSM:

The BWH Hotel GroupSM is an international hotel group headquartered in Phoenix, Arizona, and the umbrella brand for

the three global brand families including Best Western Hotels & Resorts, WorldHotels Collection and SureStay Hotel Group with a global network of approximately 4,700 independent hotels in over 100 countries and territories worldwide. BWH Hotel Group offers a total of 18 hotel brands worldwide that suit the needs of hotel developers and guests in every market: Best Western®, Best Western Plus®, Best Western Premier®, Executive Residency by Best Western®, VÄ«b®, GL , Aiden®, Sadie®, BW Premier Collection® and BW Signature Collection® as well as WorldHotels® Luxury, WorldHotels Elite, WorldHotels Distinctive and WorldHotels Crafted. SureStay®, SureStay Plus®, SureStay Collection® and SureStay StudioSM complete the group's brand portfolio.** BWH Hotel GroupSM offers hoteliers operational services, sales and marketing support, multiple award-winning online and mobile booking options as well as the customer loyalty programs Best Western Rewards® and WorldHotels RewardsSM with more than 40 million members.*

BWH Hotel GroupSM Central Europe GmbH, formerly Best Western Hotels Central Europe GmbH, based in Eschborn, supports a total of around 270 hotels in ten countries, including Germany, Croatia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Austria, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

Further information: www.bwhhotelgroup.de, www.bestwestern.de and www.bestwestern.com.

** Numbers are approximate, may fluctuate, and include hotels currently in the development pipeline.*

*** All Best Western, WorldHotels and SureStay branded hotels are independently owned and operated. In Europe, SureStay Hotels are managed with the brand Sure Hotels.*

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