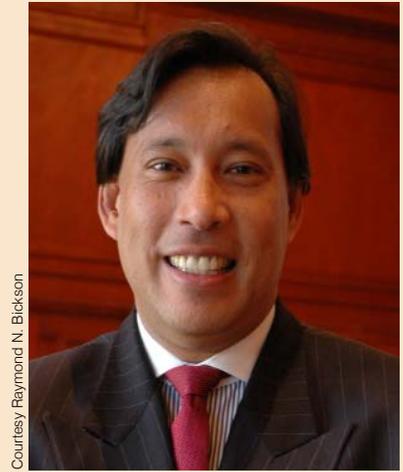


# SPOTLIGHT

*Raymond N. Bickson*

## Bringing a Global View to the Hotel Industry

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG



Courtesy Raymond N. Bickson

**R**aymond N. Bickson didn't know much about India as a child growing up in Hawaii, but is now having "the adventure of a lifetime" as well as the biggest challenge of his career as managing director of Taj Hotels, Resorts and Palaces. He joined the Taj board in 2003, after 15 years as general manager of The Mark hotel in New York City.

"I knew about Taj as a hotel company with excellent, historic, five-star properties," he says. But he was unaware, before taking up his position, of the legend behind the Taj group: that industrialist J.N. Tata is said to have built the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay in 1903 as a luxury establishment where Indians could stay, after Tata had been denied entry to a Europeans-only hotel in the city.

"I fully grasp the history of what this means to the pride of the Indian people," says Bickson, whose own background has added to that understanding. Referring to his home state, the last one to join the American union, Bickson notes, "The Hawaiians were a people who certainly know what it is like to be under the thumb of more powerful invaders and who know about discrimination based on color. So when I discovered the Taj history, I was filled with pride to be playing a small role in helping this company spread its style of hotel around the world."

Bickson believes he brings not just an American but a global perspective to his work. "I grew up in the hotel business, working for The Rafael Group, the European luxury brand, and I also worked for Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group. What I know is global excellence, how to deliver five-star service in a language that is universal, without regard to geographic boundaries.

"Americans who have lived abroad, speak multiple languages and have grown up with ethnic diversity, have a broader perspective and perhaps an enhanced ability to integrate more successfully," Bickson feels. The Taj expansion in the United States last year, taking over management of The Pierre hotel in New York City, brings his experience into play, as does his work in China, as the Taj hotels group investigates possibilities there.

"I knew I was being offered the adventure of a lifetime—the opportunity to join a company that was beginning to

make its mark globally and also the opportunity to be in a country that also was beginning to make its mark globally," says Bickson. "In the 21st century the big forces of innovative change will be India and, of course, China. How could a person not want to be in the thick of that excitement?"

Recent changes that have increased the availability of airline flights and seats have made access to India easier from all parts of the world, but major destinations run short of hotel rooms every winter. Now, Bickson suggests, everyone connected with tourism to India—hotels, travel agents, tour operators, airlines and the government—should cooperatively market India as a year-round destination and promote different aspects of the country and culture outside the major tourist spots. New hotel development is also needed, he says, from budget, to mid-level and luxury sites.

India is a country with some of the world's best hotels and hotel staff, says Bickson. "I come to work with my eyes and ears open because I know that in every moment I will have the chance to learn lessons, not just about hotel operation but about life," he says.

His career includes luxury hotels throughout Europe, North America, Australia and Asia, including the Hotel Plaza Athénée in Paris, and the Montreux Palace in Switzerland. He studied at the Goethe Institute in Berlin, the Alliance Française and the Université de Sorbonne in Paris, Harvard University in Boston and Cornell University in New York. His education encompasses languages, French culture, hotel services, financial management and cooking. In fact, Bickson began his career as a kitchen trainee at the Berlin Hilton. He found the hotel business more appealing than renting cars, though his father, Irwin "Bick" Bickson, had cofounded Budget, one of the most successful car rental companies in the United States, which helped drive the 1970s tourism boom.

As many American children do, Bickson first heard about India in school at the age of 12. "To me, it seemed a huge place, teeming with people, with exotic animals (tigers), and with mystery and romance and the possibility of experiencing something different," says Bickson. "I still see India that way. This is a country where, in the moment you think you understand it, it changes. And so do you." □