

Hotel & Catering

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Review

A RISING TIDE...

The impact of luxury hotels on rural towns

NEW HEIGHTS

DARA CRUISE takes on Group GM role at Neville Park Hotels

Where BUSINESS meets COMFORT

A NEW LOOK FOR RADISSON BLU HOTEL DUBLIN AIRPORT

STEPHEN GIBSON
on 15 years at PICHET

Steady

as he goes

New

HEIGHTS

DARA CRUISE,
the new Group
General Manager
at Neville Park
Hotels, on providing
guests with unique
experiences



HOW'S BUSINESS ACROSS THE THREE PROPERTIES?

It's good. Our businesses service different audiences and markets. The Riverside Park Hotel and Crown Quarter in Wexford are enjoying the strongest period of the year, running at 95% occupancy. For Midlands Park Hotel in Portlaoise, it's an interesting week for us as it's Electric Picnic. That's our busiest weekend of the year so we're gearing up for that.

WHEN DID YOU JOIN NEVILLE PARK HOTELS?

I joined the company seven years ago as General Manager at the Midlands Park. I held that role for five years before taking an operational position at Crown Bar in Wexford. Originally, the premises consisted of just a bar but during Covid, work began on a new development consisting of 26 bedrooms, a restaurant, coffee shop and additional pub, all under the umbrella of Crown Quarter. Then in late May of this year, I took on the role of Group GM.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY ABOUT THE ROLE?

Each property has its own opportunities and challenges. There's great variety with the role; you can't apply the same logic to all three businesses but what's the same is the wonderful people you get to work with. They're so committed and there's a real spirit of care, which is our group core value. During Fleadh, which took place in August in Wexford, we brought in about 80 staff members from across the businesses. Everyone gelled to deliver an incredible experience and I'm so proud of the way everyone pulled together. Taking care of people is what's important to us, in terms of the service we provide to our customers and the environment we provide for our teams. That's what I work towards every day.

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HOW DIFFICULT IS RECRUITMENT?

There are certain areas that are more difficult than others. Finding leadership candidates with capacity and the calibre you're looking for can be a challenge. You can have people that have held leadership roles in the past that are technically quite strong. They understand what's required to deliver a service but they have a different ethos that might jar with what we're trying to achieve. They're not aligned with what we look for in leaders – that's something I frequently come across.

HOW DID YOU GET STARTED IN THE INDUSTRY?

My parents were publicans. They actually met in a hotel so really, I only ever had one choice! From the age of 12 to 17, I worked in the family business and when I finished school my mother encouraged me to look at a trainee management programme at the Burlington Hotel. From there I worked at the Fitzwilliam Hotel on Stephen's Green when it had just opened and then moved to The Four Seasons, which was an amazing experience. I met my wife Claire there, along with some of my best friends. It really was the grounding for my values and beliefs. I had fallen in love with the industry from an early age, but that was the first time I felt the love back.

WAS THERE ANOTHER EXPERIENCE THAT SHAPED YOUR CAREER?

Yes. In 2007, myself and Claire moved to Ballina to open the Ice House. I was far too young and green but somehow I survived and was there for five years. It was a life-changing experience and an incredible adventure.



Midland Park Hotel



Riverside Park Hotel

HOW STRESSFUL WAS IT?

I don't remember the first 12 months I don't remember the crush at Lehman Brothers either. It was the most demanding time of my career. In situations like that though, you find your resilience and you keep going. In many ways, it set me up for future success and opportunities. We're very proud of what we achieved and during the first few years, the hotel was recognised for the service we provided, the calibre of its food, the spa etc.

HAVE YOU BENEFITTED FROM HAVING A MENTOR IN YOUR CAREER?

When we left the Ice House I took up various positions, including a role at Powerscourt Estate where I was lucky enough to work with David Webster, who was the GM at the time. I was in an operational role and we just worked really well together. It was a natural fit and he continues to be a great friend of mine.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES FACING THE INDUSTRY?

The food services business is incredibly challenged. It's frightening to see the number of restaurant closures. Costs are incredibly high and any margin on food has ebbed away. Restaurants are absolutely critical to our eco system - a hotel will bring people into a town but those people want a variety of experiences, they don't just want to eat in the hotel. We work in an industry that people generally don't dedicate their entire careers to, particularly in F&B. We also tend to have a young workforce. I want to make this an attractive sector for them to work in and ensure they're well looked after. Our industry needs to reposition itself: a huge amount of work is being done in that regard by the Irish Hotels Federation and various bodies to reshape how our industry is viewed.

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WHAT SETS NEVILLE PARK HOTELS APART FROM OTHER GROUPS?

We aim to differentiate ourselves through our values which are focused on the level of care we provide, our continuous improvement, our energy and drive and our integrity. If we can deliver on those four core principles, I think our customers will have a unique experience. Our feedback is always about how warm and special our teams are. During the Floods, we were taking a look at videos from the event, one showed one of our security officers dancing with a lady in the bar. It was a special moment that you just don't see everyday. Another example is again from the Floods, Conor, one of our regulars, is disabled and was unable to use any of the toilet facilities as they were all full. He made his way down to the Crown and one of our agents recognised him and welcomed him in, despite the fact we were at full capacity at that stage. We received a letter the following week from Conor and his father thanking us, which was really touching. It's those experiences that set us apart, now and into the future. People won't remember the pint of Guinness you served them, but they will remember the interaction they had and how you made them feel. It's my job to ensure that level of service continues.

