

HYB26

Annual Edition

Converging Forces – The Future is
Hybrid by Design



The Hotel Yearbook

Foresight and innovation in the global hotel industry



HY8



Why Presence is the Next Amenity

Human touch

Susie Arnett

Director of Wellness Programming, Six Senses



Susie Arnett of Six Senses explains that as hotel service becomes more automated, the real value of hospitality moves back to the human relationship between guest and host. Drawing on lessons from retreat centres, she shows why future staff must act more like guides than service workers, and why training should focus on presence and emotional intelligence so guests feel truly seen, not just served.

“Great hotels have always been social ideas,” wrote Joan Didion.

I love that line, because it reminds us that hospitality has never been just about buildings, it's about belonging. The best hotels don't simply house us; they mirror our social hopes, our longing to connect. And today, that longing is evolving once again



We studied 2500 guest comments across 30 hotels worldwide. Only 4% mentioned the physical product. What people really talk about is how the team made them feel.

Recent research by Jannes Sorenson, Founder of Kepler International Hospitality Academy

Before working in hotels, I spent years designing programs at retreat centers – places built for transformation and where the experience lives or dies by the quality of the people leading it. In those environments, the “product” isn't the facility (which usually includes very scratchy sheets, cinderblock walls, and bad food) – it's the *facilitator*. Guests are called participants, because they are participating in a meaningful experience.

On the other side of the encounter isn't a staff member, it's a guide. That language shift matters. When a retreat works, it's because the experience is guided by continual moments of connection that feel intentional, authentic, and alive. And that's when transformation happens.

What retreat centers taught me is that transformation doesn't depend on luxury, it depends on presence. Hotels are now rediscovering that same truth. Whether in a tropical wellness resort or a city hotel, what guests remember isn't the linens but the feeling of being cared for. As hospitality becomes more experiential, the quality of that experience depends on the quality of the person delivering it.

Guests no longer come only for rest or service; they come for connection, transformation, and meaning. (And they pay more for it). That changes everything about the relationship between guest and staff. The staff member who once delivered efficiency is now being asked to deliver experience.

THE RISE OF THE EXPERIENTIAL GUEST

Today's traveler is more self-aware, more curious, and more emotionally literate than ever before. They're not just booking a room, they're curating moments that align with their identity. They want to feel part of something unique, intentional, and human.

As a result, the nature of the guest experience is shifting from something the brand designs to something the guest co-creates.

This is something we've done in retreat centers for decades, built on the roots of the ashram experience where seekers go to awaken. This changes the host's role profoundly. The host is no longer there simply to execute service transactions but to guide, interpret, and personalize meaning.

Guest > Participant > Seeker & Staff > Host > Guide

This isn't limited to luxury. Whether it's a yoga teacher at a wellness resort, a bartender at a boutique property, or a front-desk associate at a lifestyle brand, the new expectation is the same: bring authenticity, emotional intelligence, and a sense of story to every encounter.

THE HOST AS GUIDE

At Six Senses, we see this evolution every day. From the beginning, we have called our staff hosts because their role has always been driven by what former CEO, Neil Jacobs, called “emotional hospitality”. A skilled host doesn't just provide information, they connect.

Travel is an experience driven by aspirational dreams: to escape, to become someone else, to recover, to celebrate. A host taps into these unconscious emotional drivers, sensing when a guest needs quiet rather than conversation. A chef tells the story of where a dish came from, creating a link between nourishment and place. A spa therapist helps guests access a deeper sense of self through ritual and presence.

In each of these cases, the host becomes more than a service provider. They become a guide, a translator of experience and navigator of dreams and desires, often guiding a person deeper into his or her own self. And this is where the peak moment occurs. In experiential hospitality, guests don't just consume experiences for Instagram; they are transformed by them. And that transformation happens in relationship with a human being who knows how to hold space. Because it's transformational, it's also highly memorable, locking the experience into long-term memory through qualities like strong emotions, heightened attention and deep processing. This bonds people to your brand. The property becomes a part of them.

As automation expands – check-in kiosks, mobile keys, AI concierges – the transactional jobs for hotel staff are disappearing. What remains, and what will increasingly define a brand's value, is the human capacity for empathy, intuition, and presence. That is the essence of the new host. In that moment of presence, when one human being truly sees another, the guest doesn't just feel served. They feel seen. And that is the essence of hospitality.

HOW THE INDUSTRY MUST EVOLVE

This shift demands new forms of training for staff, because presence can't be faked or standardized. It has to be developed. The hosts of the future will need more than customer-service or skills-based training; they'll need self-awareness, empathy, and maturity training.

That's why I believe hospitality training must evolve into personal development. It's not about teaching scripts, it's about cultivating emotional intelligence and self-regulation. The future host must know how to be grounded in themselves to create calm, trust, and transformation in others.

Harvard psychologist David McClelland's research on "training for economic achievement" in the 1960s offers a useful model. McClelland discovered that the most effective training doesn't focus on behaviors or rote skills, it helped people see themselves differently. By strengthening self-understanding and purpose, participants became more resilient, self-directed, and motivated. In other words, their identity changed, and their performance followed.

The hospitality industry can take a lesson from that. Rather than teaching people what to do in every guest interaction, we can nurture who they are becoming as hosts. When training touches that deeper level and develops character as much as competence, it produces the kind of emotional maturity that can't be replicated by technology.

At Six Senses, our hosts' wellbeing is developed through practices like mindfulness, reflective listening, and peer learning because when people are supported to be more fully human, they naturally become better guides for others.

THE FUTURE OF THE GUEST-HOST RELATIONSHIP

What does all this mean for your hotel or teams? The guest experience of the future won't be pre-fabricated, our staff aren't actors, after all. It will unfold through the interaction between guest and host – the spontaneous, human, in-the-moment magic that can't be automated or replicated where host presence is felt and responsive to the moment.

As AI takes care of logistics, the art of hospitality will return to its most ancient form: one human being welcoming another. And the greatest luxury of all will be to feel, even for a moment, that someone is truly there with you.

That's why presence isn't just a soft skill – it's the next great amenity.

