

Olga Polizzi

an eye for individuality

In the hotel business, **Olga Polizzi** is something of a celebrity. Daughter of Lord Forte, for 16 years she was responsible for building and design within his eponymous chain. More recently, she has been a co-investor and again responsible for design in the mini-chain being driven by her brother, Sir Rocco Forte. Finally, she is a hotel proprietor in her own right, at the much-garlanded Hotel Tresanton in St Mawes, Cornwall.

Many journalists have covered her family history and glamorous connections but few seem to have treated her as the astute businesswoman that she is.

For this issue of *Locum Destination Review*, Mrs Polizzi agreed to be interviewed - as hotel investor, designer and proprietor - by Locum Managing Director, **James Alexander**, and Non-Executive Director, **Tony Hodges**, who then cast a critical eye over her Cornish creation.



The canny investor

It would be easy to be taken in by Olga Polizzi's charm, her style, her looks. Yet, behind the genuine smile and easygoing laughter, there is a shrewd stakeholder. She may be a celebrated designer but this is a designer who can count.

Ask Mrs Polizzi for a tour d'horizon of the hotel business in the 20-odd years that she has been involved, and her answer focuses on the two determinants of return on investment: property and guests.

'It is more difficult to get in now. Property is incredibly expensive. It's very capital intensive. It's hard to make a return unless you're really careful and do something a little bit different.

'In the early days my father got in and found some fantastic properties for very little money, and it was relatively easy to make a return on them. Now in London it is practically impossible to get a really good building.

'That's one of the changes. The other is that everyone travels now, everyone is used to hotels and they don't want the same boring old hotel. People don't put up with the same things they did before.'

Immediately, within the first minutes of our interview, she raises the issue of individuality. Has this become the big issue because of the hotel owner or the guest's demands? 'A bit of both. The hotel owner wants to distinguish the hotel from the one next door and make it more popular. And then the guest comes in and sees

something different and likes it! Good strategic thinking, simply expressed. No wonder she is successful.

For Olga Polizzi, the difference lies not in the concept - 'What's a different concept?', she challenges - but in the details. 'Service is 70 per cent of it, really. Service is incredibly important, how you are greeted, hot water, is it friendly?, telephone calls ...!' Despite the new sophistication of the seasoned traveller, 'we are still the same humans we always were ... mainly we want comfort, good food, good service ... you're just playing around with the elements a bit!'

Although design provides the day job, she puts it in perspective by putting herself in the guest's shoes. As a designer, she admires the 'genius' of Philippe Starck but recognises that most guests will look at the hotel experience differently. 'I like going somewhere really brilliant and new ... I'll notice the door handles ... but most people, you ask them what colour the room was and they won't remember ... it's just a feeling, it's everything in its right place, everything really comfortable. Design is a lot to do with comfort, especially in hotels!'

Behind the designer stands the sane businesswoman. 'We are quite careful and budget-conscious. I can't bear it when I see something like Sandy Lane where they've spent £80 million on it. We're in there to make money and cannot spend that sort of money.'

Clearly this is a tough time to be talking about making money in the hotel business, but the question has to be asked. Carefully, the investor answers: 'We are making money now, yes. It took a good



Exterior, St David's Hotel & Spa, Cardiff Bay



Tides Bar



Lounger on bedroom balcony with view of the Bay

three years to start making money! After September 11th? 'We were hit. We would have had a fantastic year this year because Rome and Florence have done incredibly well. But September 11th did hit us, Florence in particular, because it's a tourist destination with lots of Americans so that came down from about 90 per cent (occupancy) to about 40 per cent. But the others have done OK and we will still make money this year.'

There is no doubt that Mrs Polizzi thinks seriously about her investment.

The designer

The Forte family were famously and understandably aggrieved when they lost the original Forte business to Gerry Robinson and Granada. The bitterness lingers on but, to their great credit, Lord Forte's heirs have responded to the challenge thrown down by an unfeeling City and built a new business and reputation from scratch. The Granada raid may have been a blessing in disguise, forcing them to stand on their own feet: not on their inheritance but on their talents and determination, side by side. So was born RF Hotels, for which the Forte name has recently been re-acquired, driven by the son, designed by the daughter. In families lie the strengths of many Italian businesses. 'It was quite hard the way we lost the company and I wanted to give Rocco a hand to get going and it seems to be working quite well! There is nothing complacent or patronising in this remark; it is just a natural statement of filial fact.'

Mrs Polizzi's brother describes his vision in personal terms. 'At Rocco Forte hotels, I am establishing a collection of individual luxury hotels which assume the highest quality accommodation, facilities and services! The aim is 'to provide a five-star hotel in each key city throughout Europe! Thus far there are eight properties: in Brussels, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Florence, Frankfurt, Manchester, Rome and St Petersburg. All except Frankfurt (due 2005) are virtually complete, although the Balmoral in Edinburgh has not had a recent Olga Polizzi makeover, yet, that the other hotels display.'

There is an individuality about each hotel but, it seems to us, rooted in a classical tradition. Even in the contemporary styling of newly built hotels (The Lowry in Manchester, St David's in Cardiff) there is restraint.

'Rocco Forte Hotels are not boutique hotels, because they are large hotels, over a hundred rooms or more,' insists the designer. However, 'every hotel we do is individual. (There are) some elements in common ... I like mosaics at the moment, I'm always putting mosaics everywhere in the bathrooms ... but always in a different idiom. You go to Manchester and you go to Rome (to Hotel de Russie) and you wouldn't know the same hand had done them.'

The businesswoman favours the restorations. 'If we could have got existing buildings in cities over here, we would have done that but not finding the right hotels we built some.'

The designer has an obviously soft spot for the new buildings, the clean sheet of paper. 'I did enjoy doing Manchester. It's modern and you can let rip and do what you feel ... the suites are really nice in Cardiff and they do have these wonderful views ... (but) I'm finishing off Brussels at the moment, and I can't really do what I really love there, which is pretty modern!'

(At this point in the interview it becomes clear that wherever - outside London - Locum does its major work, Rocco Forte Hotels is building a presence. In destination cities, no less. James Alexander is

obviously the guest that Mrs Polizzi has in mind when developing her designs.)

Our now favourite designer asks if James stays in the suites ('I wish', quoth he) and discussion moves on to size and, in particular, the so-called Mick Hucknall suite at The Lowry. 'It is enormous', she cries. 'My brother is always saying 'bigger, bigger, bigger'. And I'm saying 'it's so expensive to build, it doesn't matter if it's a bit smaller'. But actually he was right and by making it bigger we managed to put a piano in it! So that is where the rock stars and other celebrities stay when visiting Manchester.

Her brother, Rocco, sounds like a dominant personality. Does that make him difficult to work with? 'Not really because on the whole he leaves me in peace' (clever man). 'I hate the days when he's got nothing much to do and he pulls out the plans and I end up getting very nervous. We always do a prototype of a bathroom and everyone looks at it and Rocco looks at it and says "I don't like that" or "I do like that" ...! These days, the designer does not involve others in her designs as much as she had to before. 'I do that less and less because I had so much of that at Forte I had the regional manager and the area manager and the head housekeeper and everyone saying they liked this and they didn't like that and it was so nervous-making and I ended up trying to please everybody ...! Olga Polizzi is obviously more confident today.

The family business works on the basis of mutual respect, it seems. There is admiration in her voice when she recalls that 'it was Rocco who started that business of working with the great chefs' (Nico Ladenis at Grosvenor House, Marco Pierre White at the Hyde Park). Whereas 'if I were in a capital city, I would have no restaurant. Have a big bar with snacks if you need them. Having a big restaurant is a nightmare, a huge expense.' So brother Rocco treats this area more personally. With Marco Pierre White? 'Rocco sees him more than I do.' And the ubiquitous restaurant designer, David Collins? 'Rocco likes David Collins and he doesn't think I'm good enough to do a restaurant. (Collins) is a professional. I like working with him. He's good at what he does.'

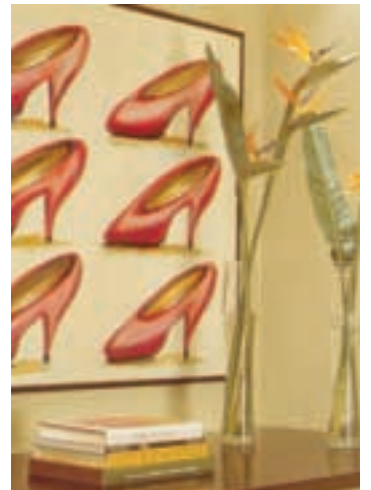
Working with her brother has developed Olga Polizzi's range but her increased confidence flows from a different source, one suspects. She gives us a hint when describing the once notorious Marco. 'He is pretty focused ... and we all mellow with age *unfortunately* (our italics). Again when she is faced with the proposition that, of the two siblings, Rocco is the more conservative, his hotels reflecting that, being representative of a classical tradition. 'I think you are right. Rocco may not like me saying this but in a way he's rather an old-fashioned man. He likes comfort, he likes glamour and he wants that in his hotels. Traditional five-star hotels with a bit of a difference ... with a twist. He has his slightly rebellious side but he is quite traditional!

These comments say as much about Olga Polizzi as her brother. She has her sensible side no doubt; she shivers at the idea of 'the designer hotel' - 'a designer hotel doesn't look at comfort ... it's so often done too cheaply, everything breaks, you take a shower and the water pours out into the room, all the little things that drive you completely mad ... *design is not for its own sake!* (Again, our italics.) You can have more of that 'in the public areas, anyway, a bit of glamour, a bit of surprise, you can go a bit more glitzy there.' But this sensible, balanced approach is not the whole story.

For the rest of the picture we have to venture beyond the five-star strictures of Rocco Forte Hotels and check out a destination hotel called Tresanton.



'It is in the detail that the design delivers'



Shoes say fashion, Hotel Savoy, Florence



Boots for walking, Hotel Tresanton



St Anthony's lighthouse from Hotel Tresanton, whose icon it has become

"I can think of no more perfect out-of-season haven than the Tresanton, nor of a better excuse for returning to Cornwall than the chance to visit it"

Max Hastings, Evening Standard



St Mawes coast road, from Hotel Tresanton

The proprietor

If you wondered how a small, 28-bedroom hotel could be considered a destination in its own right, visit Tresanton in late January. The sea is lashing the houses beyond the sea wall. Storms are building to wreck ships, empty the streets and flood St Austell. Yet, at dinner, the dining room at Tresanton is more than half full. Exhilarated young couples from London fill the bar with noise. Sophisticated, more elderly businessmen, with their wives, are revived by a warming fire after a wet walk, scotch in hand. The place is relaxed but alive. It should feel more like Peter Cook's famous sketch 'Felixstowe at Christmas', but in truth it is seriously civilised. Winter in Cornwall, five hours drive from London, yet alive.

This is the source of Olga Polizzi's professional confidence, the success of her very own hotel. 'When I first opened it, the accountant down there said 'You can't make money on a hotel in Cornwall', but I said 'I haven't put all this effort and money in not to make money, we're going to make money'. Actually, we are doing incredibly well. This is my fourth year I broke even from the first year ... it's not very full now (in January) because this is the first year we've been open but February's not bad and already 55 per cent booked ... go down there, you'll see how long it takes. I cannot believe it.' (She visits each week.) 'I come in and see the place full and I think 'who are these people?' and 'why are they coming down here?' But it is a pretty place and every room looks out to sea. When you get there you relax. And I get lots of repeat business.'

Hotel Tresanton is commercially successful for reasons beyond its location. Like all the best entrepreneurial ventures, it precisely reflects the values of its creator: it has genuine style, easygoing charm, and immaculate taste. By virtue of these values, Tresanton justifies its premium pricing. At £150 per night out of season, £250 per night in season, and £33 per head for the set menu at dinner (before wine), Tresanton is not cheap, especially for Cornwall. Yet it represents value for the young bucks from London and the gourmet travellers from further afield.

The style is in the design. Olga Polizzi has transformed a once-loved but run-down old family hotel with consummate skill. When berating 'designer hotels' earlier in our interview, she declaimed: 'You want a big bath, a big strong comfortable shower ... a comfortable bed, a comfortable chair, a good reading light ... you don't want an extraordinary bathroom with no room to put your bottles ... you want something better than home but not to terrify people ... you want something comfortable but push the boundaries, though not too far ... you don't want to be old-fashioned in ten years' time.' In Tresanton, Mrs Polizzi has put such simple principles into practice and so created a tiny, modern classic.

'I have brought a different kind of visitor to Cornwall, who might not otherwise have come here'

Olga Polizzi, proprietor

“Design is a lot to do with comfort,
especially in hotels”

Olga Polizzi

As with all her work, it is in the detail that the design delivers. Just as the designer added the display of shoes at Hotel Savoy in Florence (to suggest fashion mecca), so she arranges wellington boots at Tresanton (to nudge you into a coastal walk). She found the way to communicate a sense of place in St Petersburg (at the Hotel Astoria) with the soft grey linen of Russian heritage. At Tresanton, it is the icon of St Anthony's lighthouse which she picks out, sometimes blue, sometimes just embroidered, reminding you of that bedroom view. Perfectly judged detail, wherever you look. In the mosaic work she predicted for the bathroom, the sea green glass knobs on bathroom hooks, the Paul Gallico paperback you had always meant to read, the vast arrangement of your favourite lilies, the sensibly stout wooden umbrella, the warm wood floor, the perfectly cool linen on an oversized bed, and, above all, the weird and wonderful wall lamps wherever you go. Comfort defined, with style.

Charm comes as standard, with the service. There is no service charge but it would be a hard-hearted guest who did not find the odd tip. Olga Polizzi is rightly proud of her 'lovely' staff. A scrabble set is excavated for an addict. The breakfast milk is hot, precisely as requested. The Polizzi shop ('ONDA') is opened before its normal opening hours, especially for a traveller who must be away for an appointment. Nothing seems too much trouble.

The food is good. Predictably, the seafood is exceptional, both langoustines and scallops simply cooked, perfectly timed, memorably fresh. Mrs Polizzi is proud of her butcher ('practically organic', he claims) but our lamb was bland, despite a good sauce and appropriate beans. The cheeses paled beside excellent desserts, light and toothsome tarts. The wine list is brief and brilliantly chosen, with typically intelligent input from John Armit's team (whose restaurant selections are outstanding). What is more, the mark-up is sane. We chose a modest Chianti from a great year, (listed as Chianti Classico DOCG. Carobbio 1997, at £29.50, since you ask). Dinner was enjoyable, if not memorable, but both service and principles were sound, and the room must be a joy on a lighter, more clement evening. Mrs Polizzi surely has it right when she says to her chef: 'Simple, simple, simple. I don't want a lot of chi-chi food, I want it really simple.' And to us: 'On a bad day, perhaps it's a little too fussy. At it's best, I think it's quite good.'

Hotel Tresanton works, beautifully, because it is an expression of Olga Polizzi's beliefs. 'I've always wanted to do my own hotel and do exactly what I wanted! Perhaps there was a time when she lacked the freedom - or was it the confidence? - to achieve what she has achieved at Tresanton. If it has given her the confidence to go further, what will the future hold for her acumen and her eye?



'Perfectly cool linen on an oversized bed'

“Here is the perfect English seaside hotel”

Jonathan Meades, *The Times*, on Tresanton



"It's good taste at the end of the day." Olga Polizzi on design and food



The brand?

There is more to be done with Rocco Forte Hotels before it reaches its goal. There is the Frankfurt hotel to design and complete and Edinburgh to revisit. There are new ventures to explore in Sardinia and Sicily, and an intriguing destination resort on an island off the Montenegro coastline: 'a fishing village where Tito appropriated these little stone houses from the fishermen. It would have to be a destination. Actually Rocco has seen what we have done at Tresanton, how you can make it a destination.' This, said with touch of pride.

The sister would urge her brother not to develop another city-centre hotel in Britain, but she is intrigued by approaches she has had to create Tresanton-like hotels on and off the British coastline. Her husband urges her to develop her own businesses and she does have bold ideas. She has talked with Tim Smit at the Eden Project about a budget hotel there, and is clearly fascinated by the idea of simple, inexpensive, ubiquitous hotels, 'Travelodge but done really well, spending only a tiny bit more.' On the one hand, 'I would love to do that. I've been in this business now for over 20 years and I think, now I could do it.' On the other hand, 'I'm not sure I have the energy actually to do it on my own.' It sounds like a *cri de coeur* for a sympathetic partner.

Perhaps the future for Olga Polizzi lies in more Tresanton hotels, perhaps in more Polizzi-designed hotels. Or perhaps, with less strain

on her slim frame, she should recognise that it is her eye that gives everything she touches a hint of individuality. She admits that she is in demand. 'Practically every day I get someone writing to me. What colour paint is this in the room? Where did you get this bedspread or this material? Where do you get your handles, your basins, your baths? It's extraordinary ... someone came the other day and they've called their house Tresanton,' she trills.

Yet down in the family's gift and fashion boutique in St Mawes - ONDA - for all the well-cut clothes and Tresanton iconography on towels and lavender sachets, and the £50 umbrella and £5 soap, there is no sense that Olga Polizzi is taking her potential brand strengths seriously enough. She should. She is a talented individual with a rare eye and a fine business brain. And she has something that ordinary mortals understandably envy. In all innocence, she defines this something simply and memorably when discussing good food and good design. 'It's true of both, design and food. There is a connection. It's good taste at the end of the day.'

Precisely so, Mrs Polizzi. Now why not share your taste with a wider audience? Heroes make good brand stories, but so do heroines.