

How Hospitality Alumni Are Waiting out COVID-19

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Source: Boston University

By *Emily Stewart and Dr. Suzanne Markham Bagnera*

The days of sold-out nights, busy lobbies, and bustling ballrooms started to slowly dwindle. We thought we would be okay and be able to get through this. Then one day, we showed up to work and it felt like everything had changed, in just 24 hours. Occupancy started to drastically drop to a record low of 5-15%, events were canceled or postponed until the Fall or 2021, and the front desk agents were excited when there were people in the lobby. This was just the beginning of how hotels would see the effects of COVID-19. Our alumni share how they have come to terms with the pandemic and share recommendations on how to keep busy while at home, along with their hope for the future of the hospitality industry.

Impact to the Industry

News about COVID-19 and the impact it was having on China first surfaced in the mainstream media in December 2019. As Jonathan Jaeger (SHA'08) noted, "many people in our industry, were naïve about the implications and risks associated with COVID-19

spreading in the United States.” Javier Rosenberg (SHA’94) was residing in Asia, operating a hotel, when SARS occurred, so he was more alert to monitor the developing COVID-19 situation. As Rosenberg reflects, “the present reality is that past experience does not always predict future outlook; take SARS or H1N1, for example, they both had very different behaviors and geographical impact.”

Most lodging industry professionals did not think that COVID-19 posed a major threat in the U.S. Once additional travel restrictions were put into place and the volumes of cases increased, it became crystal clear that difficult times were ahead.

Everyone was in shock. Cities and towns were extremely quiet; something no one had really seen before. The impacts of COVID-19 on the industry occurred in what seemed to be a blink of an eye. As the virus began a ripple effect in the United States, the travel and tourism industry started feeling the impact. Hospitality is about being surrounded by people all the time, but when government restrictions limit the proximity to how close we can be next to each other, we knew what was to come next was not going to be good. Revenue was declining rapidly and cancellations became a new normal amongst airlines and hotels. Looking back on the past, the industry has faced many other travel-related concerns including 9/11, natural disasters, other medical epidemics, and the 2008 financial crisis; however, COVID-19 is something we, as a nation, have never experienced before.

Estee Chaikin (SHA’02) started her hospitality career right after September 11 th, the devastating event had a big impact on the industry. Chaikin said, “with COVID-19 I started to see some similarities unfolding; however, due to the length of economic slowdown from weeks to months, I already felt the pandemic would have much bigger ramifications for the hospitality industry.”

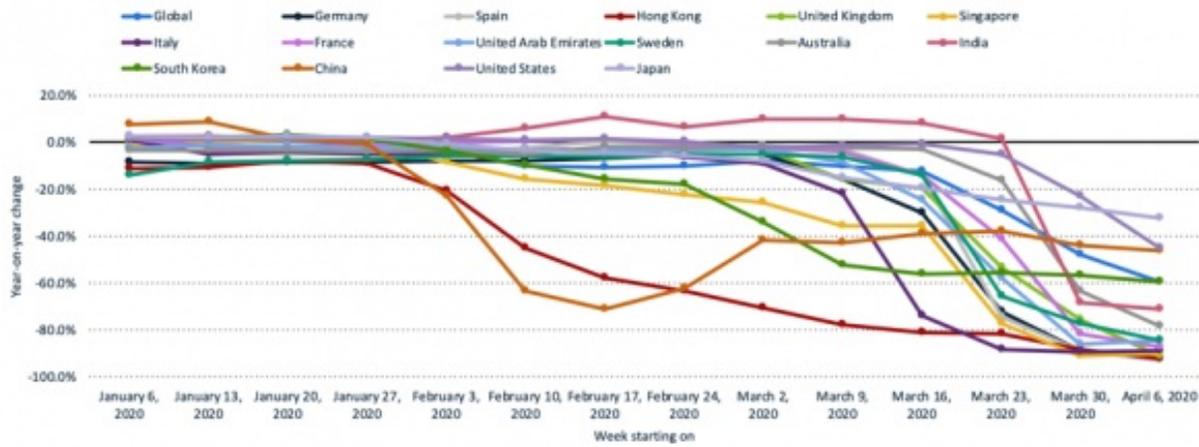
According to Jaeger, “as of April 8th, the U.S. lodging industry has experienced two consecutive weeks of an 80+% decline in RevPAR on a national basis.” This abrupt and massive decline in hotel performance on such a wide scale, is greater than the combined events of 9/11 and the financial crisis. As Jaeger expresses, “even in a worst-case scenario, I thought an outbreak in one major U.S. city could cause disruptions in that market, but I never imagined a situation where the majority of Americans are under stay-at-home orders and international/domestic travel has basically come to a halt.”

As Figure 1 shows, global travel has come to a near 100% halt compared to last year, due to this pandemic. The airline industry has had to ground their planes with the lack of business.

Figure 1. 2020 Airline Travel

Year-on-year change of weekly flight frequency of global airlines from January 6 to April 6, 2020, by country

Weekly flights change of global airlines due to COVID-19 as of April 6, 2020



Note: Worldwide; week of January 6 to April 6, 2020

Further information regarding this statistic can be found on [page 57](#)
Source(s): OAG Schedules Analyst; [ID: 1104706](#)

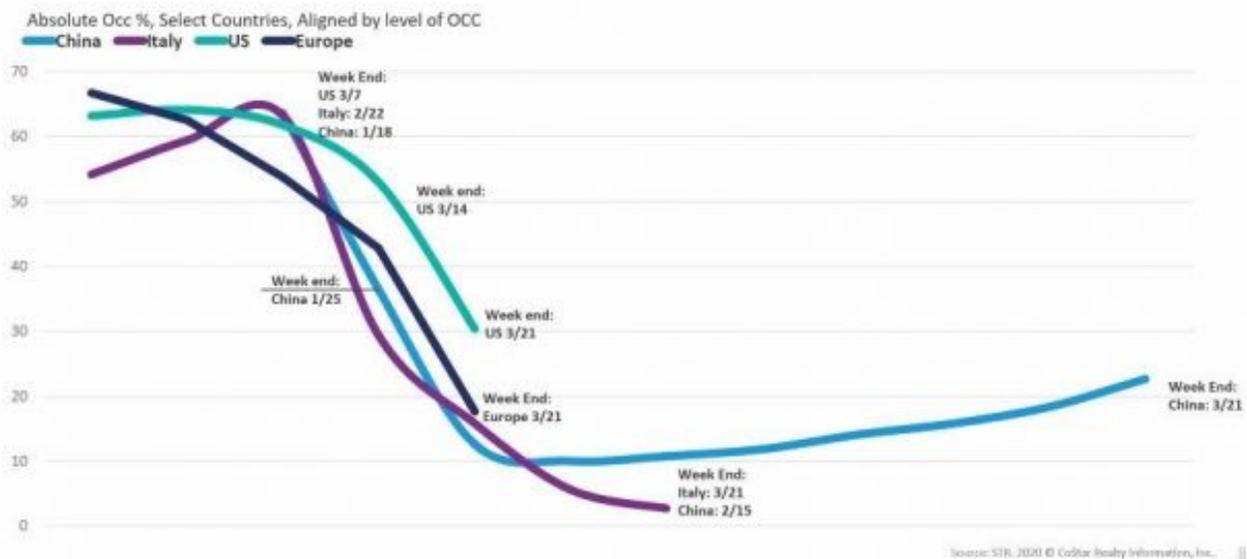
Impact on passenger aviation **statista**

In conjunction with the reduction in airline travel, hotel occupancy rates have also tanked. Figure 2 shows the four countries most impacted, the US, Italy, China, and Europe. While the data might not tell the entire story, China did start to see an increase in occupancy approximately three months after the start of the virus.

Figure 2. 2020 Occupancy

China Shows What's To Come

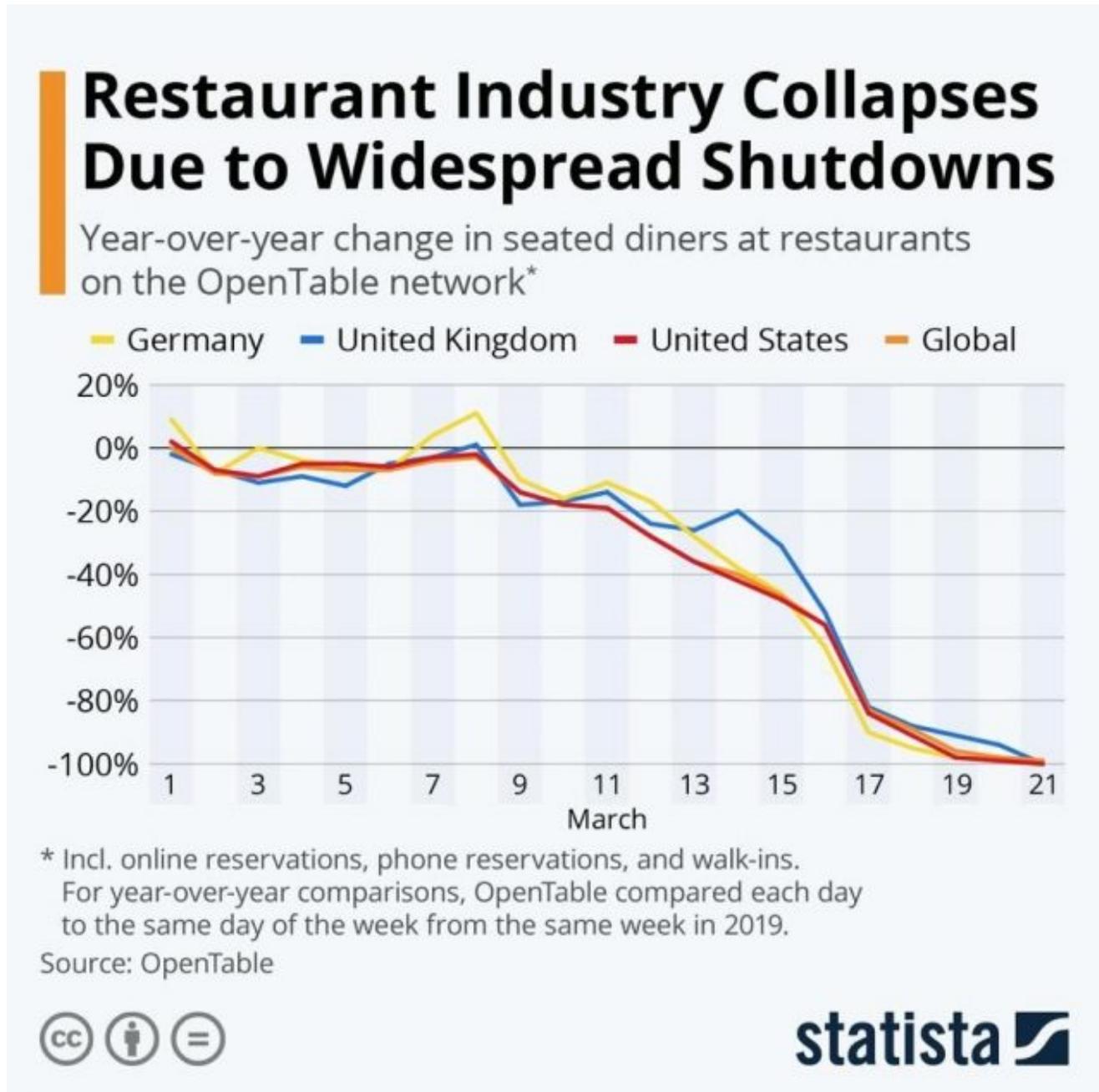
China Occ seems 8 weeks ahead, but that is likely a misleading read



Source: STR, 2020 © CoStar Realty Information, Inc.

With the reduction of travel, comes the limitations of guest and the closure of restaurants. The CDC recommendation to avoid gatherings of 10 or more people has forced restaurants to close their doors to their dining guests. Figure 3 shows the 100% negative halt in seated reservations in the restaurant industry. If restaurants wish to continue to operate, they must only offer take-out or delivery.

Figure 3. 2020 Restaurant Reservations



During this pandemic, it is hard to see the end. We try to envision the day we wake up and the news reports that the world can go back to 'normal.' It may seem hard to visualize that day, but indeed it will get better. We must begin to get comfortable with discomfort because, even when COVID-19 is gone, the industry will need to make some necessary

changes to better prepare a safer environment in the future. We need to have hope and keep a positive attitude during this time because this too shall pass. The hospitality industry will prosper again, people will travel, and we, as hospitality professionals, will fall in love with the industry all over again.

We have connected with some of our wonderful alumni from the School of Hospitality Administration at Boston University to get their thoughts on the industry during this time, what to do to stay busy at home, and some inspiration for the future of hospitality. These alumni work in different sectors of the hospitality industry from operations, events, to revenue, just to name a few.

Making Others Feel Safe

Source (From Left): Ron Bagnera, Cambria Hotel Boston Downtown; Emily Stewart, Marriott Hotel New York

Working in the hospitality industry sparks a natural joy with the concept of making people happy. We enjoy being surrounded by others and making people feel joy. During this pandemic, it may be hard to make everyone comfortable, but as many of our alums expressed, their teams and colleagues acted fast to make others feel safe in their environment.

Eirhenz Espiritu (SHA'18) expressed that her team helped her to stay positive, even when everything was changing. Her team kept everyone up-to-date on what was happening and let them know they are all in this together; they can lean on each other for support.

Many hotels, including the property that Brian Bond (SHA'07) manages, have placed hand sanitizer pumps around the hotel for both guests and staff. Brian said, "it is important to have enough gloves on property for employees to protect themselves while cleaning and making sure staff is sanitizing the high touch points (i.e. doorknobs, elevator buttons) more frequently."



Alex Fish (SHA'11) mentioned that his property has “turned all food outlets into grab-and-go stations, closed their club lounge to protect guests from close interactions, and placed tape marks on the floor by the front desk to make sure guests stand six feet apart from each other while waiting to check-in.” These actions are beneficial for both guests and employees. Guests will appreciate all the necessary actions that properties are taking to protect them from unwanted virus exposure.

Rosenberg’s early monitoring, provided him with a different perspective, where they focused on the safety and wellbeing of their guests and team members. Rosenberg said, “we deployed a strong communication program designed to keep our team members informed and helped them apply good hygiene practices and physical distancing in their homes and families. We also set new procedures to ensure we were consistent in self-quarantine practices should a team member or team members family come in contact with someone testing positive.” In a few locations the company was forced to shut down hotels as part of local government mandates. While some of their properties do remain open, Rosenberg said, “the lack of business has forced us to run with limited teams and reduce hours and furlough team members.”

Airbnb has also done their part during this pandemic. Leonie Grundler (SHA'18) works for Airbnb in Berlin, Germany, she said that “Airbnb is expanding their ‘Open Homes Program’ to healthcare professionals, relief workers, and first responders.” They also have re-published their cleaning and disinfecting guidelines, as well as allowed customers to cancel their stays for certain time periods without penalization. These steps will go a long way with guests and hosts.

Presently, all of the sport venues that Aramark operates are closed. Alison Birdwell (SHA'88) said, “we are focused on serving others in the communities we serve- either by providing services in alternative medical facilities that have been set up in some of our venues, or by



supporting other areas of our business at Aramark such as feeding and cleaning in hospitals, and correctional facilities, etc. We are working to redeploy our staff to these efforts to keep them working wherever we can, to serve those in need.”

Jeffrey Selden (SHA'91), of Marcia Selden Catering and Event Planning, in NYC, New York and Connecticut, is also the president of the International Caterers Association. He says, “all catering operations are handling the crisis in different ways; some have laid off employees (as we had to do), others do not want to place any risks upon their staff and have shut down, and others have gone into online grocery stores.” With all the variation that is out there, everyone he knows “is doing a different job than what their normal day job would be.” While Selden had to lay off 60% of his workforce, until at least June, as events through that time period are canceled now, they are working to provide meals to the frontline workers. They are tied into the Food for Frontlines program where they make meals based on the donations, and deliver those meals to the medical teams on the front line. More details about their efforts can be seen in this [Fox News video](#). Keeping their guests focused on postponing their events, instead of canceling is their approach. In the meantime, they are getting really creative with what they can do to keep their doors open (i.e. meal deliveries for virtual birthday parties, meal preparation for frontline workers, meals for their current clients, freezer meals, and movie snack packages). They are changing up their menus on a weekly basis to keep it fresh and fun!

Keep Yourself Busy!

As industry veteran's, we know that 'sitting around' is not in our DNA. We are used to walking miles a day in hotels, making things happen every day, and applying creativity in a team setting, so being alone is not easy! As hospitality professionals, we are used to being surrounded by others, whether it be guests, clients, or colleagues. We are constantly with people and are used to bouncing ideas off of each other with a simple walk to their office or chatting over lunch. With the drastic changes in our country, many of our colleagues and friends were either laid off, furloughed, had their hours reduced, or are forced to work from home.

This was a shock to most with many thoughts running through the minds of fellow alumni... what will I do to keep myself occupied in my home? When will I be able to meet up with friends at trendy restaurants again? Or what will I do to get ahead and keep my resume exciting? Our alumni recommend a few different ways to stay sane during quarantine and keep your mind thinking!

Personal Tips

1. *Education*

Use down time to further your education by learning a new skill that could be beneficial upon returning to work; this can be reading, studying new topics, learning a new language, or taking online courses. There are many resources, some that are complimentary, including AHLA's *Hospitality for Hope* initiative and Harvard.

2. Invest in yourself

Hospitality is not an easy industry and most of us are used to working 10+ hours a day, on weekends and holidays, or even overnight shifts. As hard as it is to stay at home, take this time to improve and invest in yourself. We will probably never have this much time again on our hands to do things that we have been wanting to try. This is our time to refresh and reset before we pick up again with work.

3. Exercise

Another great way to keep yourself occupied is staying active by doing different at home exercises. There are many free online classes with all different exercises including cardio and yoga classes. Many studios have started providing online classes on YouTube or Zoom. It might mean a change of scenery by getting outside daily for a walk. The exercise will get the blood flowing and will give you energy and vitality throughout the day.

4. Home Projects

Now might be the best time to tackle projects and chores around the house that you never have time to do. Consider packing up the items you no longer need for a donation to a local charity.

5. Video Calls

It is also important to set time aside to video chat with family and friends. It feels good to talk through the things that we're all experiencing. You can even play games 'together' through video chat or enjoy a meal together through video. During these chats, you can start to plan what you want to do when the quarantine order is over; plan what restaurants you want to try once they are open again.

6. Set a Schedule

Have a schedule and stick to it. Setting a schedule is important and allows you to get the day started with goals and plans.

7. Work Environment

When working from home, try to mimic a work environment and avoid sitting at your desk for hours. Take a few breaks during the day to grab some coffee or water and stretch your legs. Maybe make a social call for 15 minutes to break away from the monotony of working

alone from home.

8. *Helping Others*

The Ritz-Carlton motto, “We are Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen” so wonderfully sums up a large part of what hospitality is about (2020). We, as hospitality professionals, have given our lives to see a smile on the faces of others, to assist others, and provide an experience to guests like never before. It is in our nature to want to help, but during this time, it may seem impossible to still be able to give; however, there are many great things we can still do, even by staying at home in our pajamas.

Professional Tips

- Jeffrey Selden (SHA'91) recommends taking online classes or attending virtual live events about issues surrounding the pandemic. Another way to keep ahead of trends is to watch some videos to improve your skills, like making certain types of cocktails. Figure out ways to incorporate what you are learning to be creative in the delivery of your events moving forward.
- Alec Dalton (SHA'15, QST'15) recommends finding online opportunities to volunteer virtually; as true hospitality professionals, we can always find ways to be of service to others, even in times like these.
- Jocelyn Thames (SHA'16) suggests surprising your friends with take-out meals from their favorite restaurants. This will make your friend smile knowing someone is thinking about them and it will also benefit the local restaurants. Also, she recommends sending meals to essential workers, if you have the means to. This gesture will go a long way for our essential workers knowing that they have people who are thinking about them and thanking them for their service every single day.
- Jonathan Jaeger (SHA'08) says now is the time to educate yourself on what is happening across the industry. We are in uncharted territory, and even folks who have been working in hospitality for 40+ years have never experienced anything like this. Think about ways to innovate once the industry begins to recover. Based on current expectations, hotels will begin to reopen during the summer, and many of you will be desperately needed back at work.
- Consider connecting with a former professor, offer to zoom into one of their classes to share your industry insights with the students.

There is Hope!

We want to uplift you with some thoughts from our alumni. It may seem like there is no light at the end of the tunnel right now, but we will come out of this and the hospitality industry will rise again! Keep a positive attitude and an open mind and we will get through this together!



Alison Birdwell (SHA'88) – President, Aramark Sports and Entertainment

“Right now, I have my team at Aramark focused on how we will come out of this situation. The way we operate when the venues we serve re-open will be very different and we’re going to need members of our team to think differently. This will make us very interested in filling current open roles with candidates who have fresh ideas rather than experience, as past experience on how we operated before isn’t going to get us where we need to go. So, don’t assume you’re not qualified or experienced for some roles- take the chance and apply anyway. And know that you can shape the future of the industry in unique ways as a result of the challenges we are all facing right now. The willingness and necessity of our industry to reinvent ourselves has never been felt like this before.”



Jeffrey Selden (SHA'91) – Managing Partner, Marcia Selden Catering & Event Planning

“Hang in there and stay with it. Keep looking, as people will be hiring. I’m keeping a candidate on deck, in a ‘holding pattern’ until we can resume full-scale operations. For graduates, hang in there as long as you can, it’s all going to be about timing. If you need money, then look for a short-term or temporary role to bide you some time for now. But when things open back up again, businesses will need to generate revenue, considering all that they have lost over these last few months – it’s going to be a fast start and people will be needed asap. While I know it’s scary, we do great things in this industry, we just need to ride out the storm, likely through the summer and I’m hopeful for a very busy fall.”



Javier Rosenberg (SHA'94) – President, Northwood Hospitality

“These are unique times and a situation that the world has not seen in the past many decades – clearly exceptional and impacting many industries globally. The fundamentals of our industry remain strong and valid: people will always seek to dine out / seek entertainment, and people will always travel. While the current situation is forcing the industry into a very difficult situation, this is temporary and our industry will recover and continue to be one of the world’s most important industries in terms of employment, revenues and opportunities. Stay strong and committed – we will come out of this ready to bring back smiles to our guests, to develop incredible talent and to make a difference in the communities we serve.”



Estee Chaikin (SHA'02) Marketing & PR Director @ Antler in Amsterdam, Netherlands

“Entering the industry in 2002, during a real challenging time, helped me build resiliency and find creative ways to make my mark in the industry. Overall, I am stronger because of this experience. Hospitality students should navigate with a clever compass towards sectors within hospitality that could bounce back faster (e.g. delivery services, Food manufacturing) and keep an open mind towards industries where you are able to use your service minded toolkit which SHA provides ample support for and apply it as well. The future of work, shopping and eating are all changing in this current climate and new services need to be developed, any hospitality student should have the means to be a part of the solution and even though you might not find your dream job at the start, use this challenging road ahead to as a real stepping stone for application of the hospitality knowledge you gained.”



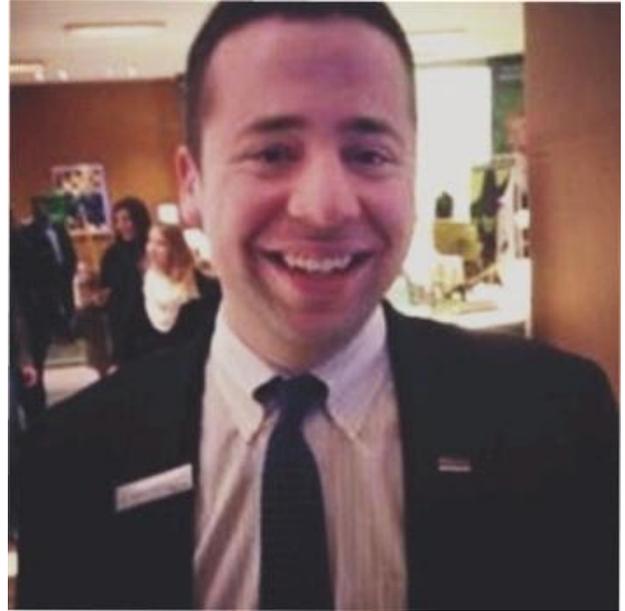
Brian Bond (SHA'07 & QST'16) – Director of Finance Hotel Commonwealth

“The hospitality industry isn’t going anywhere. If anything, I think it’s going to be even better once things are back up and running. Like any crisis, this *will* pass, and in its wake, it will create new opportunities for the creative entrepreneurs and problem solvers of our industry. I know once we’re given the green light to live our lives again the first thing I’m doing is going out to dinner! People can only sit at home for so long. We need experiences, culture, food and wine, and we need to share it with our family and friends. That’s what our industry is all about, and when COVID-19 is behind us, we’ll be there to fulfill that need, bring people together again, and play our role in helping the world get back to normal.”



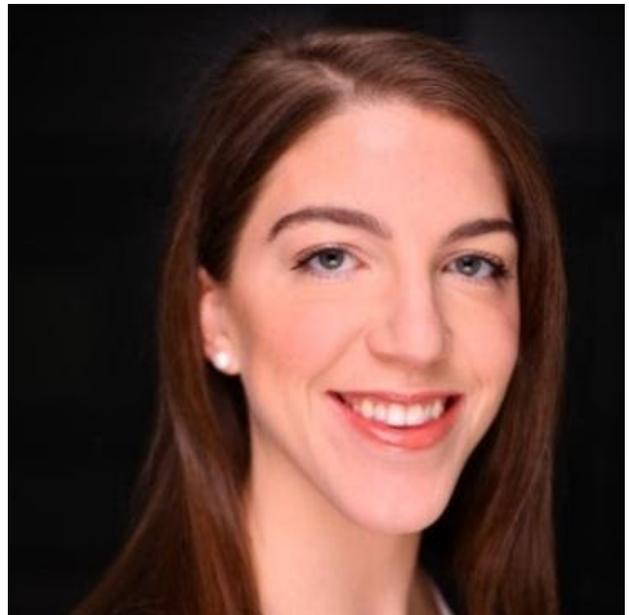
Jonathan Jaeger (SHA'08) – Senior Managing Director, LW Hospitality Advisors

“Having started my career during the financial crisis of 2008/2009, I understand how grim everything looks at present, but I promise you that a recovery is on the horizon and brighter days are ahead. When the economy is strong, the hospitality industry offers students one of the best opportunities to graduate from college and step into meaning managerial positions right away, in my opinion. In addition, the prospects for growth within larger organizations is second to none. This current COVID-19 crisis was a direct hit on the travel and hospitality industries, however, I am confident that the industry will recover and continue to offer those opportunities. Even during one of the most difficult times in modern history, hotel owners and operators are still banding together to help those in need. Many hotels are offering free or discounted rooms to first responders and medical workers in order to keep their families safe. In addition, countless restaurant owners are providing meals to those in need. I am extremely proud to be part of such an exciting and dynamic industry that will continue to evolve and offer opportunities to future hospitality students.”



Alex Fish (SHA'11) – Director of Restaurants and Bars Sheraton Times Square

“This too shall pass. This is just a wrinkle in an otherwise thriving and exciting industry! We keep telling each other that we will have interview answers for years to come after coming out of this pandemic! Remember, when this is all over, people will need a vacation, a place to eat out, or a way to get away...that is where we come in...to make those positive memories!”



Natalie Deutsch (SHA'14) – Director of Guest Experience, W Boston Hotel and Residence

“Don’t give up on what you love. This is a tough time but facing the challenge will make us stronger. Just wait and see how when restaurants, hotels and retail do open again how this amazing wave of passion, joy and determination overcome the industry, even stronger than before. And trust me, you’ll want to be a part of that story.”



Alec Dalton (SHA'15 & QST'15)- Senior Manager of Global Quality for Marriott International

“As hoteliers prepare for temporary closures, a common challenge has emerged: the front doors on many hotels do not lock. Not just metaphorically, our doors are always open. There are very few scenarios that close hotels, and remarkably fewer that close the industry at large. As uncertain as the present times may be, remember that we will open our doors around the world to welcome guests again. And when we do, we’ll need exceptional talent to deliver true hospitality.”



Roshni Patel (SHA'15 & QST'15) – Director of Revenue and System Implementation

“The industry will recover. We’ve gone through this before, and this will certainly not be the last. If you are truly passionate to work in hotels, be flexible and open-minded. You may have to adjust your geographic location preference or start off in a different position than you anticipated. There will be jobs available, but it may not be what you want. Some may also consider branching out to other industries and expanding their experience, at least temporarily. For example, you may have a second degree, in finance, or marketing, or communications. If you can’t find what you want in the hospitality industry, you may want to consider expanding your search for now. There is a lot of uncertainty so it is hard to say exactly when this will be past us. But it’s important we remain hopeful and continue to travel and give money back into tourism, local restaurants and bars once this is all over.”



Jocelyn Thames (SHA'16) – Events NYC

“I really love that quote that has been shared by industry peers a lot during this time: “If you would like to know how it feels to be in hospitality during the coronavirus pandemic... remember when the Titanic was sinking and the band continued to play? We’re the band.” There are of course many people doing many extraordinary things during this time and each industry is doing their part, but I think that quote really sums up the hospitality industry. It’s times like these that help us put the service industry into perspective and remind us why we do what we do: we’re here to help. It’s so inspiring to read the stories about how each sector is stepping up, whether its hotels providing safe places for front-line workers to rest, or airlines transporting doctors to places that need extra help and turning passenger planes into cargo planes to transport as many necessary supplies as possible. Hospitality will persevere; people will always travel, will always need a place to eat and a place to stay. Hopefully, each of these experiences will be even more meaningful after this passes.”

Maddie O’Connell (SHA’16) – Hospitality Professional

“If you’re passionate about hospitality, do not let the pandemic change your career course. This industry has a demonstrated cycle–this is just a lower low than what we’re used to–but the upswing with all the pent-up travel will be great. There will be light at the end of the tunnel.”



Leonie Grundler (SHA'18) – Experiences Market Manager, Central & Eastern Europe at Airbnb

“I’ve heard over and over that the travel industry is the first to rebound after tough times. Our brains are programmed to crave new experiences and especially now that we are cooped up, people will be eager to travel as soon as authorities deem it safe, whether it be internationally or domestically. Luckily, a degree from SHA will prepare you for a career in so many places and the skills you learn here are valuable in a wide range of industries and functions. Although right now things seem quite grim, I have trust in people and especially in our industry and that things will get better.”



Eirhenz Espiritu (SHA'18) – Front Office Manager at Marriott Hotel

“Keep your head up; we will be back. I did not say goodbye to my colleagues at work, but rather “see you soon.” We are the business of connecting people, and when we are able to travel, meet, and celebrate again, our industry will thrive once more. The best part of my job is the people – whether they are guests, or my own team – and I cannot wait to roll up my sleeves to welcome everyone back.”



Francesca Farrell (SHA'18) – Events Manager at Renaissance Boston Hotel by Marriott

“Though we are all struggling right now, I can say for myself, and I’m sure many of my fellow alumni and industry professionals can as well, that we do not love our industry any less because of the current challenges we face. I consider myself very lucky to have an incredible support network from both my boss and coworkers as we all attempt to navigate these uncertain times together. The character and genuine compassion of my current team match that of nearly all my past professional associates, because those are the kinds of people that are drawn to hospitality. When this passes, and indeed this too shall pass, I know everyone in our field will get right back to work, ready to assist customers just like they always have.”



Marina Poole (SHA'19) – Sales Coordinator at The Carlyle, A Rosewood Hotel

“This crisis has reaffirmed my love of hospitality. Now more than ever I am so grateful to be a part of this industry. Not being able to work has made me realize how much I love my job and the people I work with. Hospitality is all about people and the people in hospitality are truly one-of-a-kind. If hospitality is truly your passion, stick with it because your hard work and determination will be rewarded.”

#hospitalitystrong



Source: Google

[PDF Version Available Here](#)

References

The Ritz-Carlton. (2020). *Foundations of Our Brand*. The Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center. <https://ritzcarltonleadershipcenter.com/about-us/about-us-foundations-of-our-brand/>

Emily Stewart is a Rooms Operations Manager at a Marriott Hotel, where her primary focus is in housekeeping. She graduated from Boston University School of Hospitality Administration in 2018. Upon graduating from BU, she completed her Voyage Program with Marriott in Rooms Operations. In her career, Emily has gained experience working at hotels in Boston, New York, and Dublin. She has received certifications in Food Protection- NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and Cleanliness- Ecolab Foundations of Cleaning.



Suzanne Markham Bagnera is Associate Clinical Professor and Chair of the Undergraduate Programs in the School of Hospitality Administration at Boston University, where she specializes in teaching hotel operations and human resources. She has held positions as General Manager at Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites, Staybridge Suites, and Holiday Inn Express. She is a member of the International Council of Hotel, Restaurant, & Institutional Education (I-CHRIE) and serves as Immediate Past President for the North East North American Federation. She holds numerous certifications in hospitality training; Certified Hotel Administrator (CHA) and ServSafe. Suzanne earned her M.B.A. in Management and B.S. in Hotel/Restaurant Management from Johnson & Wales University her doctorate from Iowa State University in Hospitality Management.

