

Biz.Travel Q&A with Liz McGrath



By [Brian Berkman](#): contributing editor, travel

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As the only woman in the world to own three hotels, all members of the prestigious Relais & Châteaux Association, Liz McGrath turned her grief over the sudden loss of her husband into a passion for restoration and hospitality. The hotels are The Plettenberg (Plettenberg Bay), The Marine (Hermanus) and The Cellars-Hohenort (Cape Town).



You travelled a lot with your late husband Gerald, head of Gallo Music. Where were your outstanding hotel experiences? What made them so?

The Hotel Cipriani in Venice. Venice is such a romantic city and being on an island in the middle of the Grande Canal, in a hotel with a warm, caring staff is an experience not to be forgotten.

Had you stayed at Relais & Châteaux properties before you become an hotelier yourself? Was the connection with R&C a historic one?

Yes, I consider the reason I was able to become a hotelier was because when my husband was alive, Relais & Châteaux hotels became the focus of our annual holidays abroad.

You're quoted saying you were surprised by their invitation to join their ranks. How did it happen?

I was surprised when I was invited to apply to join the Relais & Châteaux because I had always been in awe the quality and high standards of the Relais & Châteaux Association. I couldn't believe I had made it!!

In the mid-eighties you bought the one-star rated Lookout Hotel in Plettenberg Bay. In 1987 you opened it again as an exclusive five-star property. What were the key changes?

The original hotel was very small and I was not able to enlarge within its existing area because of the bulk factor. I, therefore, retained the existing walls and made major alterations within.

Although you are based in Johannesburg, you don't have a hotel there. Is there one on the cards?

My original home, which my husband and I bought 40 years ago, is in Johannesburg. These days I am lucky to be there every 2 or 3 months for a short spell. At this point in time, there are no plans for another hotel in Johannesburg. Three

hotels are more than enough for the standard I try to maintain.

The Marine Hotel was awarded the prestigious Investors In People award. It is an award that recognises your effort to groom and grow your staff. Is it just good business practice or do you feel an extra commitment to your staff?

The concept of encouraging staff to grow and develop within my 3 hotels is all important to me. As most of my managers have had the experience themselves of growing through the ranks, you can imagine it is of prime importance to all of us.

What are you and your managers doing differently?

You can have the most perfect building, with the most perfect setting but if the staff are not warm, friendly and motivated, you have nothing to make the hotel unique. My staff and attention to detail are my trump cards.

Although most of your guests are moneyed, do you think they see you as one of the celebrities you knew? After all, there are photographs of you with Elvis and Frank Sinatra.

Oh dear no, I hope not.

You schedule time to stay at each of your hotels every month. Is it a case of three weeks on and one week off or are you able to relax and enjoy your time in your beautiful properties?

What is this thing called relaxation? I am so hands on and motivated that I don't ever feel off duty.

In 2007 you were awarded the Relais & Châteaux Woman of the Year and most recently the Relais & Châteaux Garden Award 2010. It is not an exaggeration to describe the hotels that are members of the Relais & Châteaux Association as among the finest in the world. Do you feel you're sufficiently recognised by your peers within the South African hotel industry for your success?

I am a passionate South African and I am a passionate member of Relais & Châteaux and whatever success I may have had, I attribute to all the wonderful people who work for me.

Did you also watch Arthur Hailey's Hotel on TV in the 80's? Did you imagine then you'd be a real life Mrs Cabot? Unfortunately Bette Davis or Anne Baxter are no longer around to play you. Who would you like to play you in the movie about your life?

If I have to answer this very unusual question, I imagine that it would be Meryl Streep, as I am a great admirer!

With large poodles named Pablo and Picasso, what's your view about guests with pets in your hotels?

I have had standard poodles most of my life and I love all animals. I really don't have a problem with well behaved pooches staying in my hotels.

Menus at your hotels all have "Mrs M" dishes. Are these dishes you've enjoyed to eat or that you have prepared yourself at home?

Some of the dishes are family recipes and some of them have just been named after me by the chefs.

You have a rose named in your honour. Did you choose the cultivar yourself?

No, my family gave me the rose as a present for a special birthday. Quite one of the best presents I have ever had.

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