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Celebrating 2021's Hospitality Stars

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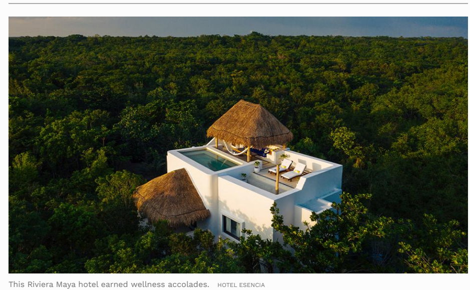
This Riviera Maya hotel earned wellness accolades. HOTEL ESENCIA

While the pandemic's economic effects devastated many industries, travel was among the hardest hit. One in 10 jobs worldwide is in travel and tourism, according to the World Travel & Tourism Council. But despite facing numerous challenges — including openings and closings, navigating fluctuating regulations, dealing with furloughs and layoffs and much more — the hospitality sector demonstrated resilience. Hotels, restaurants and spas pivoted with offerings like workations, inventive alfresco dining options, takeaway high teas and touchless spa treatments all while continuing to care for guests and keep them safe.

As part of the 2021 Star Awards, Forbes Travel Guide wanted to recognize the hardworking, passionate people behind the best properties by presenting some special accolades, all sponsored by Frette. The second annual Employee of the Year prizes celebrate the exemplary staff members who stood out in their service to guests and co-workers. To honor those who shined all the more during the pandemic, FTG introduced the new Hospitality Stars of the Year awards.

Properties in FTG's worldwide collection were asked to submit nominations for these industry distinctions. FTG received hundreds of deserving entries and took on the difficult task of narrowing down each category to five finalists. An executive committee then chose the winners below.

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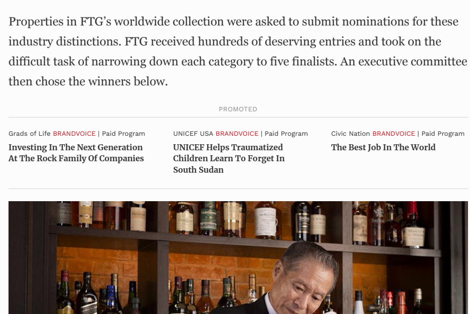
Master bartender Hisashi Sugimoto pours a drink. THE TOKYO STATION HOTEL

Hotel Employee of the Year: Hisashi Sugimoto, master bartender, The Tokyo Station Hotel

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This 1915 Tokyo hotel is designated an Important Cultural Property of Japan, and it boasts a living legend on its premises. Eighty-year-old Sugimoto joined the property in 1958 and went on to invent many of Bar Oak's original cocktails, including the Tokyo Station (learn to make it here), which is one of the most popular drinks on the menu. The master bartender also often shares his wisdom with younger staff members looking to hone their skills.

It isn't simply Sugimoto's mixology prowess that's drawn the admiration of thirsty patrons going back more than six decades. "His passion to make his guests happy never fades," his nominator said, "and he warmly welcomes and keeps attracting his guests with a soft smile."

Finalists: Manon Danois, housekeeping floor supervisor, Shangri-La Hotel Paris; John Goncalves, concierge, Hotel 41 in London; Ashley Lowry, recreation manager, Hammock Beach Golf Resort & Spa in Palm Coast, Florida; Ricardo Silva Pereira, front office guest service agent, Le Grand Bellevue in Gstaad, Switzerland.

Najla Ceman is a 20-year beauty veteran. JOE THOMAS

Spa Employee of the Year: Najla Ceman, therapist, The Spa at Four Seasons Hotel New York Downtown

When the spa closed for nine months, the 20-year beauty veteran didn't sit idle. Ceman became certified in numerous health-and-safety-related courses to ensure that she was prepared to meet new demands (which included helping to create a safe Nail & Skincare Therapy Menu) when the spa reopened. "Education is important, which is why besides my work and home life, I am currently a college student," Ceman said. "When the war started in Bosnia, I had just started my first year of college, but I had to leave because the city was under siege. Now, 27 years later, I am following my dreams because I realized it is never too late for anything you truly want."

Finalists: Heriberto Peña, wellness ambassador, The Spa at Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica; Phonthip Uppapong, senior spa trainer, The Oriental Spa, Bangkok; Denise Ward, attendant, The Lodge at Turning Stone Resort Casino's Skana Spa in Verona, New York; and Hee Wei Feng, therapist, The Spa at Mandarin Oriental, Kuala Lumpur.

Colleagues report feeling more confident after taking one of Wong's workshops. MARCO POLO HONGKONG HOTEL

Restaurant Employee of the Year: Bruce Wong, supervisor, Marco Polo Hongkong Hotel's Cucina

Wong is known for going the extra mile when it comes to taking care of guests. For example, he once was conversing with a guest, who lamented that his favorite breakfast, honeydew melon juice and yam congee, was difficult to find. Wong took it upon himself the following morning to depart early for work to purchase the items and arrange for them to be delivered to the guest's room.

He pays the same attention to colleagues, regularly hosting workshops to enhance the team's confidence. In addition to working long hours, Wong managed to find time to obtain a level 3 certification in Wine & Spirit Education Trust, among other initiatives, to further bolster his skills.

Finalists: Jorge Blas Vasquez, kitchen supervisor, Bristol Panama; Nathan Gillespie, commis waiter, Ashford Castle's The Drawing Room in County Mayo, Ireland; Akeel Shah, restaurant director, SingleThread Farms Restaurant in Healdsburg, California; Jeremy Stulak, server, Sheraton Grand at Wild Horse Pass' Kai Restaurant in Chandler, Arizona.

Meals are served at The Berkeley 999 Drive Thru. THE BERKELEY

Philanthropic Star of the Year: The Berkeley, London

This award salutes a property that helped others who faced adversity in 2020, whether through an international campaign or a community-based effort.

When COVID-19 forced the London hotel to close during the first lockdown, the property transformed its façade into The Berkeley 999 Drive Thru, serving 500 meals daily to those in emergency services. An additional 250 meals a day were given to the elderly and the more vulnerable in the community, in partnership with Westminster Council. In total, the hotel provided more than 50,000 meals were provided. Staff members, many of whom were furloughed, volunteered to serve food, providing a measure of warmth along with the meals.

In the subsequent lockdowns, The Berkeley continued to support the frontline, offering the Drive Thru the first Wednesday of every month and The Berkeley Blue Lights Club, a program for emergency services personnel that entitles the heroes to hotel benefits and treats.

Finalists: Drake Bay Getaway Resort in Costa Rica; Ocean House Management Collection in Rhode Island; SingleThread Farms in Healdsburg, California; and The Venetian Resort Las Vegas.

Ocean House created a mobile bar cart. OCEAN HOUSE

Service Visionary Star of the Year: Ocean House Management Collection

This category spotlights a property or brand that implemented a notable reimagined process that improved the hotel experience for staff and guests.

The Ocean House Management Collection (which includes Five-Stars Ocean House and Weekapaug Inn in Rhode Island as well as Forbes Travel Guide Recommended The Inn at Hastings Park near Boston) imagined imaginative services early in the pandemic with input from Harvard University experts. Some of the inventive initiatives included a mobile cart rolling from room to room giving out cocktails and complimentary appetizers to re-create the bar experience; personalized picnics delivered anywhere on the grounds; producing must-visit alfresco dining destinations like the Whispering Angel Culinary Garden, Whispering Angel Winter Igloo and Fondue Village; and private culinary and wine classes and dinners. The group proved that hardships can be an opportunity that sparks ingenuity and makes the guest experience fun and engaging.

Finalists: Kimpton La Peer Hotel in L.A.; One&Only Palmilla, Los Cabos Resort; The Phoenician, A Luxury Collection Resort in Scottsdale; and The Post Oak Hotel at Uptown Houston.

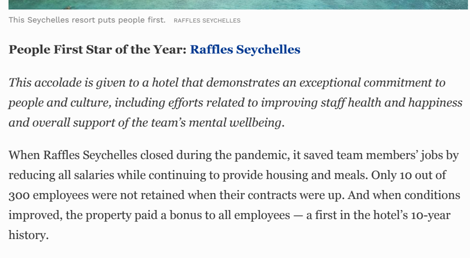
Wellness Star of the Year: Hotel Esencia, Riviera Maya, Mexico

This distinction recognizes a property that spearheaded an inspired wellness initiative, like a noteworthy food program, a fitness and health offering, or a focus on design and amenities that enhance wellbeing.

When the pandemic thrust wellness even more into the forefront, Hotel Esencia devised a way to allow guests to focus on their health in a private and luxurious setting. The boutique hotel introduced Rooftop Wellness suites outfitted with the most up-to-date equipment: a Mirror virtual fitness trainer, a Peloton bicycle, a Technogym weight set, yoga mats and an aromatherapy steam shower. The innovative accommodations also encourage you to experience the jungle landscape on an expansive rooftop terrace with a heated pool, an outdoor shower and a solarium.

Hotel Esencia also incorporated wellness into its dining offerings. Every menu contains healthy choices like bowls of superfoods or roasted vegetables along with fresh-squeezed juices and smoothies.

Finalists: Carillon Miami Wellness Resort; One&Only Palmilla, Los Cabos Resort; The Ritz-Carlton, Bahrain; Sunstone Spa at Agua Caliente Resort Casino Spa Rancho Mirage, California.


This Seychelles resort puts people first. RAFFLES SEYCHELLES

People First Star of the Year: Raffles Seychelles

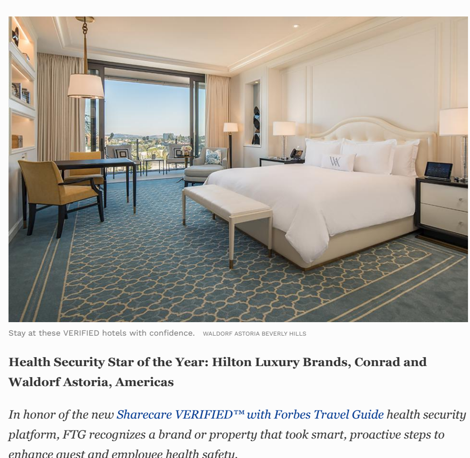
This accolade is given to a hotel that demonstrates an exceptional commitment to people and culture, including efforts related to improving staff health and happiness and overall support of the team's mental wellbeing.

When Raffles Seychelles closed during the pandemic, it saved team members' jobs by reducing all salaries while continuing to provide housing and meals. Only 10 out of 300 employees were not retained when their contracts were up. And when conditions improved, the property paid a bonus to all employees — a first in the hotel's 10-year history.

Aside from its pandemic-related efforts, Raffles Seychelles took other measures throughout the year in support of its team. Since the Seychelles has the highest rates of obesity in Africa, the property launched a staff health campaign that included a six-month-long "biggest loser" competition, the introduction of healthy options in the cafeteria and group workouts. Additionally, the end-of-year staff party was changed to a sports day where everyone joined in activities such as pingpong, basketball, football, cricket, volleyball and more.

"People first — always," said Salwa Razzouk, general manager. "If someone in the hospitality industry has not understood this, then they must be in the wrong profession."

Finalists: Acqualina Resort and Residences on the Beach in Miami, Four Seasons Hotel at The Surf Club in Miami, Four Seasons Resort Palm Beach and Royal Mansour Marrakech.


Stay at these VERIFIED hotels with confidence. WALDORF ASTORIA BEVERLY HILLS

Health Security Star of the Year: Hilton Luxury Brands, Conrad and Waldorf Astoria, Americas

In honor of the new Sharecare VERIFIED™ with Forbes Travel Guide health security platform, FTG recognizes a brand or property that took smart, proactive steps to enhance guest and employee health safety.

In response to the pandemic, Waldorf Astoria and Conrad in the Americas swiftly developed new luxury service manuals with detailed videos and illustrations to thoroughly describe modifications made to the guest experience with safety in mind. The brand also created a robust cleanliness and disinfection program. Its VERIFIED™ hotels include Conrad Fort Lauderdale Beach, Conrad New York Downtown, Waldorf Astoria Beverly Hills, Waldorf Astoria Chicago, Waldorf Astoria Las Vegas, Waldorf Astoria Los Cabos Pedregal and Waldorf Astoria Orlando.

Finalists: Acqualina Resort and Residences on the Beach; Hotel Nikko San Francisco; The Murray, Hong Kong; and Wynn Resorts Las Vegas.

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