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## A Hotel Maker's Inspiring Destinations

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By Duncan Mavin



Harry Harrison

Grace Leo

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Before Grace Leo helped create Bono's Clarence Hotel in Dublin, and before she refurbished the historic Hotel Lancaster in Paris, she was the daughter of Hong Kong hoteliers, learning the business from the ground up. As an adult, she left the city behind and formally studied the hospitality industry in the U.S. before settling, in the 1980s, in Europe, where she eventually redeveloped more than a dozen of the toniest boutique hotels in France, England and Portugal.

Over coffee recently at Hong Kong's Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Ms. Leo said, "It's funny coming back to Asia, I feel like a foreigner."

Ms. Leo, who is based in Paris, is currently working on the restoration of a former Dutch colonial residence in the Menteng district of Jakarta. She plans to turn it into a boutique hotel—her second project in the region, and, with a budget of US\$12 million, the biggest so far. (The first project was Nyaman Villas in Bali.) She says she'd like to work on more projects in Southeast Asia.

Ms. Leo, the first woman to serve on the board of hotel organization Leading Hotels of the World, described the five destinations she finds most inspiring.

**1. Paris**

“I am so lucky because this architecturally splendid city where I live re-inspires me every morning as I walk to work along the river Seine while looking at the Eiffel Tower. I am in awe every time.”

**2. Hong Kong**

“The city is like an intense beehive with people working incessantly. Hong Kong citizens are extremely efficient, forthcoming, business friendly, deeply imbued with a service culture. It is an astonishing and harmonious cohabitation of the East and the West, and that’s no cliché.”

**3. Bali**

“....for innovative resort ideas and handcrafted objects that I can order for my hotels. Bali is an exotic cocktail of spirituality and hedonism, as well as a haven of artistic expression. Somehow the seaside-resort design movement has always been avant-garde here.”

**4. New York**

“People gravitate to this city to find or to be part of the ‘best and brightest.’ New York sparks off the latest trends in art, fashion, décor and restaurants, all of which make up part of my universe. I come here regularly to get my dose of dynamic energy and creativity, and of course to fulfill my retail therapy needs.”

**5. Hakone, Japan**

“I’m inspired by the tranquil landscape in the Hakone region at the foot of the mythical Mount Fuji. A short stay in a stunning *ryokan* [a traditional Japanese inn] like the Gora Kadan, take hot thermal baths followed by traditional massage that cure body and mind.”