

JOURNEY TO LEADERSHIP

Mr. Eben Nel, General Manager, JW Marriott Hotel & Residences Nairobi



Q1. Let's start by delving into your background. Could you tell us about your early experiences and how they shaped your career path?

I bring over 30 years of international experience in hospitality, having worked across luxury hotels, complex resort environments, and large-scale pre-opening projects. My journey has taken me through diverse markets, including South Africa, Egypt and now Kenya, each shaping my understanding of varied guest expectations and operational dynamics.

Early in my career, I built a strong foundation across Food & Beverage, Spa & Wellness, and Golf operations, while gaining exposure to complex openings that required precision, adaptability, and resilience. These formative experiences instilled in me a deep appreciation for excellence, a strong connection to people, cultures, commitment to consistency and empathy values that continue to define my leadership approach.

Q2. Tell us about your diverse experience in the industry and what motivated you to become the GM of JW Marriott Hotel & Residences Nairobi.

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to lead hotel brands and dynamic markets, each chapter

shaping and refining my leadership journey. From the early days, what drew me to hospitality was not only the pursuit of operational excellence, but the opportunity to create meaningful experiences through people, culture and service. My journey has taken me through senior leadership roles at leading hospitality brands such as Sun International, Starwood Hotels and Resorts and Marriott International.

In Cairo, at The Westin Cairo Golf Resort & Spa and The Westin Cape Town, I was part of a transformative period that involved navigating complex hotel openings, driving operational turnarounds, and building sustained performance momentum. These experiences were both demanding and deeply rewarding. It was during this time that I had the honor of being recognized with the General Manager of the Year Africa Award, a milestone that reflected not just individual achievement, but the strength of the teams I had the privilege to lead.

Taking on the role at JW Marriott Hotel & Residences Nairobi felt like a natural progression an opportunity to be part of something truly special. The vision of bringing a globally recognized hotel brand into one of Africa's most vibrant and evolving cities was both compelling and inspiring. Leading the pre-opening and launch of this landmark 35-storey property in April 2024 stands as one of the defining moments of my career a journey that required precision, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to excellence.

From the outset, our vision has been clear, to seamlessly blend global luxury standards with the richness and authenticity of African hospitality. Bringing this vision to life has been a true collective effort, driven by a passionate and dedicated team. In a relatively short period, the hotel has established a strong market presence, earning prestigious recognition at the World Travel Awards as Kenya's Leading Luxury Hotel in both 2024 and 2025, as well as Kenya's Leading Hotel Residences in the same years. Further accolades include the local Tourism Excellence Awards for Best Hotel in the Nairobi Region and Best Hotel Overall in 2025, along with the World Spa Award for Kenya's Best Hotel Spa by JW in both 2024 and 2025. These achievements reflect not only our distinctive positioning but also the consistency and excellence of our delivery service.

Today, JW Marriott Hotel & Residences Nairobi stands as a preferred destination for both business and leisure travelers, supported by strong performance across key indicators such as market share, RGI and RevPAR. More importantly, it represents a space where luxury is not only experienced, but felt through every detail, every interaction and every moment created.

Q3. Shifting focus to JW Marriott, could you provide insights into the core values driving its growth and sustainability?

At JW Marriott Hotel & Residences Nairobi, my leadership is anchored on three core pillars: people, performance, and purpose.

Sustainable success begins with our people. By investing in talent, nurturing growth, and fostering a culture of accountability, we consistently deliver exceptional and personalized guest experiences. Beyond commercial performance, we are committed to innovation, sustainability, and building meaningful partnerships that contribute to Kenya's broader hospitality ecosystem.

Sustainability is not treated as a standalone initiative, it is embedded in how we operate, from resource efficiency to community engagement ensuring our growth remains both responsible and impactful.

Q4. How has your vision for the company evolved in response to recent challenges?

Recent global and industry challenges have reinforced the importance of resilience, agility and forward thinking leadership. In response, we have sharpened our focus on guest personalization, strengthened team capability through continuous development and accelerated digital transformation across the business.

At the same time, we remain firmly committed to preserving the human connection that defines luxury hospitality. While technology enhances efficiency and enables deeper guest insights, it must complement not replace the warmth, intuition and care our associates bring to every interaction.

Q5. Considering the organizational culture, what type of culture do you envision, and what benefits should it yield?

I envision a culture that is deeply people first, inclusive and performance driven.

BCCK CEO OF THE MONTH

My philosophy is simple, when associates feel valued, supported and inspired they naturally deliver exceptional service. We focus on empowerment, encouraging innovation, and fostering a strong sense of belonging. This creates an environment where individuals are motivated to perform at their best, driving higher engagement, stronger brand loyalty, and consistently elevated guest satisfaction.

Ultimately, culture is the foundation upon which sustainable success is built.

Q6. One of the most significant challenges in my journey has been leading through periods of uncertainty, both globally and within the local market.

In Kenya, the operating environment remains fluid and increasingly complex, shaped by geopolitical unrest, regional instability and evolving global health considerations. External shocks including the ongoing Middle East crisis, broader geopolitical tensions, and heightened global uncertainty continue to influence travel flows, investor confidence, and market stability.

Regionally, health-related risks such as Ebola outbreaks in parts of Africa, alongside the lasting structural impact of COVID-19, continue to shape traveller sentiment, regulatory protocols, and operational preparedness across the hospitality sector. At the same time, rapid technological acceleration is transforming how businesses operate, compete and engage with customers, requiring continuous adaptation and investment.

Domestically, cost pressures including rising wages and input costs are placing increased emphasis on efficiency, pricing discipline and value creation. These dynamics, coupled with intensified competition from both regional and international markets, are directly influencing occupancy trends, demand patterns, and overall sector performance.

Navigating this environment requires a high degree of agility and resilience. Operationally, we continue to manage fluctuations in demand, last minute booking behaviors and supply chain variability, while ensuring consistent service delivery and safeguarding employee wellbeing.

Leading through this complexity reinforces the importance of clarity in execution, proactive scenario planning and disciplined decision making. It also underscores the value of staying closely aligned to both global developments and local market realities.

Our focus remains on building resilient operations, empowering our teams and leveraging innovation to sustain growth. By maintaining a long-term perspective while responding decisively to short term pressures, we are well positioned to deliver consistent value to our stakeholders and exceptional experiences to our guests.



Q7. Given the increasing role of Artificial Intelligence, what is your perspective on its impact in hospitality? Artificial Intelligence is a transformative force shaping the future of hospitality, JW Marriott Hotel & Residences Nairobi, we are embracing this evolution in a deliberate and strategic way. AI is enhancing guest personalization by enabling us to better understand preferences, anticipate needs, and deliver more intuitive, tailored experiences across the guest journey. It also plays a critical role in predictive analytics, supporting more informed decisions around demand forecasting, pricing strategies, and guest behavior.

From an operational perspective, AI is improving efficiency through smarter resource allocation, optimized staffing, streamlined housekeeping scheduling, and enhanced procurement processes. These capabilities help reduce inefficiencies, minimize waste and improve turnaround times, ultimately enabling more precise and cost-effective operations without compromising service standards.

While AI will continue to elevate our capabilities, true luxury hospitality remains fundamentally human. Technology should support and empower our teams not replace the genuine connection that defines exceptional guest experiences.

Q8. What is your view on ESG and its role in addressing sustainability and climate change?

Environment, Social and Governance is no longer optional, it is fundamental to responsible business operations.

Within Marriott International, this is driven through our global platform, SERVE 360: Doing Good in Every Direction. I currently serve as Chairman of the East Africa Business Council and previously chaired the Junior Business Council in Egypt, reflecting a strong commitment to mentorship, collaboration and regional growth.

Our framework focuses on environmental sustainability, community engagement, diversity and inclusion and ethical practices. Our responsibility extends beyond the hotel to the communities and environments in which we operate. By embedding ESG principles into our strategy, we align with global expectations while creating long-term, meaningful value for all stakeholders.

Q9. As you reflect on your journey, what advice would you offer to growing leaders?

Reflecting on my journey, I take great pride in what we have built as a team at JW Marriott Hotel & Residences Nairobi it has been both professionally and personally rewarding.

My advice to emerging leaders is to remain curious, embrace continuous learning, and stay adaptable in the face of change. Leadership is not about having all the answers, it is about asking the right questions, listening actively and creating an environment where others can succeed.

Q10. What advice would you give aspiring business leaders looking to transition into leadership roles?

Aspiring leaders should focus on developing emotional intelligence, as the ability to understand and connect with people lies at the heart of effective leadership.

Equally important is being solution-oriented and agile, particularly in fast-paced and evolving environments. Developing a holistic understanding of the business, building resilience through challenges, and staying grounded in a clear sense of purpose are all critical to long-term leadership success.

Q11. Throughout your career, what resources have significantly influenced you?

Throughout my journey, I have remained actively engaged in industry leadership and development across the region. This includes participation in executive programs such as Marriott International Luxury University (MILUX) as well as serving as a member of the Luxury Advisory Board for the Middle East and Africa.

These platforms provide valuable opportunities to exchange insights, challenge perspectives and contribute to shaping the future of luxury hospitality. I place strong emphasis on continuous learning, drawing from leadership forums, industry networks and global insights to stay attuned to evolving trends and guest expectations.

Engaging with diverse perspectives has been instrumental in refining my leadership approach, enabling me to remain adaptive, forward-thinking, and responsive in an increasingly dynamic and competitive landscape.

Parting Line

“ I remain incredibly proud of what we have achieved at JW Marriott Hotel & Residences Nairobi, and I am equally excited about the future.

Our continued focus on excellence, innovation and people will ensure that we not only meet but exceed the expectations of our guests and partners, while contributing meaningfully to the growth of hospitality in the region.