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Hospitality 101: From the Biggest to the Best

Chad Merchant

10–13 minutes



Any hospitality pro will tell you, the best hotels are the best because of their people. Such a statement is no more true anywhere than at EQ, Malaysia’s top-ranked city hotel.

Running a great hotel takes a lot of great people, and it all starts at the top, so it’s no surprise that this hotel’s General Manager was also recently named the #1 Hotel GM in the *Travel + Leisure* Asia-Pacific awards.

Strategy-driven and people-centric, Aussie expat Gerard Walker is a seasoned hospitality professional with extensive experience... and that’s probably an understatement. Gerard has gone from managing the largest hotel in the world – we’re not kidding – to now leading the Best Hotel in Kuala Lumpur, so naturally, he brings a wealth of hospitality knowledge and acumen to the table. His 28-year career spans China, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam, making him exceptionally adept at the nuances of Asian hospitality. You’d be hard-pressed to find many GMs who had led both the biggest and the best hotels in any single country, and yet that’s just one of the highlights of Gerard’s long-running career in hospitality.

Gerard has now been the General Manager of EQ for two-plus years, and we recently sat down with this affable expat hospitality magnate to get his take on life in Malaysia and running a multi-award-winning hotel in KL.



Australian expat Mr Gerard Walker

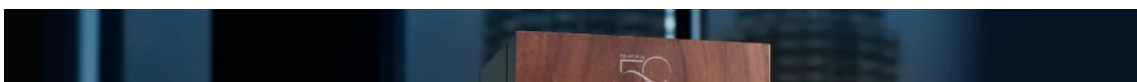
Hi, Gerard, thanks for chatting with ExpatGo. First, please tell us a bit about yourself – nationality, background, family here or not, how long in Malaysia, etc.?

I'm a Sydney-sider who, by now, has spent more time out of Australia than in it. My early experiences in the Australian F&B industry ignited a passion for hospitality, leading me to some of the most vibrant and exciting destinations in the world. My first introduction to Malaysia was in 2008 as Director of F&B for an international hotel chain.

How long have you been GM at the EQ? Can you tell us a little about the hotel and its history as it wraps up its 50th anniversary?

I have been the General Manager of EQ since April 2022. EQ has a long, colourful, and illustrious history, being a part of the Malaysian hospitality landscape since its opening in 1973 as Hotel Equatorial Kuala Lumpur. The former building stood on the current site of EQ and was the place to be seen. Anybody who was somebody came to dine, hold parties, or attend events right here!

We dedicated an entire year to our golden anniversary with events throughout the duration, including weekly sharing of historical images on various platforms. The pictures are from our own archives and those black-and-white images are real prints! To commemorate this milestone, we were honoured with the exclusivity of the Barons de Rothschild Rare Collection Blanc de Blancs Vintage 2012, making EQ the only hotel in Malaysia with 240 bottles of this outstanding vintage. Barons de Rothschild also designed exclusive presentation boxes for the vintage sold at EQ. The year 2012 was significant for the EQ brand as it marked the announcement of plans for Equatorial Hotel's redevelopment.





Commemorating EQ's 50th anniversary, the Barons de Rothschild Rare Collection Blanc de Blancs Vintage 2012 was a special collaboration with the hotel

Continuing the spirit of celebration, Kampachi secured a special sake vintage for its 50th anniversary, while we recreated two of Equatorial's most beloved restaurants, Golden Phoenix and Chalet, as pop-up restaurants. Despite the official celebrations ending, EQ continues to be a testament to its owners' vision, standing as the most sustainable hotel in Malaysia. We are a Green Building Index (GBI) Gold standard building, boasting an impressive array of green features that reduce water consumption by over 50%.

How meaningful was it for EQ to win three impressive awards in 2023 from *Travel + Leisure Southeast Asia*, including the best city hotel in Malaysia, and then to win again in 2024?

Every nomination is a win and a feather in our team's cap, but for a Malaysian hotel to be named the victor not once, but for three consecutive years, is truly unprecedented. It highlights our unwavering commitment to exceptional service and remarkable hospitality. This recognition is especially significant as it comes from

the readers of *Travel + Leisure*, who are among the most discerning and well-travelled individuals worldwide. Their votes affirm our hard work and dedication. We are deeply grateful for their support and take immense pride in upholding the high standards that have earned us this honour. All credit goes to our extraordinary team for their consistent excellence.



Stunning city views from EQ's excellent location in the heart of KL

EQ has a pretty eclectic range of dining options. Can you tell our readers briefly about the F&B options available?

EQ offers a diverse range of dining options that reflect the vibrancy of Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia's reputation as a foodie paradise. Our dining offerings are rooted in a tradition of excellence, starting with six degustation menus at Sabayon and a family-friendly Sunday Sky Brunch, providing children with the chance to experience their first fine-dining meal. Adjacent to Sabayon is Sky51, an alfresco nightspot with stunning cityscape views, an imaginative cocktail list, and live music at Blue.





Sabayon

Our diverse cuisine includes Kampachi, a Japanese restaurant synonymous with EQ since the hotel's inception, serving some of the freshest air-flown Japanese seafood and produce. Nearby is Bottega, where afternoon tea is presented in an exclusive sculpture by Nizam Abdullah called Dolce Vita. On the same floor is Nipah, our all-day dining venue renowned for its authentic local cuisine and sizzling satay during buffet lunches and dinners. For a popular lunch and after-work spot, Étoile, located facing Jalan Tun Perak, offers a variety of meals for busy executives and a delightful deli selection for those needing a break from the city's hustle and bustle.

How do you typically spend your leisure time?

I have a strong passion for sports. In the past, I was actively involved in sailboat racing, which could certainly warrant its own discussion. Currently, I enjoy golfing when time allows. I'm also a keen follower of the English Premier League and make a point of watching all Manchester City matches.

Do you have any unusual or amusing anecdotes that you could share about your time at EQ?

It's always exciting when the unexpected happens with visiting dignitaries, Heads of State, or VVIPs. There's a unique buzz that comes with a high-level guest going 'off-script,' and that adrenaline provides a daily boost. All our guests have particular nuances and requests, and anticipating their needs is what makes their stay memorable.

Name three of your favourite Malaysian dishes.

It's not so much about the dishes but the authenticity that goes into the preparation of the food. I'm always on the lookout for the best Roti, the most authentic Klang *bak kut teh*, or *rendang tok*. Dining is a great experience among friends, and the time spent searching out good food is part of what I love most about dining out in Malaysia.

What is your preferred holiday destination in Malaysia?

Holidays aren't as important as the experience of embarking on a culinary exploration with my F&B team. Visiting caviar producers in Raub or walking through cacao plantations in Pahang are great ways to see parts of the country that many do not get to experience.

What are some of the things you miss most about your home country?

I couldn't go without Vegemite and Tim Tams. You can take the boy out of Australia, but... well, you know the rest.

Thanks for taking the time to talk with us, Gerard. As a final question, what would you say makes EQ a good choice for a local staycation?

Of course, I'm going to be biased, but for me, it's a combination of its unrivalled location right in the heart of the city's most vibrant thoroughfare, proximity to the best shopping experiences, and the number one pool in KL on level 29. Also, EQ is probably the only city hotel in Malaysia with its own collection of art. A tour of our sculptures,

the copper tooling piece from the original hotel, and modern art by Kenji Chai on plates from Equatorial Hotel are also things to look out for and enjoy.

Curious about EQ's growing list of awards? Since its debut in 2019, the hotel's strategy to create new hospitality standards has proven to be the most rewarding. Notable accolades include:

- *Travel + Leisure* Awards Asia Pacific in 2022, 2023, and 2024 for No. 1 [City Hotel in Malaysia](#)
- *Travel + Leisure* Awards Asia Pacific in 2024 for No. 1 Hotel General Manager, No. 1 Hotel Pool and No. 2 Hotel Spa
- [Travel + Leisure's The Top 500 Best Hotels in the World 2024](#)
- *Travel + Leisure* World's Best Awards 2023, No. 5 in the 15 Favourite City Hotels in Asia, No. 35 in 100 Favourite Hotels in the World
- Preferred Hotels & Resorts Award of Excellence – [Hotel of the Year 2023](#) in Asia Pacific
- HAPA Hospitality & Tourism Awards 2023 – 2024 – Malaysia's Service Excellence Establishments, Malaysia's Best Hotels & Resorts, Malaysia's Best Hospitality & Tourism Personalities (General Manager), Hospitality Establishment for Director of F&B Category, Malaysia's Best Executive Chef of The Year, Malaysia's Best Executive Chef of The Year (Kampachi), Malaysia's Best Human Resource Strategic Talent Development for Hotels & Resorts, HAPA Best Restaurants Recommended (Kampachi), Malaysia's Best Restaurants (Sabayon), Malaysia's Best Service Excellence Establishments (Blue & Sanctum Wellness), and [Malaysia's Best Spas](#) (Sanctum Wellness)
- Green Building Index (GBI) Gold certification 2023
- TripAdvisor [No. 1 hotel in Kuala Lumpur](#) and Travellers' Choice Award

from 2019 – 2023

- *Wine Spectator* Restaurant Awards for Best Award of Excellence – Sky 51 Sabayon from 2019 – 2023
- Malaysia Institute of Interior Design (MIID) REKA Awards 2019, Design Excellence in the Food & Beverage category: Gold for Sky51 Sabayon, Silver for Sky51 Blue and Bronze for Kampachi
- Malaysian Construction Industry Excellence Awards 2019 by the Construction Industry Development Berhad for The Best Project Award for A Major Project Building – Equatorial Plaza
- *Travel Weekly Asia* Readers' Choice Awards 2019 for Best New Hotel in Asia-Pacific
- *StarProperty* Awards 2020 for The Creative Touch Award (City Hotel) for Excellence in the best interior design
- TripAdvisor Best of the Best 2021, No. 7 Best Picture-Perfect Worldwide for Sky51 Sabayon
- M&C Asia Stella Awards' [Best Meetings Hotel in Malaysia](#) 2022
- I Prefer Members' Choice Award Winners 2022
- Contemporary Restaurant of the Year by Travel & Hospitality Awards' 2022 Food & Restaurant Awards – Sky51 Sabayon

