

AWARD-WINNING GRADUATE DISCUSSES BOUTIQUE HOTEL BUSINESS

Alumnus Stipe Milišić

By Rebecca Charry

Being a pioneer is never easy, especially when everyone around you is skeptical of a new idea. But with patience, wisdom, and a good plan, risks can bring great results. That's the story of the Milišić family, who returned to Croatia in 1994 after many years in Sweden, with the idea of opening a small, private luxury hotel. At times it looked impossible.

Stipe Milišić, who graduated from ACMT in 2004, returned to the college in February to tell his family's business story to freshman students in Prof. Besim Agusai's Hotel Operations class, offering them an inside look at the boutique hotel business from the his own experience.

"We were pioneers at a time when boutique hotels were unheard of," he said. "We faced and overcame many obstacles: everyone was skeptical, no one wanted to give us a loan. There was a different attitude about private tourism then, and an amazing amount of bureaucracy, not all of which was honest."

Today, the Marco Polo hotel in Gradac, one of Croatia's first privately owned boutique hotels, is thriving, drawing a steady flow of guests from Germany, Scandinavia, Ireland, and the United States. In 2009 it was named the Best Boutique Hotel in Croatia. The management team also includes three other ACMT alumni.

Mr. Milišić, who co-founded the Croatian Association of Small Family Hotels, is now the hotel's general manager, and was recognized for his outstanding accomplishments with the RIT International Award for Alumni Excellence for 2007.

Today, he told students, there are approximately 200 small family hotels in Croatia. It is predicted that by 2010, there will be 600.

"The boutique hotel concept emphasizes luxury and personalized service," he explained. "A boutique hotel offers some unique detail, like



Alumnus Stipe Milišić accepts his award from Professors Rebecca Charry and Besim Agušaj

Photo by Hanne Edvardsen

furnishings or architecture or location, along with all the amenities of a large hotel like a wellness and fitness center and conference facilities."

Mr. Milišić looked back on his days as an ACMT student with warmth and appreciation for what he learned, especially during his co-op employment at Disney World. He offered honest advice to students about their future careers.

"You cannot expect to start your career as a general manager," he told students. "You need experience. It's even worth volunteering in an unpaid position for six months just to learn the business."

For those interested in starting a boutique hotel, he said, "All you need is a good idea and a good loan. But remember, this is not a short term money making scheme. It's a long-term investment that takes generations to pay off."

His advice: be professional, hire a lawyer. "We thought we could be our own lawyers but we were wrong." Check contractors carefully – some are unscrupulous. Get all the necessary permits and stick to them. Today hotels can be shut down or even torn down if they violate the terms of their permits. And, of course, choose your employees carefully.

"You can have a hotel made of gold but if you don't have a loyal, qualified team of people who are ready to work, you will never succeed."

ALUMNI CAREER UPDATES

Lana Vego Matić '02 was accepted to The Croatian Association of Artists of Applied Art in Goldsmithing, Silversmithing, Metalwork and Jewelry.

Mirela Subotić '04 was hired as Project Manager in the Marketing and Development division of Tisak d.d. in Zagreb.

Latica Ivković '07 was hired as Readers Service Marketing Assistant for the 24SATA media company in Zagreb.

Daniel Čečavac '07 was hired by Mobitel d.o.o. mobile technology firm as Junior Sales Manager in Zagreb.

Lana Dolenc '05 was hired as project assistant for the UNPD energy efficiency program in Zagreb

Ana Zuzenić Brant '04 was promoted to Regional Service Quality Analyst at the Ritz Carlton Hotel Company covering 13 hotels in the eastern United States. She earned certification as a Quality Improvement Analyst from the American Society of Quality, and earned a Lean Six Sigma Green Belt from Air Academy and Associates. She also gave two lectures at the Harvard University School of Graduate Studies, in Cambridge, Mass. (USA).

Ana Jarak '03 was hired as Domestic Marketing and Enrollment Manager at the American College of Management and Technology in Dubrovnik.

Ivona Labaš '05 was hired as Finance Manager at the American College of Management and Technology in Dubrovnik.

Natalia Krešić Lončar '05 was promoted to Web Development Project Manager at Atlas d.d. adriatica.net Group in Zagreb. She recently earned a Master's Degree in E-tourism: Strategic Marketing and Distribution from the University of Barcelona.

To submit a career update for our next issue, email Rebecca@acmt.hr.