I have just spent Easter in Dubai and was quite stunned at the amount – and quality – of development that has taken place since the last time I visited a few years ago.

Admittedly the pace of this change has slackened somewhat in the past year but this is hardly surprising given the ongoing turmoil in the world’s financial markets.

There did seem to be plenty of wealth knocking around though and nowhere is this more apparent than at the iconic Burj Al Arab hotel. Opened in 2000, the Burj, designed to represent an Arab dhow in full sail, is the first and, as yet, only seven-star hotel in the world. I am not quite sure where the seven stars have actually come from but there is no question that the hotel is an amazing and spectacular place.

We are often exhorted to offer five-star service in our own dental practices, but what does offering seven-star service entail? In order to try and answer this pressing question I decided to go for afternoon tea at the Burj and find out for myself what makes this place so special. The things we put ourselves through in the name of academic research!

Firstly, the location is astounding; sitting at the end of a perfectly manicured drive, the hotel really does look like a boat in full sail and, whatever else you might think about it, the design is simply stunning. Outside is all clean minimalism, with the obligatory fleet of white Rolls – not as many, I have to say, as at the Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong, so one up there for the old school colonials! The doorman greets you with a friendly smile and ushers you inside. Nothing can quite prepare you for the sight that greets you. A world away from the clean, cool exterior the interior is a rather garish, multi-coloured splash of (to my untrained eye) ostentatious vulgarity. But then again, what do I know?

What always interests me far more than the tangible, physical location is the way you are treated by the staff, the attention to detail and the care and concern they have for your wellbeing. This is where the Burj really started to shine. The staff were terrific and attentive without being obsequious or in your face. I always maintain that you cannot make people who are not genuinely interested in others behave in a kind, considerate and caring way and I do believe that by and large people are that way or they aren’t. For that reason one of my favourite maxims is ‘hire on attitude, not aptitude’. In other words, you can usually train people to do a certain job, perform particular tasks but you cannot train someone to wake up with a cheery disposition and a genuine desire to help others. Having said that, employees still need proper training so that they can channel their natural goodness into providing great service and I think that I now have some understanding of how the Burj achieves this. At the end of an extremely pleasant couple of hours I was given the bill (gasp!) and a feedback form. After the usual questions about quality and presentation of food came the following sequence of questions under the heading ‘Our Hallmarks’: ‘Were you treated with a smile every time we served you, every time we assisted you, every time you met an employee? Did we ever say “no” as a first response? Was an attitude of mutual respect displayed amongst our employees?’

To me this is at the very heart of providing seven-star service, a genuine desire by someone to do their very best for you. You can never please everyone when it comes to physical design and while I love the outside appearance of the Burj, one can only stand and gawp at the interior, which resembles a cross between Disneyland and a 19th century Sultan’s harem.

Eventually, however, it is the people who make the difference in any service. We are all expected to deliver an excellent core service these days but what sets one provider apart from the others is the way that this core service is delivered. A buzz word in management currently is ‘authenticity’ – in other words, is the business genuinely trying to do its best for you as a client, acting in your best interests not theirs, delivering on promises, maintaining high standards and sticking to core values? This can only be achieved when staff believe in those values – clearly at the Burj Al Arab, they do. This is what seven-star service is all about, what makes people come back for more, tell others about you and even write magazine columns about you.

Do you know what makes ‘seven-star service’, asks Philip Newsome

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