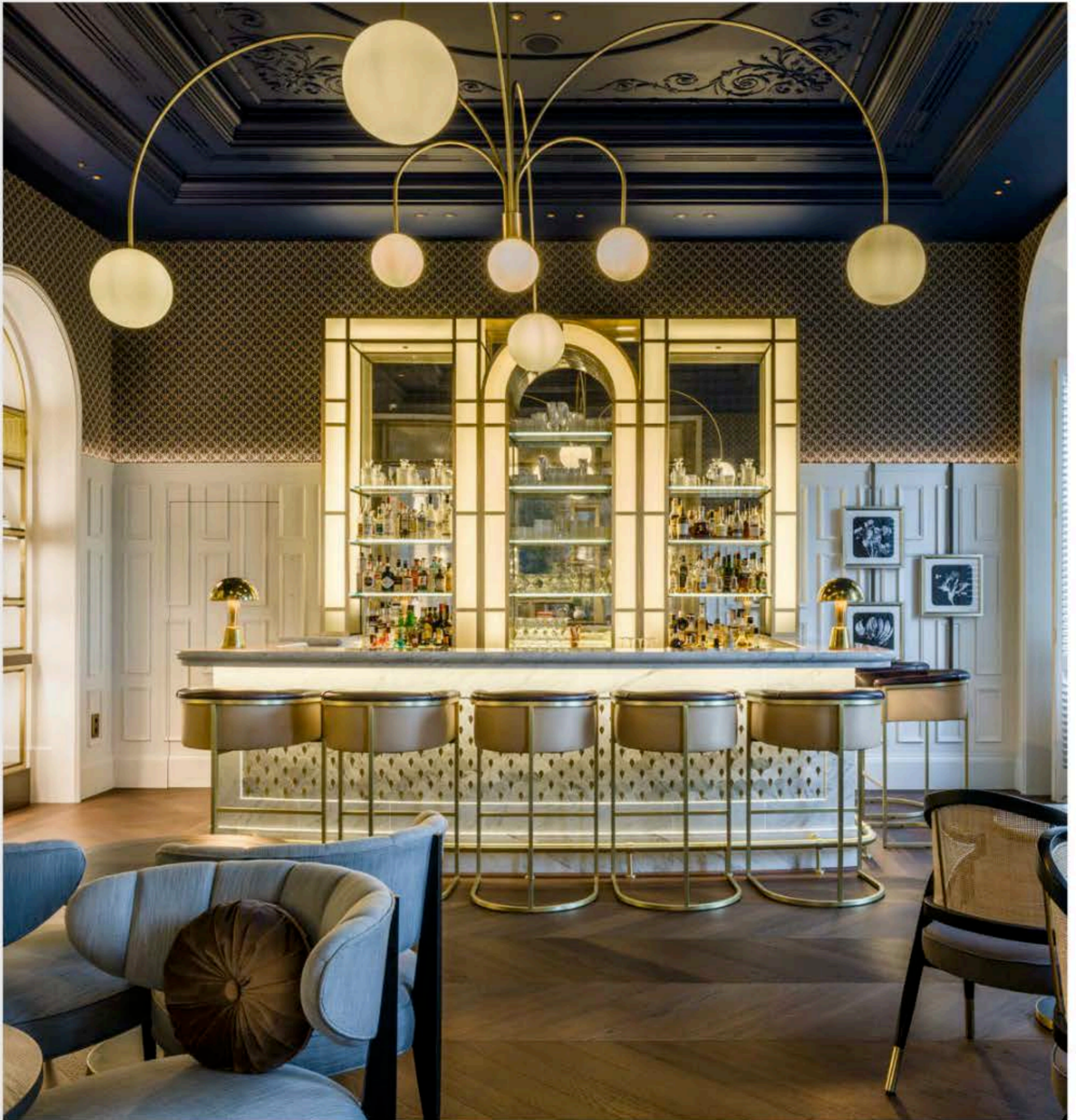


# THE WORLD OF HOSPITALITY

Hotels, Bars & Restaurants



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**The Trafalgar St James**  
SHH working with Hilton on its first Curio  
Collection property in the UK

**New-look Hilton Imperial Dubrovnik**  
Goddard Littlefair Re-injecting golden  
age glamor into one of Europe's most  
beautiful hotels

**CTO Lighting add illumination  
with botanical twist**  
Nelson Design has waved its magic to  
recreate its world class dining room



## Luxury Hotel & Resort Photographer Antonio Cuellar Interviewed by Lara Flanagan

As someone who has worked with luxury hotels for most of my adult life, it was a pleasure to interview Antonio Cuellar. Antonio is a gifted photographer who specializes in the most extraordinary photography of luxury hotels and resorts. After a stint in architecture and interiors photography, the idea of photographing luxury hotels and resorts appealed to Antonio, as this field of endeavour also managed to incorporate his love of travel and lifestyle photography. Antonio is one of the leading luxury resort photographers in the world who has won countless awards and is also a regular judge for the Luxury Travel Guide's International Awards.

### WHY DID YOU CHOOSE HOTELS AS YOUR MAIN FOCUS AND HOW DID YOU GET STARTED?

I chose to focus on hotels because it combined two of my favourite obsessions, which are

travelling and creating beautiful images. I initially started in lifestyle photography, but most of the jobs I landed at the time came from my network of friends. Most of them were real estate developers and, as a result, I developed some skills in photographing architecture. After years of improving my skills in this field and producing a sizeable architectural portfolio, I decided to focus exclusively on hotels. I knew the best way to get started and create a portfolio was by creating a personal project. The project consisted of producing a coffee table book showcasing boutique hotels on the magical city of Cartagena Colombia. The project received an overwhelming amount of attention, and I was honoured by the American Society of Media Photographers when they selected me as one of the top 20 photographers for that year.

### HOW IS PHOTOGRAPHING HOTELS AND RESORTS DIFFERENT FROM REGULAR ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY?

That is an excellent question and one that I get asked repeatedly by other photographers. There are quite a few differences. The most obvious one is that hospitality photography is not only about photographing architecture and interiors. It can also involve lifestyle and sometimes food photography. When it comes to shooting a hotel's interiors and architecture, a photographer must possess highly advanced lighting skills. We have to be able to shape the light in a restaurant to make it seem romantic and cosy. Additionally, most hotels like to feature the views from their suites. Shooting in such a way often requires us to position the camera toward the only light source, and this style of photography can be very challenging without the proper experience.



### WHY DO YOU THINK PHOTOGRAPHY IS SUCH AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE HOTEL BRANDING STRATEGY?

Historically hotels have heavily relied on name recognition for strong and regular bookings. Even though this is still an important factor, times have changed. We now live in an age of "do it yourself online travel agencies" and massive brand proliferation. More than ever before, travellers are expecting top quality images to match their expectations of established luxury brands. In an effort by big brands to segment every corner of the market, there are now over 270 brand trademarks worldwide and counting! There is also a noticeable trend whereby many big hotel chains are trying to present themselves as a more "boutique" chain.

Consequently, customers have become increasingly indifferent to brand selection, and are more focused on the immediate hotel perception they perceive at time of booking. Images of the hotel generally enhance this perception.

This indifference to brand recognition has created an opportunity for new and more boutique brands to compete with the bigger chains. High-quality photography is a significant reason as to why un-established brands can break into the market and compete with established brands.

### WHAT ADVICE CAN YOU GIVE HOTELIERS WHEN LOOKING TO HIRE A PHOTOGRAPHER?

That is an interesting question because I recently wrote an article for a hospitality publication

titled "10 "not so obvious" considerations before hiring a photographer to enhance your brand". I received more praise for this article than for anything else I have written in the past.

Following are what I consider to be the most important considerations when hiring a photographer:

- Choose a photographer that specializes in your field. Although this may sound obvious to many, I often get hired to re-shoot a job where the original photographer came highly recommended because they did a great job at someone's wedding. Or a well-established fashion photographer failed to capture the emotion necessary on a lifestyle shoot.
- Avoid requesting a large number of images.

Asking for too many photos is a common mistake made by hoteliers and one that I have to deal with on a regular basis. Commercial photography is very elaborate and requires a lot of production. A good photographer with plenty of assistance can probably deliver a maximum of eight architectural or food images per day and a few more if we are also dealing with lifestyle requirements. A lot of times I get requests to photograph 80 images because the hotel wants to choose and narrow down the selection. Expecting a large number of photos is a costly proposition. If one has a limited budget, then this expectation will result in you using a cheaper photographer who may well deliver the number of images required but not at the standard that you need for successful marketing activities. It is a clear case of quantity vs quality.





Trust me when I say there is a much better chance of influencing bookings positively with ten memorable images than with one hundred mediocre ones.

**WHAT WOULD YOU SAY IS YOUR BIGGEST STRENGTH THAT SETS YOU APART FROM OTHER PHOTOGRAPHERS?**

I have always been very technically oriented when it comes to photography, and I also have 15 years under my belt of working with demanding clients who possess high expectations. Aside from all of that, I have a Masters in Business, and I have a strong ability to understand brands and strategies. As a commercial photographer, it is essential to understand what it is, that the hotel is trying to sell and their plan to achieve it. Understanding these different factors, my fifteen years of experience and my business background is what sets me apart from other photographers.

**WHAT IS YOUR PRODUCTION PROCESS AND HOW MUCH OF YOUR WORK IS INVOLVED WITH POST-PRODUCTION?**

When I first started, almost two decades ago, photographers that spent too much

time behind a computer editing their images, were virtually looked down on. There was this idea going around that a great photographer should capture a great picture on their camera alone. I still agree with that statement to a certain extent, but the level of photography has skyrocketed since then, and photographers must excel in both areas. This concept is almost hard to conceptualize now as some of the best photographers today have a team of retouchers doing things that they probably couldn't do themselves. It is almost as if two artists are working as one with the photographer taking all the glory.

In my case, I like to focus on quality and not quantity, and this allows time for me to do my post-production. My work, along with many other photographers today, requires a lot of post-production. Especially my architectural work. I often light different areas of a room with artificial lighting on multiple different frames, and I then merge them in a single image. This process is called image compositing, not to be confused with HDR, and it results in beautiful pictures. This sort of production would've been impossible to achieve 20 years ago on a single frame.

