

Eloise: The next generation

Amruda Nair, MMH '07, cousin Samyuktha, and sister Aishwarya stand behind grandparents Krishnan and Leela Nair poolside at the Leela Mumbai. Leela is holding brother Aushim.



Room Service!

Chances are, these are the first words that come to mind when you picture Eloise, the imperious six-year-old denizen of New York's Plaza Hotel, who was brought to life in 1955 by author Kay Thompson and illustrator Hilary Knight.

Their first book, *Eloise: A Book for Precocious Grown-ups*, introduced a refreshingly different child protagonist, a little girl who crayoned walls, combed her hair with a fork, called a valet to iron her sneakers, pretended to be an orphan so hotel guests would pity her and give her treats, fiddled with the thermostats, hid in the Grand Ballroom, careened around hallways, and generally owned the place. Eloise was raised by her ever-indulgent Nanny with companionship from her pug, Weenie, and her turtle, Skipperdee; a poster child for the ultimate hotel experience. Home away from home, with benefits. Ultimate freedom. Where *were* her parents?

And what would it be like to *be* Eloise?

We spoke with some real-life Eloises: Jason Cotter '03, Amruda Nair,

MMH '07 and her sister, Aishwarya, and Alexandra Jaritz '97. Not only did they grow up in hotels (*steeped* in hotel cultures)—all four chose to go into the hospitality business. What sort of gravitational pull did these mostly

fabulous childhoods exert on their career choices? What were the pros and cons of hotel life for these children and teenagers? And how did that life prepare them for the hospitality industry?

Jason is a fourth-generation hotelier. His parents, Richard '77 and Judith '77, met and fell in love at Cornell, marrying before graduation from the School of Hotel Administration. His father was a general manager (and later the man in charge of all East Coast Starwood hotels); his mother ("a foodie") also worked for many years in the business. Jason grew up primarily in New York hotels: the former Omni, then Sheraton, in Manhattan (as the Omni, it was the first hotel he lived in; as the Sheraton, it was the last), the Waldorf Astoria, the New York Palace, and the St. Regis, with a few years at the Beverly Hilton. That's a lot of elegance for a small child, and before our interview, Jason confessed, friends and family warned him of the possibility of sounding too privileged—Eloise was, for all her lovability, a bit of a spoiled brat! Jason, it is clear from our conversations, is not.

Alexandra's parents met and fell in love in a hotel—when her mother worked in public relations for InterContinental in Germany and her father was in food and beverage operations. Alexandra was born in Germany but grew up in Malaysia, Jordan, Dubai, Thailand, and India. "The first time I lived outside of a hotel," she said, "was in my college dorm at Cornell!" Alexandra was always conscious of the world outside the lobby—the beauty, the variety, but also the poverty and political unrest. Consciousness of others—their goals and dreams—has informed her work, particularly when it comes to under

standing the complex relationships between franchisees and management in the hotel business.

The Nair sisters are the granddaughters of Captain C. P. Krishnan Nair, founder of India's Leela Palaces, Hotels, and Resorts. They grew up at the Leela in Mumbai, the company's uber-elegant corporate base, and have been closely and adoringly followed for much of their lives by the Indian paparazzi. Leela has had its ups and downs, and the Nair sisters have witnessed firsthand the power of family as they have come together to revitalize a brand that faces economic and cultural challenges. They

joined the company's management team three years ago, Amruda in charge of corporate asset management, Aishwarya in charge of corporate food and beverage.

The lifestyle

Jason has fond memories of 13Y, the suite he lived in with his family at the Waldorf Astoria, and of the balcony off the family suite at the Sheraton that looked down onto Times Square. When his father managed the St. Regis, the family was given a townhouse next to the hotel. It was the first time

the family could go home without going through the hotel lobby. "There's a lot of gossip in hotels. At all hours, someone is watching your comings and goings," he said. That might be a drag for a New York teenager, but any difficulties were offset by the sheer coolness of throwing dinner parties with room service, or having your tenth birthday party in the Waldorf's Grand Ballroom. Need a blow torch for the crème brûlée? Call down to Lespinasse and have the chef send one up! When the family lived at the New York Palace, home was a corner suite on the forty-fifth floor with views east and west, a suite that today rents for \$10,000 a night. "Nonetheless,



What would it be like to *be* Eloise?

Jason Cotter '03 (the tall boy with glasses, back row center) celebrated his twelfth birthday by baking cakes with the chef of the Waldorf Astoria. Afterwards, the boys played hide-and-seek in the Grand Ballroom. At right is Jason's father, Richard '77.

Hotelies Afield



Alexandra Jaritz '97 with her mother

I used to do my homework in the lobby,” Jason laughed. “I remember how thrilled my mother was to pick out the furniture. There was something normal about designing a home from scratch.”

The Nair sisters described a similar process of creating a sense of home within a hotel. “Our mother was very particular about what we ate, and

the family’s meals were always prepared in our own kitchen in our suite or my grandmother’s,” Amruda said. “Room service was just a phone call away but was allowed only once a week.”

The pros

Perhaps it’s not surprising that all of our Eloises reserve their fondest memories for the people who worked in the hotels they inhabited—their extended family. For Jason, it was the bellman at the St. Regis (he recently took his fiancée back to meet him), and the wonderful women in housekeeping at the Waldorf. For Alexandra, it was the Austrian pastry chef, Manfred, who taught her how to make pastries and chocolates and the driver who took her to school each day in Bangkok. “I will never forget the time I had to take the baccalaureate exam in Thailand,” she relatd. “You couldn’t be late. You couldn’t miss these exams. That day there was rioting in the streets—it was really quite dangerous. Our driver risked his life to get me to that exam. He waited for me until I was finished.” It was clear that she was quite moved, remembering this story, and that the support she received made her feel a part of a community.

Another plus for all our Eloises was having the family close—being able to drop in on Dad in his office upstairs. Home was wherever the family was. The Nair sisters grew up in one hotel, but Jason and Alexandra moved quite a bit. Both Hotelies emphasized the benefits of all that movement. “I grew up very quickly,” said Alexandra, “with a level of sophistication that comes from living in other cultures. Home was always where my mom and dad were. As an adult, I can make home anywhere with the help of a few special things and my favorite foods.”

Room service, it turns out, held less of a daily appeal. “Sure, it was great to order room service if no one felt like cooking,” said Jason, “but ordering Dominos was also special.” “You can only have room service for so long,” Alexandra said. “I never, however, got sick of chocolate!” “The novelty of room service wears off,” Amruda agreed. “Even today, the only time we end up ordering in is when we have friends over who get a kick out of it. Left to us we would still opt for what is prepared at home. We’ve been conditioned to prefer simpler, more traditional food!”

The cons

“In spite of the fact that I knew all the secret entrances, it was almost impossible to sneak out at night,” Jason remembered, “without my father reading about it in his morning report.” Alexandra sought out quiet places in the various cities her family lived in—temples, museums, parks.



Left: Amruda Nair and her grandparents welcome Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to the Leela in 2004
Right: Eloise times three: Amruda, left, with her cousin Samyuktha and sister Aishwarya

“The downside,” Amruda and Aishwarya explained, “was the lack of privacy. But the flip side is constantly being surrounded by people,” clearly a good thing in both their books.

“My mother worked hard to create a kind of normalcy,” said Alexandra. “She cooked German food and had German newspapers, no matter where we lived. She created a safety net. And she was strict—she made sure that I cleaned up after myself, made my own bed. She made sure that I was appreciative and respectful.” “It’s not easy,” said Jason, “getting away from work when you’re the GM.”

Alexandra’s mother worked in local orphanages in Thailand, bringing home many stories of children less fortunate than her own. “I knew,” Alexandra said quietly and firmly, “that the people who worked in the hotels I lived in did not go home to luxury hotels.”

“We know our childhood was different,” said Aishwarya, revealing a downside to hotel life that hovers in the background of Eloise’s story as well. “Our school friends had neighborhood kids to play with when they got home. We only had each other.”

Shenanigans

While Jason remembers rollerblading through the lobby of the Beverly Hilton and signing for brunch for friends, Alexandra says she was not particularly mischievous as a child or teen. “I never felt I needed to break any rules,” she said, with just the tiniest trace of

wistfulness. “I was representing my father in these hotels and I knew it. I was on my best behavior. There were always dignitaries and important people visiting.”

In a scene reminiscent of the Polar Express, Jason remembers his father waking him up one night when he was nine or ten and taking him downstairs to the Grand Ballroom to see... the Barnum and Bailey Circus performing for a private party! Alexandra remembers helping her mother, in their first of ten years in Thailand, to decorate seven enormous Christmas trees to be placed around the hotel. Then there was the time she went with her father to visit an offshore resort he was managing in the United Arab Emirates, two hours out to sea. When she could no longer ignore the terrible pain in her side, her father had to ask permission of the local sheik to have a doctor see her, because the closest hospital only treated men. After receiving the official okay, Alexandra had her nearly bursting appendix removed. She awoke from surgery surrounded by police officers and the press—the first female ever to be treated in the midst of all those oil rigs.

Amruda and Aishwarya remember a lot of “scampering around.” “I remember one time,” Amruda said, “we were playing Treasure Island on top of the artificial waterfall that our all-day dining restaurant overlooks. To my grandfather’s disbelief, while he was entertaining a guest, he spotted one of us slipping and falling into the pond below!”

The sisters recall “conjuring up schemes to trick the staff. Playtime would involve

hiding kitchen tools and staff uniforms and raiding the ice machines. We just celebrated the hotels’ twenty-fifth anniversary, and a staff member who is still with us remembers the time when he was the pool attendant and we fooled him into leaping into the pool in full uniform to rescue us as we pretended we couldn’t swim!”

Eloise would be proud.

Sure, there were celebrities—Alexandra’s family was allowed to use their neighbor King Hussein’s yacht in Jordan. Rodney Dangerfield held court at the Beverly Hilton when Jason lived there, while Woody Allen was often seen at the St. Regis. “We learned pretty early how to be discreet,” he said. “The Waldorf was where presidents visiting New York always stayed. It was pretty cool to say you were late for school



Jason Cotter (in the striped sweater) and a few of his 21 cousins celebrate New Year’s Eve on the steps of the St. Regis. Joe Graham ’03, his Cornell roommate, is in the second row at left.



When Jason Cotter interned at age 17 with Jacques Torres at Le Cirque, he rode the elevator down to work from his family’s suite at the New York Palace

Jason, on right, poses with his dad and brother Christopher in the garage of the Waldorf Astoria. The limousine behind them belongs to President George Bush, Sr.

