Her parents divorced when she was 16, and she and her siblings moved to California with her mother. Having left behind a strict convent-school education for a 3,000-student-strong high school in the San Fernando Valley, Leo’s culture shock was seismic. But ahead academically, she soon followed her sister to Stanford. Then, lured by raves about its hotel administration program, she transferred to Cornell. After graduation, “I paid my dues,” she says, working first for the InterContinental, then the Sheraton chains in various management positions.

She was only 26 when the Hong Kong family opening Warwick International Hotels recruited her to take care of the international division. “How lucky could I get?” she asks. “I hadn’t even managed a hotel when I was sent to open one in Seattle. It was sink or swim. I swam.” Next, she says she was “parachuted into Paris to open the city’s Warwick — exactly what I dreamt of, living in Europe.” She went on to do eight Warwick openings in five years in both the US and Europe.

A guest room at the Bairro Alto in Lisbon.
In the world of haute hostleries,

Grace Leo is a constantly evolving phenomenon. Hong Kong-born and American-educated, Leo has been based in Paris for more than 20 years, during which time she has pioneered some of the most stylish boutique hotels in Europe and the Caribbean. As CEO and founder of GLA Hotels management consultancy, she is the woman behind each project's bespoke creative concept. "I'm a hotel-maker in the manner of a film director," she explains.

A guest room at the Lancaster Hotel in Paris, which helped cement the reputation of Grace Leo after her 1996 purchase and refurbishment of the Hôtel du Pont-Neuf.

by Jean Bond Rafferty
At 32, Leo decided to go out on her own and established her own consultancy in Paris, a desire for independent success that she attributes to her Chinese background. “Ian Schrager was an inspiration because he signaled the beginning of a new kind of hotel — first Morgans with Andrée Putman, then the Royalton with Philippe Starck,” she reveals. “He broke the rules and that was a sign to me that I could do the same in Europe. It was just the right moment to launch the Montalembert and I recruited Christian Liaigre, the right person to help me interpret my vision. It launched us both.” Liaigre’s signature style of clean-lined comfortable seating and dark exotic woods soon swept through America like a design hurricane. And, says Leo with amusement, “I was considered a genius to have come up with the idea.”

Style aficionados swooped in. British design guru Terence Conran proclaimed it “my favorite Paris hotel, and one of my favorites in the world.” The view from the Montalembert’s box-hedged terrace of smart Faubourg Saint-Germain passersby was diverting. But those pedestrians’ view back to the cool and often famous hotel guests on the hotel’s terrace was even more riveting. In winter, the inviting sofa and armchairs around the bookcase-framed fireplace is a magnet for literary and design mavens alike.

Leo and Andrieu sold their interest in the Montalembert in the mid-1990s and the Lancaster in 2007. (Both hotels still conserve most of their original Grace Leo touches.) The peripatetic hotelier has since had a raft of projects that show just what her influence can mean in terms of a property’s popularity and profitability. When she is in at the beginning, as she is with most of her projects, her involvement is from “A to Z, from the design to management and marketing. I oversee everything from hiring the staff to choosing the teaspoons,” she says. “It’s a turn-key service.”
But Leo is equally able to pick up midway, like a phantoms and reviving the hotel as the hotel as recently did at Portugal’s Vidago Palace, famed for its mineral water spa. "The project had already three years of restoration," she explains. "So our mission was to pick up the pieces and open the hotel within a year, which we did."

Working with José Pedro Viera and Diogo Rosa, the same Portuguese design team she used at the Bairro Alto, Leo delved into the history of the Belle Epoque pink palace that was commissioned by King Carlos of Portugal in 1908 as a royal spa retreat, to create a glamorous European country resort in Portugal’s wine country. The fresh, uncluttered high-ceilinged rooms feature wooden floors and a mix of custom and vintage furniture and antiques, and such luxurious touches as, say, hand-painted silk wallpapers.

A room at the Vidago Palace.
Leo's current projects include converting an historic colonial building in Jakarta into a 5-star hotel; creating a new 60-room lifestyle hostelry in Caracas; and opening a resort just south of the Medina in Marrakech with a thoroughbred show-horse theme for which French superstar Jacques Garcia has already designed the interiors and state-of-the-art stables.

The Grace Leo couture style is full of surprises and is different with each project. Take the “maxi-bar” offering in the Lillie Langtry suite at London’s Cadogan: a new pale pink satin nightdress that may be purchased by guests and either worn straightaway or taken home as a gift. Or the clever “carriage way” entrance of the Lancaster that instantly recreates the atmosphere of this princely 19th-century townhouse and the colorful red, white and green Zen garden carved from an interior courtyard.

From top: Leo with daughter Céres. The Cotton House pool.
Good design is a priority in all her schemes, from lighting — flattering frontal light and spots in the bathroom, “snake” lights for bedside reading and lights that go from bright to dim — to the specially conceived desks or multi-functional tables that allow guests to enjoy breakfast and check emails at the same time. If the hotel has a history and compelling architecture, like the Lisbon Bairro Alto with its sunny yellow facade dating to 1845, then Leo and her team of designers do extensive research (plowing through books, museums and relevant historic houses) to give a sense of place. “You want to wake up and say, ‘I’m in Lisbon,’ not Bali or Dallas,” she emphasizes. Here, authenticity comes from warm ochre, mustard, red, cream and butterscotch shades for the interiors, and the sourcing of local crafts like Portuguese linens and Azuela tiles, mixed with custom wicker and wood furniture. And a knockout rooftop dining terrace with the best views in town.

A lobby view of the Hotel Jules, one of Leo’s latest Paris projects.
The Bairro Alto's rooftop terrace offers a knockout view of Lisbon.
And when they don't have a personality? “We have to create one,” she says with a wink. “The Beauchamps is pure fiction. We got around the table to brainstorm with decorator Pascal Allaman, who also worked on the Bel Ami and the new rooms at the Royal Riviera, and invented a character called Balthazar Beauchamps, world traveler and collector.” The library/sitting room is focused around Balthazar’s curious collections of sculptures, statues and vintage photos. To revive the Jules, a quirky hotel in the emerging fashionable neighborhood of the 9th arrondissement, Leo and designers Tristan Auer and Frédéric Sicard created a colorful habitat of the imaginary Jules, inspired by François Truffaut’s Jules et Jim. Along with plaster Dali lips, zebra motif rugs, checkered chocolate-and-gold headboards and shots of color from cool blue to hot red, they also dreamed up a blog for the hotel hero, who gives tips about a favorite local bistro or organizing a romantic picnic on the banks of the trendy Canal Saint-Martin.