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Middle East hospitality industry at your service

If entertainment, good connectivity and affordable fares are contributing to bullish tourism stats in the UAE, the hospitality industry is playing the perfect host, ensuring that visitors are well looked after. **TRAVTALK** Middle East elicited views of senior officials of the region's hospitality industry for an exclusive overview of plans and strategies in store for 2006.

PRIYANKA SAXENA

The booming hospitality industry of the Middle East is maintaining its growth momentum with its ever-expanding portfolio of hotels and hotel apartments posting impressive room occupancy rates for all across the Gulf. Sharing his views on expectations from 2006, Fadi Mazkour, director - business development, Coral International Hotels, Resorts & Spas said, "So far 2006 is looking very promising. We expect an average occupancy of above 90 per cent by the year end. Our clientele is a very balanced one which includes both leisure and business travellers."

Elaborating further on his marketing strategy for 2006, Mazkour averred, "Since we are looking at dedicating more room inventory to business and corporate segments in order to accommodate the increasing demand of transient business travellers from the region and elsewhere, our marketing strategy targets this segment. Besides standard marketing tools we will concentrate on e-business distribution and other affiliated procedures."

For the Rotana Group of Hotels, 2006 has begun on a positive note. "The first quarter of the year has been great and our



Fadi Mazkour, director - business development, Coral International Hotels, Resorts & Spas



Daniel Hajjar, corporate VP - sales and marketing, Rotana Hotels



Chris Moloney, COO, InterContinental Hotels Group

expectations for the entire year are extremely positive. We believe that it would be another record year. We expect to achieve a yearly occupancy of around 80 per cent despite the challenges in certain markets such as Lebanon," informed Daniel Hajjar, corporate vice president - sales and marketing, Rotana Hotels.

Throwing light on the marketing strategy for the current year, Hajjar stated, "Whilst we are operating in very exciting market places, we are conscious that the situation may change in the near future. We are consolidating our presence in key markets such as the UK and Germany but are also entering new markets like India.

Our plan for 2006-2007 is to set up an office in Saudi Arabia, Moscow and Western Europe. It is crucial to be very close to key decision makers in vital feeding markets and Rotana's aim is to be close to its customers."

Chris Moloney, COO, InterContinental Hotels Group pointed out, "For 2006 we forecast continued growth and that demand will continue to out-strip the additional supply in the region. An indication of our optimism is the rate of development at which we are moving ahead in the region. We are confident that the introduction of our new economy brand will drive a new approach to

travel and will be a catalyst demand. A major focus for the whole is the Dubai Festival Working in conjunction with the Futtaim Group, the group both the InterContinental Plaza brands within the development as well as the InterContinental Suites. The company has set a goal of 60,000 rooms' net organic growth in 2008 globally. As the pioneer of 5-star hotels in the region, opening in Lebanon over 40 years ago, this focus will continue."

Moloney's marketing strategy for the current year would focus on expanding the local management. "Our marketing strategy has been and will continue to be, classical. We build relationships around potential clients, by using the channels to market across the globe, direct sales for corporate clients across the electronic media and e-mail. In line with our marketing portfolio, the positioning ranges from formal and family-friendly, informal and family-friendly, Holiday Inn to top of the range, the InterContinental brand."

Meanwhile, events such as the World Cup, Dubai Shopping Festival and Dubai Summer Surprises play a major role in making Dubai one of the most popular destinations in the world, thereby making the leisure sector a popular choice for most high-end travellers in the region. The Coral International Hotels, however, are aiming to tap

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Stars for service - Keys for space

Oman is setting the trend for quality assurance through hotel classification as tourist arrivals in the Middle East are growing along with the competitiveness amongst different tourism destinations.

 SVEN P GADE

Tourism arrivals in the Middle East are growing as is the competitiveness amongst different tourism destinations. With tourists becoming increasingly 'travel educated', unaligned classification standards ignoring international standards throw the reputation of hotels in the region in disarray. The sultanate of Oman has confronted this problem by spending the last eight months manufacturing and introducing a unique classification system for tourism establishments.

The ministry of tourism of the sultanate of Oman commissioned MESA, a strategic advisory firm with offices in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Muscat who determined the need for a sustainable system that can be administered at a local level. For any classification system to be sustainable, MESA stated, all the stakeholders have to be integrated and the system to be based on the highest integrity.


With the shortfalls of the legacy system in mind, a new system was created that is to be implemented in the upcoming months. It focuses on quality, service and guest expectations in line with the sultanate's focus on upmarket and sustainable tourism development. This reflects not only international best practice, but most of all the needs of the ultimate target - the tourists. Emphasising the focus on service quality and guest experience, the new classification system has allocated 31 per cent to 'soft elements' such as service, management and staff work environment. 42 per cent focus on those elements

of the establishment that guests value most: rooms, comfort and cleanliness. This sets the new system apart from most existing regulations. The remaining 27 per cent cover structural, health and safety issues.

The new system also features unique functions to accommodate the specifics of the sultanate and its tourism providers. An offset scheme prevents unfair location disadvantages and a bonus scheme recognises quality and service achievements. This innovative system was designed to ensure benefits for all stakeholders, operators, developers, intermediaries and end consumers. The classification system is now an integral part of the development process. When applying for a development licence, developers will receive physical classification criteria, which will enable them to align the property's business plan with the criteria. This will further reduce the development risk and the establishment can enjoy a smooth



Sven P Gade, director, MESA

overall development process. It is even possible to employ the services of the newly created Tourism Development Service Agents initiative. Quality assurance guarantees a positive guest's experience in the sultanate of Oman. Intermediaries will have clear and transparent description of quality levels and product offerings in line with international best practice. Classified tourism establishments can be trusted to offer physical and qualitative standards in accordance with the standards set forth by the ministry of tourism. All these points will greatly assist in selecting and packaging tour offers. 

(Sven P Gade is the director, Middle East Strategy Advisors)