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KSA in the spotlight with Maher Abou Nasr

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EVENTS

In an interview for Hospitality News ME, Hodema consulting services sat down with Maher Abou Nasr, vice president of operations, IHG Hotels & Resorts in KSA, to get the lowdown on Saudi Arabia's hotel industry and IHG's position in the KSA market.

How do you describe the hotel industry in 2022 in KSA?

The 2022 and onwards outlook for the Saudi hospitality industry is promising. The country is witnessing a new era of travel as it undergoes a historic period of growth and transformation. The country's investment in tourism has consequently had a positive impact on the growth of the hospitality sector with new accommodation options and destination experiences. Moreover, in the long-term, we believe that the hospitality industry will be an extremely important sector in the Kingdom, fuelled by increasing demand from both business and leisure travellers and the return of religious tourism such as Umrah and Hajj pilgrimages now that the pandemic has subsided.



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How did your hotels cope with the Covid-19 pandemic in KSA for the last 2 years?

The pandemic had a huge impact on the hospitality industry and led to unpredictable challenges. We adopted a new way of thinking and operating in order to keep our colleagues and guests safe and well, which was our number one priority. As a global brand, we have a responsibility to act in the best interests of the business and the people related to it. Also, as a company, our priority is to stand with our hotel owners during this difficult time. We have been deeply committed to offering the flexibility, support and expertise they need to protect their businesses, reinvigorate travel and bring guests through their doors as demand recovers. With local lockdowns lifting, we were able to benefit from domestic tourism. This was followed by the introduction of vaccines in various countries, which allowed us to welcome international visitors market by market. We developed recovery plans to suit the pace and progress of the pandemic in various countries and accordingly, introduced the right rates and promotions, including Saudi Arabia.

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How do you think the hospitality industry in the MENA will pivot post-COVID-19? Do you believe we will witness new trends?

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New trends emerged in the MENA region post-COVID-19. Responsible tourism became one of the main focus areas for the hospitality industry. In 2021 we launched Journey to Tomorrow, a 10-year action plan of clear commitments to drive change for people, communities and planet, aligned with our purpose of True Hospitality for Good and to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. To address COVID-19 challenges, we invested in cloud-based technology to accelerate the rollout of digital enhancements that support safe and secure guest experiences and reduce unnecessary contact. This includes applying QR code menus in all F&B establishments, global roll-out mobile check-in/check-out across, and piloting other mobile-enabled improvements such as room dining orders and real-time Pay-With-Points. As we stay ahead of the curve, we are investing in the technology, tools and solutions that make the biggest difference for our guests, owners and teams. Our first-of-its-kind cloud system, IHG Concerto, critical to our work. Blending core hotel applications into one seamless platform capable of enhancing the guest, owner and colleague experiences serves as the foundation for much of how we are creating digital advantage.

How are the new projects/initiatives in KSA affecting the hotel industry?



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Numerous government initiatives are resulting in a significant positive impact in supporting the hotel industry's growth in Saudi Arabia such as Vision 2030 and subsequent projects have boosted the hotel industry's confidence. The Kingdom boasts myriad tourist attractions and diverse natural assets, which have rare and historic heritage values. Additionally, the leadership has initiated a number of entertainment events such as seasonal festivals and competitive sports leagues. They have also invested in Giga projects such as The Red Sea, Dirriyah Gate Development and Al Ula which present new experiences to a range of travellers in new feeder markets. In addition, the government is facilitating arrivals in the country with airport and infrastructure upgrades, new airline routes and the introduction of a new tourism visa. These are positive and impactful changes. As the Kingdom progresses with widespread investment in tourism, entertainment, sports and cultural events, it will drive growth in the hospitality industry and bring new traveller segments into the country. As a global hospitality player with a strong and well-recognised portfolio of brands, we are well placed to cater to these new segments.

Any future projects for IHG in KSA?

As KSA is a priority market for IHG in the Middle East, we aim to grow the footprint of our existing brands, as well as introduce brands from our global portfolio in the country. Last year, we debuted our global boutique lifestyle brand, Hotel Indigo in the country and have already signed 3 hotels – testament to a great response from the owner community. Projects like The Red Sea Development and Diriyah Gate present unique opportunities to the accommodation industry, as well as to tourists to discover Saudi's hidden and unexplored attractions. We are exploring opportunities across these developments for multiple projects across our luxury brands such as Regent, Six Senses, InterContinental and Kimpton as well as our brands in the mainstream category to cater to a wider group of travellers. Last year, we announced our partnership with The Red Sea Project to build the new generation and brand-defining InterContinental Resort Red Sea, as well as bring the first Six Senses hotel to the Kingdom. We are also bringing a Six Senses hotel to The Diriyah Gate development. Further, we are aiming to expand our presence in key cities such as Riyadh, Jeddah, Madinah, Makkah, Dammam and Al Khobar where we see a gap in the demand and supply for quality, branded accommodation across segments.

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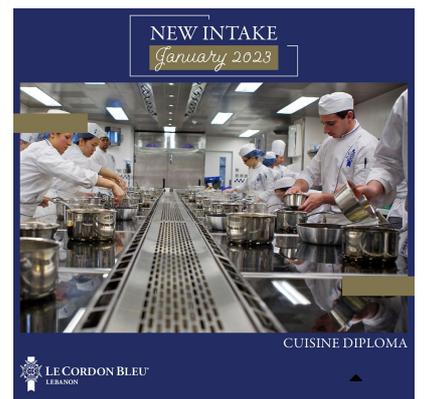
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