

Biz.Travel Q&A with Maarten van den Nieuwenhuijsen

Over lunch of antipasti, warthog pasta and La Motte Sauvignon Blanc at Radisson Blu Waterfront, Brian Berkman and Maarten van den Nieuwenhuijsen, regional director of The Rezidor Group, Southern Africa shoot the breeze.



Despite a lot of advanced media publicity, Cape Town's first Hotel Missoni has been shelved. What happened?

The market changed so dramatically with over a thousand new five-star rooms in Cape Town that the property owner decided it wasn't financially viable to open Hotel Missoni on his site in 2011. We still believe Cape Town is right for the Hotel Missoni brand and we are investigating new sites.

You've also taken away Park Inn branding from the Green Market Square hotel. I understood you were expanding operations?

We are expanding operations with our Radisson Blu Blaauwberg opening this year and a major revamp to Radisson Blu Waterfront. We have also opened a new Park Inn in Sandton and earlier this month announced the signing of the new Park Inn Cape Town on the Foreshore which will open in the last quarter of 2011. The Green Market Square Cape Town property was no longer in line with Park Inn standards and together with the owner it was decided to debrand the hotel.

With four new hotels opening in Africa in the next three months, two in Lagos, one in Maputo and one in Lusaka, is South Africa no longer your key focus?

While we're very proud of our South African hotels, international five-star hotels in Africa are much sought after and we achieve average room rates of more than US\$300 [about R2100] which is more than in South Africa where competition is rife.

Do you own or operate hotels?

The majority of the agreements are management agreements and we also have franchised operations where we receive a royalty fee and manage the marketing and reservation systems.

Are you cutting prices to be more competitive?

Discounts don't work. If we all dump rates it won't increase demand and every hotel knows exactly what its competitor is charging and when one hotel reduces rates others follow. Our Gold Points system rewards regular repeat visitors. As a management company our performance is measured by how well we do versus the competition.

When you first arrived in Cape Town you were GM at the Radisson Blu Waterfront then you moved to Sandton as GM of the new Radisson Blu Sandton. Now you're a regional director. What do you think makes an excellent GM?

To be an excellent hotelier you need three skills sets - the ability to be a good host, the ability to be a good leader and the ability to be a good commercial manager.

What makes you proud at your hotels?

Our 'Yes I Can!' campaign really empowers all staff to take decisions and know they will be supported by management, which is a very important tool in South Africa. I'm always proud of the way our staff exceed their own expectations of what they believe to be possible.

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