

**EXCLUSIVE**  
**LET'S DO, DARE  
AND DREAM...  
TOGETHER**



In an exclusive and wide-ranging interview with HN, veteran hotelier **Amine Moukarzel** talks exciting expansion plans, areas of focus and the key differentiators related to services across the regional hospitality industry



### How is the regional industry currently faring compared to other markets?

The hospitality industry in the MENA region is pretty versatile, in part because the major players in tourism have, for years, demonstrated great ingenuity on all fronts. Hospitality establishments operating throughout the region have circumnavigated all regional pressures. The development of hotels has remained a focal point in the real estate sector, with the tourism industry a top employer and provider of gross domestic product across respective local economies. However, we will see a change going forward, as we need to strengthen the offering, delivery and performance of hotels to fully benefit from the partnerships between the private and public sectors.

### What can you tell us about some of the most promising ideas and projects you are currently working on?

As the hospitality sector continues to evolve, any steps or activities undertaken should aim to maintain that momentum. Human resources are still the key focus. However, product improvement, novel technologies and fulfilling customers' expectations remain the most challenging facets of the industry. One key factor we have worked on is evolving the Golden Tulip brand to cater to the millennial audience, while adopting the new travel trends to maintain operational leadership for the next 20-30 years. With Louvre Hotels Group, our brand's main entity and the ownership of Jin Jiang International, the budget hotel sector, is set to grow stronger throughout our region, as it is playing a more important role than ever before, especially at key and secondary destinations.

Tech support coming from our research and development (R&D) departments in China and Paris provides unparalleled insight into our electronic distribution channels, with e-commerce and e-marketing reflecting a positive outlook for return on investment (ROI).

### Which markets are you most interested in breaking into right now and why?

The MENA region remains the most important inbound and outbound marketplace. Saudi Arabia, in its entirety, represents the largest and most important market for the hotel sector. In Lebanon, the diaspora has played a major role in our economy and the country remains a target for future developments, offering plenty of expansion opportunities. Another country we are looking at is Syria, where we already

have three developments underway. Iraq and Egypt are two equally important destinations that could benefit greatly from our versatile brand of Louvre Hotels, which range from two to five-star establishments.

**“Based on our aggressive expansion plans, we intend to be present in every capital in the Arab world by 2020”**

In addition, our aim is to develop 10 Campanile hotels in Algeria, with an equal number in Georgia. We will also have a second hotel in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and are soon to become the largest operator in the Sultanate of Oman. Dubai will benefit from the development of the new Golden Tulip and Tulip Inn, in preparation for Expo 2020. Additionally, we plan to develop three Kyriad hotels and five Campanile hotels. Based on our aggressive expansion plans, we intend to be present in every capital in the Arab world by 2020, thereby ensuring that our customers, employees, investors, developers and owners are in good standing.

### What role does interaction and passion play in your work and how do you incorporate them into the establishments you manage?

Every trip teaches us something new. In that respect, we should be able to adapt these ideas and incorporate them into their respective markets. This is a never-ending learning curve, with technology playing a major role, be it in the field of installed equipment, electronic mobile services offered or seamless room access.

### Mergers and acquisitions are the order of the day. What are the advantages and disadvantages for both the establishments themselves and guests?

The advantages are numerous, ranging from synergy management and loyalty programs to the enhancement of continued productivity. Whether it will help the establishment become better is a matter that remains open to question. I do not want this statement to be misunderstood, since there are far too many moving parts, especially when considering political unrest, looming security issues, taxation and reductions in oil and gas prices.

### What is the main driver in hospitality?

The tourism and hospitality industry, irrespective of the technologies deployed, people will remain the main drivers of this well-oiled machine. I would also like to emphasize the importance of our slogan, 'International Standards, Local Flavors', which is highly-indicative of the strategy

which, over many years of operations, has brought us great success.

### What are some of the key differentiators that are instrumental in adding value to the guest experience?

The hospitality sector remains a major player in any local economy throughout our region. We are witnessing the development of hotels in Saudi Arabia, in spite of economic recession, which is tricky, considering that there are over 25,000 hotels rooms to be developed in Makkah. The same applies to the hotel projects in Dubai and Riyadh.

Another challenging factor is driving business referrals to these destinations. Our properties in Makkah and Madinah are major venues, welcoming religious pilgrims. On the other hand, Dubai has a different customer profile, and is primarily focused on creative, innovative product offerings, from exhibitions, conferences and events all the way to family tourism. In that respect, airlines have played a major role for developers, as we have seen from the growth of these carriers throughout the Arab world. Yet, irrespective of the kind of traveler you are, the guest experience remains an important platform in every hotel, whether budget, mid-scale, up-scale or five-star resort, as today, we evaluate the hotel's performance through guest feedback on social media.

## AMINE E. MOUKARZEL

President/ Partner

Golden Tulip - MENA Region

Louvre Hotels Group - MENA Region

### MILESTONES

- GRADUATED WITH THE HIGHEST HONORS AMONG HIS PEERS FROM THE LEBANESE HOTELIER SCHOOL IN BEIRUT.
- HAS WORKED FOR ALMOST 40 YEARS IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY.
- ESTABLISHED HIS OWN COMPANY, FLAMINGO FOR HOTEL MANAGEMENT, IN 1998.
- VOTED ONE OF THE TOP 10 GMS OF THE HOLIDAY INN HOTEL CHAIN AND ONE OF THE TOP 100 INFLUENTIAL LEBANESE PERSONALITIES IN THE WORLD.
- VICE-PRESIDENT OF MEDITERRANEAN HOTELS AND RESTAURANTS ASSOCIATION, VICE PRESIDENT - MIDDLE EAST OF INTERNATIONAL HOTELS AND RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION (IHRA)