

Growth in Key Source Markets

An Interview with Raymond N. Bickson, Managing Director, Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces (Taj Group), Mumbai

EDITORS' NOTE Having studied in Berlin, Paris, Lausanne (Switzerland), and at Cornell and Harvard Universities, Raymond Bickson began his career at the Berlin Hilton in 1973. Following worldwide managerial postings – predominantly with Regent International Hotels of Hong Kong and Monaco's Rafael Group – he joined The Mark in New York in 1988, where he served as Vice President and General Manager until assuming his current post in 2003.



Raymond N. Bickson

COMPANY BRIEF Founded in 1903, Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces (Taj Group: www.tajhotels.com) is recognized as India's largest and finest hospitality chain. Based in Mumbai and owned by the Tata Group, it consists of more than 60 properties located throughout the subcontinent, elsewhere in southern Asia, in the Middle East, Africa, New York, Boston, and London. In addition to its luxury hotels in India (several of which are members of The Leading Hotels of the World), the group operates business hotels, palace hotels, beachfront resorts, and garden retreats.

Many travel executives have talked about the strength of the industry over the past year. Have you been happy with the growth of the brand, and as you look to 2007, do you foresee continued growth?

Overall, I think the travel and tourism industry is currently in one of the best cycles that we've seen in almost 30 years. And with the boom in Asia today, and in India particularly, we believe that it's time for the company to look beyond its traditional regions. There are many opportunities for us to build a larger presence in our key source markets.

You made a major investment in the U.S. market in 2005, when you took over the management of The Pierre, a legendary property in New York. Is it important for you to tie the Taj name to the Pierre brand?

The Pierre is iconic in stature, and it would be extremely difficult for us to re-brand such an



icon. So we see The Pierre more as an opportunity for us to be in the most vibrant city in the world. After all, in order to have a global presence, one has to be in New York. The unique opportunity to be located on Fifth Avenue and 61st Street on the Upper East Side was something we couldn't overlook. There's no question that we're really pleased to be there.

Do you see continued growth in the United States? Will you be expanding into other U.S. cities?

The North American market is our second-largest market after the U.K. We are keen to grow our brand on both coasts of the U.S.

We are seeing a growing trend toward mixed-use properties, which incorporate retail and residential components as well as hotels. Do you see that as a long-lasting format for the industry?

Mixed-use developments offer the opportunity for a win-win scenario for both the developers and the hotel operators, who work hand in hand to build successful and viable projects. This approach is reflected in our new projects in Dubai; Capetown, South Africa; and even some resort areas, such as Sydney. Our new Sydney hotel has some aspects of residential real estate, and I see this approach as a growth vehicle for Taj in the future, as it is for many other hospitality companies.

Considering the extent of your portfolio, is it important for you to create a consistent experience from one property to the next, or do you design the experience around the location?

It's important for our properties to feel like they belong to the city and country in which they are located. One must always find a way of creating a sense of place. That said, being an Asian company, service is one of the key drivers in what we do, and that focus is consistent throughout our portfolio of properties.

Nowadays, luxury properties don't just offer accommodations; they often of-

fer concierge jets and a whole range of additional services. Is that what differentiates brands in this competitive market?

Additional services certainly make a difference. After all, the sophisticated traveler today expects more than just a bathrobe. The differentiation of the travel experience is what will create lifetime clients.

Spas are becoming an increasing important offering in luxury properties worldwide. How is Taj approaching those types of those amenities?

The launch of our Jiva Spa brand last May, with the creation of our new Jiva brand spa at the Taj Exotica Resort & Spa in the Maldives, highlighted the growing desire for the spiritual and physical wellness that one achieves in a spa. In luxury properties today, spas are the new bathrobes.

Do you find that this industry is attracting talented people? Are you satisfied with Taj's ability to find that next generation of leaders?

The travel and tourism industry is the largest employer in the world today, accounting for nearly 10 percent of global GDP. The service sector continues to be one of the biggest growth industries, and it offers wonderful opportunities for any young person looking for a fulfilling career.

Looking ahead two or three years, what are the key priorities or challenges for the Taj Group?

First, we want to acquire a presence in our key source markets and international gateway cities. And second, we want to develop brand extensions, both in our properties and in new businesses associated with the hospitality sector.

Will the group's future growth be through developing new properties or taking over existing ones?

We're focusing on growth through a combination of both approaches. I think we'll see new development in the resort sector, mixed-use development in gateway cities, and international development through luxury resorts.

You inevitably spend a lot of time traveling. How difficult is it for you to get away and relax?

Finding the right work/life balance is a challenge for everyone today, including me. ●

The Pierre in New York City (left); Mandara Spa, Taj Coral Reef Resort, Maldives (above)