

Betting big on boutique



The Zambezi Queen is an example of the group's philosophy of small inventories that offer a luxurious guest experience.

South Africa-based owner-operator Mantis, has partnered with Mumbai-based real estate and finance ICS Group to operate boutique hotels and lodges, branded Ayana, in leisure destinations. We quiz Mantis CEO Graham Moon on plans and opportunities

BY RAYNAH COUTINHO

Q Tell us about the opportunity that you see in India's boutique hotel market. While it is nascent, the term boutique has been misconstrued. How will you battle the notion that boutique is associated with budget? The term boutique hotels might have been misused but it does not affect our business model. We have highlighted the term boutique to highlight our small room inventory but have also emphasised on the luxury aspect of our offerings.

Q What is the nature of the agreement with your Indian partner?

It is a JV for the Indian sub-continent and South East Asia. We would not like to divulge the shareholding pattern. The ownership will remain with the developers who own the land. All hospitality-related services will be provided by Ayana including; design-development, operations and marketing.

Q Where is the financing coming from?

Projects will be financed by institutional investors, land owners and HNI investors — anyone with an aspiration to own luxury boutique hotels.

Q What is your take on the amount of consolidation in the Indian hospitality landscape right now? What does it mean for you as someone who is making an entry into India?

For us that is a clear sign of the hospitality market maturing. Consolidation typically results in the best and biggest players emerging

from the pack. We feel that entering the space today is the right time for us as we can take advantage of the best opportunities once the dust settles. It also gives us a chance to set our business in the right direction because we will have clarity on who we are in competition with (the big players who emerge from consolidation) and what niche we want to create for ourselves.

Q Who is your competition? For instance, we have some SLHs. And there is Neemrana, although it is more heritage, than boutique?



The Ocean Beach and Wildlife Reserve is one of the group's iconic properties in South Africa. The group will carry its 'once in a lifetime' brand promise to India.

There are people who have set up impressive hotels and they will compete with our future properties. But these are in select markets only, like Rajasthan, Goa and Kerala.

Q Where do you like to stay when you're in India? And what are your favourite brands here other than your own?

I am very impressed with the Imperial Hotel in Delhi and the Leela and Taj properties in Udaipur. And of course the Taj and the Oberoi brand have beautiful properties around the country.

Q Tell us about locations where you would like to see the Ayana flag?

In India we would like to be present in Kerala, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Lakshwadeep and Andaman.

In South East Asia we will focus



Graham Moon

on Vietnam, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

Q What kind of footprint would you like to have. Are you going the Greenfield or the Brownfield way?

We plan to have 30 hotels in the next 10 years. We will be doing a combination of both Brownfield and Greenfield projects.

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Q Tell us a little about your service style and product differentiation.

At the core of the brand is a customised and intelligent luxury experience. We will appeal to the softer side of guests through community service and conservation of natural resources around properties. Ayana will carry forward the Mantis brand promise of a 'once in a lifetime experience'.

Q Mantis offers consultancy on education: do you have any suggestions on what will help build a pool of talent for your company and Indian hospitality at large?

Mantis has an alliance with Stenden University. As per this alliance there is an exchange of knowledge, based on the latest aspects of luxury service and experience. Mantis recruits talent from the university, which also trains Mantis' staff when the need arises.

Once our Indian operations begin, the plan is to send our staff to our international properties. We believe that this will provide them with relevant exposure and effective soft skills. Later we would also like to have a small educational institution of our own to have a ready pool of talent. **Q**