

# Hotelier

MIDDLE EAST

DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL HOTEL MANAGEMENT

APRIL 2013

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+

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“

*We've long been in a position where Bill Marriott doesn't touch every associate, so with 300,000 people you've got to make sure that the team broadly is on the same journey and broadly they are”*

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## GM INTERVIEW: CHRISTOPH FRANZEN

## A fresh pair of eyes

Ahead of the Hotelier Middle East Qatar GM Debate, Guy Wilkinson asks the venue's GM, **Christoph Franzen** at Grand Hyatt Doha, to highlight issues in the market and reveal his plans for the hotel

**C**hristoph Franzen, the new general manager of the elegant Grand Hyatt Doha in the city's West Bay lagoon — the venue for this month's Hotelier Middle East Qatar GM Debate — is just a few months into the role, but already bringing his long experience and infectious enthusiasm for the job to bear.

Born into a family of hotel owners, Franzen grew up in the famous Swiss mountain resort of Zermatt. Following traditional apprenticeships as chef and sommelier, he worked for Hilton. Only at the age of 26 did he go to hotel school, the Australian International Hotel School in Canberra, where he cannily completed a Cornell Degree for far lower fees than he would have paid in New York. And from then on, it was Hyatt all the way, but while he is familiar with the philosophy of his new property, Franzen is biding his time on changes to the product.

"I think it's a little bit dangerous that I come in and want to change all things straightaway for the sake of change," says Franzen. "I think it's important to sit and let it happen around you for a few weeks and get a feel for the place — and then see. The hotel has been very lucky to have Garry Friend as GM before me, who was a very outgoing personality. He created a fantastic network in the city. I consider myself also relatively outgoing, a people person. I'm not a guy who sits in his office all day. I like to meet guests and go out and make sales calls. I'm very hands-on. I will personally check in guests. I wouldn't hesitate to clear a plate from the table."

True to this approach, it is evident that the affable Swiss career hotelier has not just been sitting and letting it happen around him, but is already making plans for the future. "The hotel can always benefit from a fresh pair of eyes," he comments.

## FOOD FIRST

One of his first focuses will be to enhance the hotel's food and beverage performance. "We are trying to attract more Doha residents into the hotel, especially the outlets." The Grand Hyatt has seven outlets, including the Rocca Italian and Isaan



➤ Grand Hyatt Doha is developing a new F&B delivery menu for its guests.



➤ Franzen was formerly GM at Grand Hyatt Muscat, Oman.

**“ We have identified certain positions that can be easily filled by Qataris, such as government relations, sales and rooms division-type jobs”**

➔ Thai speciality restaurants, plus the Biscotti Italian 'café and retail shop'. The menu for The Grill all day diner has just been revamped, and the hotel is now staging monthly 'Wig Parties' at which all participants have to wear a wig.

"I want Doha residents to think of the hotel as a fun place to visit, not as a corporate hotel where you only go for cocktails," says Franzen.

Another F&B initiative of his is to create a new delivery menu for use by guests and tenants at the hotel's 91 two-, three- and four-bedroom villas, which are not only a favourite among Gulf families, but also with long-term (six-monthly and annual-let) corporate guests on contract work in the city.

"Arabic families are ordering food from outside — it's probably a price issue," Franzen comments. "But there's no reason why we can't serve pizzas and burgers at a very competitive rate. We don't want McDonald's and Pizza Hut to take all the revenue!"

The new GM is also getting to grips with the hotel's Jaula Spa & Club. With a strong background in finance, revenue management and cost control, Franzen is implementing a policy of 'elastic pricing' at the spa, meaning that prices and packages will now change according to whether it is a peak or a quieter period for demand.

**MARKET DYNAMICS**

Franzen's previous posting was as GM of the Grand Hyatt Muscat, which won a string of awards under his leadership. He also saw the hotel improve from seventh to first place on TripAdvisor. "That hotel is printing money now, but at the beginning it was very tough," he says.

Franzen is finding Doha quite a contrast to Muscat.

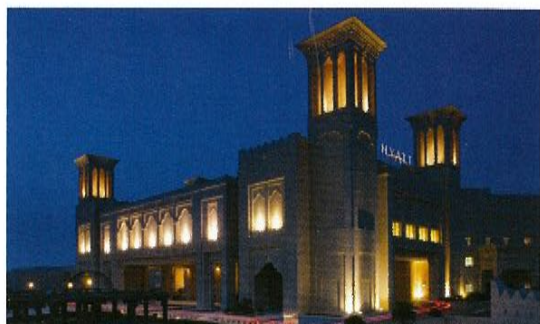
"[In Muscat] there was so much demand, but so little supply," he comments. "Doha reminds me a little bit of Dubai many years ago. You can feel that this city is on the brink of exploding with all the projects and all the hotels. It's a very vibrant and energetic place. I came here for a job interview with Sheraton in 2001 and there was nothing. Now, 12 years later, you have these major conferences here in Doha, big sports, medical and political conferences." The Grand Hyatt hosted the prestigious COP 18 UN climate change conference last year.

Another difference that is front of mind for Franzen is the question of workforce localisation.

"In Muscat you have the large factor of Omanisation, which is a good thing. I mean, we should give back to the community, by hiring and training their people, right?"

While in Muscat, Franzen was GM throughout the modest Arab Spring that took place there, which found its most vocal manifestation in Omani employees' demands for better pay and benefits. The Grand Hyatt Muscat was one of the few hotels not to be temporarily closed down.

"The reason was that we already had five percent of the senior management who were Omanis, so we had a bit more credibility," he explains.



☞ The Grand Hyatt Doha is the Qatar GM Debate host venue. ↑

→ Now in Doha, Franzen has picked up the torch of Qatarisation. "I had a chat two weeks ago with the Ministry of Labour and there seems to be a concerted effort to drive this forward, because they understand that what is happening here is not sustainable."

The result of this meeting is that the Grand Hyatt Doha, which currently has no local national staff, is now creating an induction course for young Qataris.

"The Ministry of Labour is extremely supportive. They will fund the training programme and pay the salaries. We're going to have a workshop when we will invite young Qataris to come and find out what hotels are all about. We have identified certain positions that can be easily filled by Qataris, such as government relations, sales and rooms division-type jobs. There is no reason why we should not find the right calibre of people who would want to do that, at least for some part of their career."

**The hotel at a glance**

**249**  
ROOMS

**91**  
VILLAS

**65-70%**  
AVERAGE 2012 OCCUPANCY

**2.2 DAYS**  
AVERAGE STAY

**60:40**  
MARKET SEGMENTATION  
CORPORATE:LEISURE

*According to the hotel's GM, Christoph Franzen*

**GM DEBATE**

As GM of the Hotelier Great GM Debate's host hotel, Franzen thinks that one of the hot topics will be the large future pipeline, citing a local press report that identifies 21 new properties due to come on line before 2017.

"That's a lot of rooms! Qatar has a lot of potential for leisure tourism. We already get a lot of visitors from Saudi Arabia on the weekends, but the European leisure market is still not very well tapped. The Qatar Tourism Authority is working on that. We are nowhere near the UAE, especially Dubai, but with all these hotels coming up, there will be a big push from the government."

Franzen cites such as events as the Moto GP, the Tour of Qatar and the Islamic Museum as examples of initiatives in place to encourage visitation, as well as the continuing expansion of Qatar Airways' network and the opening of the new airport this month, with its potential to encourage stopover holidays.

"I don't think [the Qatari government] wants to replicate Dubai's mass tourism model. It's more like Oman, they are looking for upscale tourists interested in arts and culture," he concludes. ■

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