

Ringling in the Future of Hospitality

With a 25-year career in investment management, strategic and financial planning, M&A, it is no surprise that Ahmed Janahi was appointed as Group Chief Executive Officer of Gulf Hotels Group (GHG) recently. Bahrain This Month sat down with him to discuss his vision for the company, the importance of leadership and the current state of the Kingdom's hospitality industry.



Can you tell us about your career so far and how you plan to lead GHG into the future?

My background is mostly in investment, so I spent most of my time and years of experience in the real estate and hospitality sector. I've been with the GHG board since 2016 and my view is that the company has huge potential to grow. We have a portfolio of hotels and branded residences in Bahrain, including the Gulf Hotel, Crowne Plaza, Novotel, Asdal Gulf Inn, Gulf Executive Residences, the Bahrain Airport Hotel, plus properties in Dubai and Zanzibar.

What would you say is the most exciting part about being the group CEO?

Being CEO of a renowned hospitality management company with over 50 years of industry experience and backed by strong shareholders, it really brings endless opportunities for the future I look forward to witnessing the thriving potential of this organization, as we all aim to make a lasting and positive impact on our local community.

With your extensive experience in investment management, how do you plan to leverage your expertise in order to drive growth and profitability for GHG?

We'll be overseeing our assets and actively managing them to improve their performance. This involves working with the management of each of these assets through regular monitoring and assessing the financial and the operational performance to identify opportunities for growth. So that's the idea. We'll also create value and synergy across our operations by streamlining processes and sharing resources and services.

In your previous roles, you have been involved in mergers and acquisitions. Can you discuss any potential strategies for expansion or acquisitions that you have in mind for GHG?

Our DNA is to grow organically and through acquisition. For example, we recently announced our expansion to Saudi Arabia and that will be our priority market that we will be looking to acquire and develop hotels across major cities including Riyadh, Jeddah, Makkah and Madinah in partnership with local investors and developers.

The hospitality industry has faced significant challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. How do you plan to navigate these challenges and position GHG for future success in a post-pandemic world?

The hospitality industry has recovered and witnessed a steady growth post-pandemic across all KPIs. For example, if we look at STR data, the occupancy rate has gone up from 50.6 per cent to 52.6 per cent over the last 12 months. The other important aspects is that the government is also

investing in hospitality and I would say tourism and the number of visitors is very promising. As per the BTEA, we had 5.9 million visitors arrive in Bahrain for the first six months of 2023. The target is 14.1 million of visitors by 2026. The recent agreement between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to promote the two counties as a common tourist destination is also expected to attract more visitors and create further demand for hotels.

Development is a key aspect of staying competitive in the hospitality industry. What are your plans for expanding and improving GHG's portfolio of properties and services?

As mentioned, Saudi Arabia is the main target of expansion through either acquisition or development. We're already in the process of discussion with several local investors and developers to develop hotels and branded residences in major cities of KSA. With regards to Bahrain, we have a plan for numerous developments focused around extending our food and beverage offerings outside the hotel. We will be developing multiple premium restaurants in Block 338 which we will be announcing shortly.

The customer experience is vital in the hospitality industry. How do you plan to enhance and personalise the guest experience at your group?

I completely agree with that, which is why it really is a priority for us and will continue to be so in order to deliver exceptional guest experience across our hotels and restaurants. We will strive to continue to improve the personalised services we offer and enhance the amenities and the facilities using innovative technology.

How will you use technology to improve operational duties as well as customer experience?

Technology innovation is one of our key initiatives for 2024. We have already started the process of digital transformation, which covers all aspects of an improved booking experience such as a mobile app for booking, in-room technology, a loyalty programme and more.

What plans are being put in place when it comes to fostering a positive and collaborative work environment at GHG?

I think collaboration is a fundamental value for us to really achieve our goal. It is my priority to work closely with each team member within our properties to improve the areas of learning and development. As management, we have an open transparent communication on our targets and expectations, and the most important area will be recognising the individual contribution to the group by providing proper rewards and incentive.

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