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THE PULSE OF ASIA FOR BUSINESS EVENTS



THE  
LUXURY  
ISSUE

# THE LUXURY OF AUTONOMY

INDEPENDENT HOTELS OFFER  
OFFBEAT OR EDGY LUXURY  
EXPERIENCES, BUT HAVE THEY  
GAINED THE TRUST OF EVENT  
PLANNERS?

**WORDS:** KRISTIE THONG

Major hotel chains and their rapid growth in the Asia Pacific region have always gotten most of the attention in business events. The rise of independent hotels, however, has been evident in recent years as the category gains more prominence. A Biz Events Asia survey conducted in May revealed that the majority of respondents (95 percent) are interested in independent hotels due to their unique product offering.

"Travellers today are looking for authentic and memorable experiences, where travel is aspirational and luxury is defined by personal life and style preference at any given time in your life," says Josephine Lim, managing director of South East Asia for Preferred Hotels & Resorts.

"Independent hotels are often borne from entrepreneurial hotel owners with a passion for the art of hospitality. They deliver the authenticity of a destination – featuring the unique characteristics of specific cultures within their own brand of hospitality that allows discerning travellers to 'live like the locals'," she adds.

Also playing a significant role in the rising trend is a growing demographic of high-earning millennials with sizeable disposable incomes looking for exclusivity in cooler, trendier and off-beat experiences.

"Independent hotels pay a lot of attention to detail and design aesthetics. Though some of them may be smaller, the experience is often different and more magical. I tend to stay in such hotels if I want a different experience; they tend to feel more luxurious," says Jeanne Hong, a 35-year-old finance professional who is also the



The Dhara Dhevi Chiang Mai

co-owner of The Snack Guru, an online store selling healthy, gluten-free snacks.

Putting independent hotels within a single alliance has long been industry practice, and there are many benefits to doing so. An independent hotel under a company like Small Luxury Hotels of the World or Preferred Hotels & Resorts can save costs by easily tapping into the hotel company's global distribution channels, gain awareness through joint marketing efforts, or build continued satisfaction with the company's loyalty program. While individual properties may be overlooked when pitching for corporate business, joining a hotel company offers them tender opportunities with multi-national corporations.

These independent hotel companies have been gaining traction. Worldhotels welcomed seven new members in the first quarter of 2015, adding to its portfolio of nearly 500 properties worldwide. Small Luxury Hotels of the World has announced at least eight member hotels and resorts, of which several will be opening throughout the year. Meanwhile, Preferred Hotels & Resorts introduced six new properties ideal for the business events market that will be scheduled to launch by the end of 2015.

### A CHAIN GOES FREE

In early 2015, Starwood Hotels & Resorts announced the launch of its 10th brand that now falls within its extensive portfolio. Tribute Portfolio promises owners, Starwood Preferred Guest (SPG) members and guests

Royal Palm South Beach Miami, Starwood's first Tribute Portfolio feature hotel



the ability to "stay independent" with a selection of independent, upscale hotels in high-demand destinations. While falling under the new brand name, the independent hotels within the portfolio will maintain their own unique identities and continue to promise boutique service.

Adam Aron, chief executive officer of Starwood, adds that the mission of the new brand is to "bring great hotels in great destinations to loyal SPG members, who make up more than half of all Starwood stays". As with Starwood's other nine brands, SPG members will be able to earn and redeem Starpoints at Tribute Portfolio hotels and enjoy in-hotel elite tier benefits, such as upgrades, welcome amenities, late check-out and more.

### IT'S ABOUT THE SERVICE

This recent development from Starwood may put independent hotel companies on alert, in particular due to Starwood's strong and global branding as well as its loyalty program. While many independent hotel companies offer some form of loyalty program, most are only beginning to find a footing with loyalty programs specifically for event planners. Elaine Macy, senior vice president, group sales for Preferred Hotels & Resorts, revealed that a meeting planner loyalty program is currently undergoing a Beta testing in North America under iPrefer, the company's point-based guest loyalty program. It was introduced in early 2015 to offer planners points for actualised revenue from rooms booked

### NUMBERS FROM THE SURVEY:



#### LEADING HOTELS OF THE WORLD SMALL LUXURY HOTELS OF THE WORLD

Event planners have stayed with a member hotel in these hotel companies at least once

**95%**

list **something new and unique product offering** as reasons why they will go for an independent hotel



**35%**

will take into consideration loyalty programs when considering the use of an independent hotel





“Travellers today are looking for authentic and memorable experiences, where travel is aspirational and luxury is defined by personal life and style preference at any given time in your life.”

**JOSEPHINE LIM**  
Managing Director of South East Asia Preferred Hotels & Resorts

at member hotels, and already has more than 550 planners enrolled.

Perceptions of service standards and event delivery also differ. According to survey findings, perceptions are pretty much split down the middle when it comes to concerns over an independent hotel’s brand standards in event delivery.

While some believe the use of an independent hotel for an event may “not be able to benefit from the established international image of hotels”, others feel they offer a less mainstream and more intimate touch while not compromising on service standards. Many will take to leisure-focused research through sources like TripAdvisor or rely on word-of-mouth to gauge standards of an independent hotel’s ability to host events. Some however feel that the overall experience is dependent on the staff and service standards and do not take into account the hotel status.



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