

Inside Accor's stunning new Raffles and Fairmont hotels in Doha

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Undoubtedly, Qatar has risen handsomely to the world stage. It has the fourth-highest GDP at purchasing power parity per capita globally, is one of the world's largest exporters of liquefied natural gas and will soon host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Working in tandem with that growth is the country's hospitality market estimated to reach US\$54 billion by 2030, according to a recent estimate by Knight Frank. That report noted that at present there are over 56,000 hotel rooms under development in the country with an estimated value of US\$7 billion. Also, international brands represent 62 per cent of its inventory pipeline.

One of the key players in the country's hospitality sector is Qatar-based Katara Hospitality whose portfolio includes 42 owned and managed hotels across several markets including Qatar, Egypt, Morocco, the UK, France, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Singapore, Thailand and the US. In a landmark signing last year, it reached a management agreement with French hospitality company Accor to bring the latter's prestigious Fairmont and Raffles brands to Qatar. These two iconic brands are located in Doha's Katara Towers in Lusail, whose architecture is inspired by the upward-facing curved swords found in the coat of arms of the peninsular country.

Accor said that its worldwide revenue for H1 2022 stood at EUR1.725 billion, up 97 per cent year-on-year. As of the end of June, its worldwide portfolio included 777,945 rooms across 5,300 hotels with a pipeline of 212,000 rooms in 1,215 hotels.

In the first half of 2022, Accor opened 85 hotels worldwide, while the upcoming opening of Raffles and Fairmont in Qatar will be among its biggest openings in the second half. "Raffles and Fairmont are for sure the most prestigious and im

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opening that Accor has this year in Doha," says Christian Hirt, the managing director for both Raffles and Fairmont in Doha. "There are some fantastic hospitality brands coming to market here, and we work closely with Qatar Tourism to promote the destination which serves as a great stopover destination for leisure travellers as well as a great MICE location. The vision that the country has of six million visitors [annually] by 2030 is definitely something achievable."

In some respects, it's déjà vu for Hirt in his role here at the hotel – he was the F&B director at another property in Berlin back in 2006 when Germany hosted the FIFA World Cup, and so he's had hands-on experience of witnessing the hospitality behind-the-scenes trappings of a mega sporting event. Hirt confirms that for the Qatar edition of the World Cup, both the properties he now oversees are fully committed with two exclusive bookings and will only subsequently open to public bookings once the tournament concludes.



The design of the Raffles suites are inspired by falconry and desert dunes

Living standards

The 132-key Raffles is Qatar's first all-suite property. Its suites range in size from the 88 sqm Urban suite all the way up to the two-storey 930 sqm Royal suite that has a private pool, wine cellar, hammam and yoga studio. The design of its Raffles suite is inspired by falconry and the desert dunes, whereas its Parisian suite is designed to resemble an apartment located along Rue des Beaux Arts in Paris' Saint Germain district. "We intend to ensure that Raffles Doha will be the destination of choice for individuals and travellers who are looking for ultra-luxury hospitality. We will be able to cater to this market with three theme suites and one Royal Duplex suite, some of which will offer private barber and make-up studios, cinemas, saunas, beverage cellars, virtual reality experiences, steam rooms, and private fitness and wellness facilities," says Bernd Knaier, hotel manager at Raffles Doha.



The bathroom within a Raffles suite

This will be the very first Raffles property in the world to offer what it calls an “in-suite scent library” that allows guests to choose which scents are diffused across their suites. “We have partnered with French perfume house Compoz and will be the first hotel in the world to offer its Le Compositeur intelligent, natural, bespoke and made-in-France fragrance diffuser in each of our suites. We have also partnered with Frederic Malle, the man behind the niche fragrance house Editions de Parfums Frederic Malle and have chosen an edition of his scent series that will be exclusive to Raffles Doha’s bathroom amenities,” adds Knaier.



The 132-key Raffles is Qatar’s first all-suite property

Fairmont Doha on the other hand has 202 rooms and 95 suites, as well as Fairmont Gold rooms and suites – its hotel-within-a-hotel concept. The overarching design theme of the rooms and suites at Fairmont is inspired by mega yachts – extravagant flourishes include 18k gold tiles in the shower. The Fairmont glc

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network comprises of 82 hotels and 32,149 rooms in 29 countries – with projections for 25 new Fairmont properties to open in 2023 adding 7,205 rooms. Fairmont Doha is therefore pushing itself to include elements that will set it apart from its global peers – it will, for example, feature four theme suites, one three-bedroom Presidential suite with its own salon, gym, and cinema, as well as a top-of-the-line Katara suite whose details are still kept under wraps. But what is expected to create a mighty buzz at the property is the crystal chandelier in the lobby. "As guests walk into the hotel, they will be met with a 56.5m high chandelier – the world's tallest which is ready to enter the Guinness World Records. This chandelier weighs over half a tonne and is curated with individual wire pieces and 4,807 bulbs and glass parts which all create beautiful chimes – it is the centrepiece of our lobby. As guests look down, they will also see a vista of marble flooring in which 43 types of stone shimmer in the sun's rays across the Fairmont lobby," says Hani Akkari, general manager at Fairmont Doha.



Enrico Crippa will establish Alba by Enrico Crippa at Raffles Doha

F&B offerings

Both properties have several strong contenders that they are bringing to the Doha market. With Dubai having received its first Michelin Guide recently, and another confirmed for Abu Dhabi next month, it is likely inevitable for Doha to receive its own guide in due course. Fairmont and Raffles are leaving nothing to chance.

As Dirk Haltenhof, executive director of culinary at Raffles and Fairmont explains, Raffles Doha will include two restaurants and three lounges while Fairmont Doha will have three restaurants with sea views and two luxury lounges. He adds that a team of 700 people are employed to manage the F&B and culinary operations across both properties.

At Fairmont, theatrical food and beverage concepts take centre stage. One of the major highlights will be Masala Library – the progressive Indian gastronomy concept pioneered by Jiggs Kalra. Further examples can be found in Latin American restaurant Vaya, as well as the Cyra shisha lounge which has a botanical garden and will offer bespoke botanical shisha alongside the services of a shisha-

sommelier, all of which will be accompanied by live falcon shows. The 154-seater Provok at Fairmont meanwhile adds theatrical flare to the mix too. "Provok is an expansive culinary destination with an eclectic Asian feel where our version of the continent's hottest dishes and drinks will be served high up in the Sky Balcony duplex. It has a theatrical element in that a master ice sculptor will be carving masterpieces and a 'fire focus' area that emphasises Japanese and Asian dishes such as teppanyaki and Korean BBQ," says Haltenhof.



Alba by Enrico Crippa at the Raffles will be the first international opening of a Crippa restaurant outside of Italy

Over at Raffles, the Acoustic Music Penthouse spread across the 36th and 37th floors will be a lounge with a commanding view of the city. It will feature unplugged music, contemporary "Silk Route" food, custom drinks created by a mixologist and a specially designed acoustic terrace. But perhaps the biggest culinary draw at Raffles will be its Alba by Enrico Crippa. The chef's Piazza Duomo restaurant in Italy currently holds three Michelin Stars and is regularly featured among the World's 50 best restaurants. "Raffles Doha's Alba by Enrico Crippa will be the first international opening of a Crippa restaurant. Crippa – one of Italy's most talented and renowned chefs – has created a special version of his distinctive cuisine for this restaurant," notes Haltenhof.

While there are several options to dine within the two properties, guests can opt for a curated experience within their suite or room too. The in-suite dining at Raffles particularly has been given laborious consideration. Haltenhof says that at Raffles, guests ordering private dining can expect to be served their meals in custom-built trunks.

As for its overall operations, Haltehhof emphasises the use of local ingredients in all culinary creations. "We will [tap] a number of local farms and use homegrown ingredients and produce, some of which have even been planted by our chefs and mixologists, and which will be freshly harvested for our creations. In addition, we will pickle, ferment, dehydrate and dry freeze our produce, to serve it in various forms."

Haltenhof confirms that there will be several F&B activations at the two properties for guests to look forward to over the coming months. These include special themed dinners including 'Personal Friends,' 'Celebrity Chefs' and 'Guest Pastry Chefs' as well as mixologist appearances throughout both hotels. He adds that plans are afoot to invite chefs, pastry artists and mixologists back to a grand gourmet festival next year.



Fine finishings within a Fairmont suite bathroom

Wellness

When it comes to its wellness proposition, Fairmont is focused on fitness, physiotherapy and nutrition, while Raffles is primarily geared towards providing the ultra-luxury spa experience.

"Fairmont Fit and Fairmont Spa will be home to international well-being gurus. Our indoor climbing wall will be the largest in the country. We will also feature a large hotel gym, and have an immersive spinning studio too. [Optionally], we can also offer well-being experiences within the guests' rooms," says Fairmont Doha general manager Akkari.

Shekhar Malkotia, executive director of wellness at Fairmont and Raffles in Doha, notes that Fairmont will offer clinical well-being programmes with an ability to diagnose, assess and prevent injuries and ailments. "Our new-to-market concept of mobility for fitness blended with recovery services and ideal nutrition will elevate the local fitness offering. Our sports and recreation offering is a highly developed programme to improve sports performance, prevent injury, enable rest and recovery and deliver personalised nutrition. We will also offer one-on-one personal coaching with master athletes," says Malkotia.



The well-appointed bedroom and living room in a Fairmont suite

The Raffles spa offerings spread across 2,100 sqm will include one Fitness Suite, three Spa Suites, five Experience Suites, three beauty as well as three fitness studios. The Spa Suites are connected with either a fitness or beauty studio and are designed for two guests to undergo treatments in the privacy of the suite. Spa Experience Suites meanwhile incorporate a sauna, hammam, outdoor pool and relaxation space along with a treatment space for two.

The Spa Experience Suites can be reserved entirely for a family to exclusively avail themselves of all of its hydrothermal facilities. "At Raffles, we will also offer the Dr. Burgener Haute Couture treatment which addresses personalised skincare, and analysis for heavy metals and trace elements. Our Dr. Burgener well-being programmes can last between four hours to six days, while the Dr. Burgener Experience addresses anti-ageing and regeneration, detox and immunity-building as well as slimming and contouring needs," observes Malkotia.



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The VIP meeting room in Raffles

Art

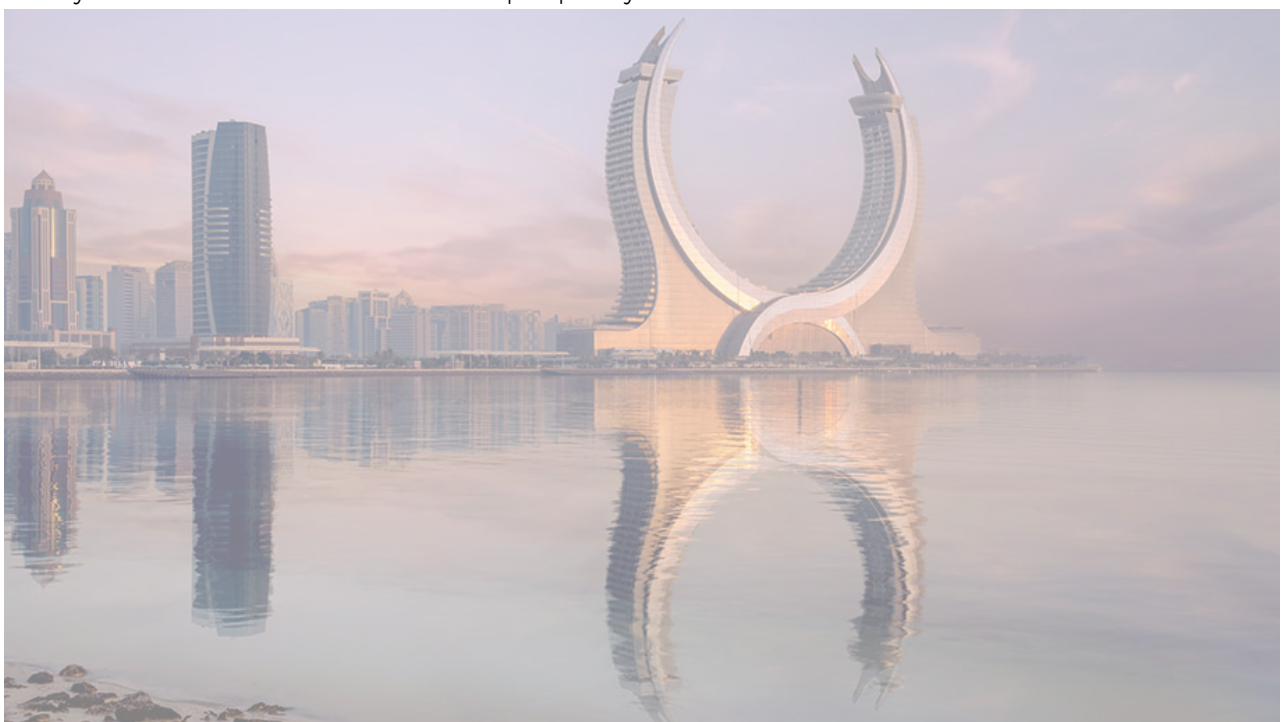
Tal Danai is the founder and CEO of Artlink, an organisation which has curated collections for hotels around the world from Dubai and Shanghai to New York City and London. He was brought onboard to curate an expansive array of art installations across Raffles and Fairmont.

“For the art collection of Katara Towers, we asked local and international artists and craftsmen to focus on Qatar’s historical use of two fundamental materials – stone and iron – and their immediate derivatives including sand, glass, and precious metals. The majority of the collection for both hotels is bespoke. There are over 230 artists and artisans involved in the art collection of Raffles and Fairmont Doha,” says Danai.

From the lobby and corridors to its lounges and restaurants and even its suites, artworks are abundantly visible across the two properties.

The main lobby of the two hotels features a series of large sculptures by artist Khalid J Shahin and the artistic duo Hybycozo Art. Artist Jesús Perea was invited to develop a unique collection of over 100 original works inspired by Katara Hospitality’s properties worldwide. Further stunning works of art can be found at The Provok lounge in Fairmont by way of the 108 individually blown glass vessels.

The suites at Raffles have been imagined as mini-galleries with curated art content within them. Pieces from artists including Noor Abuissa, Shua'a Ali, Sophie-Elizabeth Thompson and Chris Wood are displayed in the hotel’s suites alongside unique creations from Art Basel too. At Fairmont, its Presidential suite has works by Kristin Breiseth, Lisa Hunt and Michael Thacker. It’s worth noting that at Fairmont, art isn’t the reserve of only the top-end suites. In fact, one of the large porcelain artworks has been cut into 362 pieces, with one piece placed in every room and suite across the property.



An exterior shot of the Katara Towers which houses the Raffles and Fairmont properties

Experiential luxury

Fairmont and Raffles are set to surge ahead within the luxury hospitality space as they attempt to recreate experiences that cannot be found anywhere else in Doha – and perhaps are hard to come by at any of its properties elsewhere in the world too.

The Blue Cigar lounge in Raffles, for example, has an extensive collection of rare and difficult-to-find books. Fairmont and Raffles together sourced 40,000 titles in what is believed to be one of the world's single largest purchase of books. The collection is spread across the rooms and suites, but it is within the Secret Library in Blue Cigar where some of the most prized classics will be available for guests to read. There is an extensive collection of spy and detective books, featuring over 200 first-edition titles as well as hand-drawn famous works. These include a rare two-volume copy of The Iliad and The Odyssey in Greek and Latin from 1707, an illustrated two-volume 1785 edition of Robinson Crusoe, a numbered Moby-Dick book from the limited artist edition with a foreword by Jacques Yves Cousteau and paintings by LeRoy Neiman, as well as a RL Stevenson's Treasure Island in a First Trade Edition of Edmund Dulac illustrations from 1927.

"All these books are pre-loved and so have dedications and some bear the authors' signatures. All have a lived-in feel. We don't want guests to be intimidated by their history but to touch the books and enjoy them," says Raffles Doha hotel manager, Knaier.

Apart from its book collection, making luxury an experience in itself, Knaier adds that there will be a team of 25 highly-trained butlers at Raffles around whom the core guest experience will be centred. Meanwhile, Fairmont Gold guests will have access to a dedicated team of butlers and concierges as well as a dedicated lounge at Fairmont. In a world-first for any Fairmont, these Fairmont Gold guests will have exclusive access to a dedicated pool at the Doha property.

The next step

Still to open at the property next year will be the Raffles Residences as well as the floating Privée lounge which is designed to resemble the reflection of the iconic towers on the water. Also, with one eye on the events market, the Katara Hall which is located at the base of the structure in between the two hotels will serve as a sprawling 3,400 sqm pillarless space that has 15-metre high hydraulic entrance doors that weigh 35 tonnes and a ceiling at a height of 22m – it's a space that Hirt, the managing director for Raffles and Fairmont, says will particularly appeal to destination weddings.

Although the property is being opened in time for the World Cup, it will only be mainly reserved for FIFA World Cup delegations. Hirt says that while there will be an official grand opening party next year, the public can start booking their stays at both properties from December 25. Christmas, come early.

