

The Story of a Nation

An Interview with Gerard “Jerry” J. Inzerillo, Group Chief Executive Officer, Diriyah Company

EDITORS' NOTE Jerry Inzerillo is a globally celebrated visionary in the hospitality and tourism industry, with a deep aptitude for positioning strategies and iconic developments. In June 2018, Inzerillo was appointed by His Royal Highness The Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to be the founding CEO of the newly created Diriyah Gate Development Authority (*diriyah.sa*), a \$63.2 billion project aimed at restoring and reimagining the



Jerry Inzerillo

ancestral home of the original Saudi state. In this role, he is charged with developing and implementing a master plan to turn its 14 square kilometers of development area into one of the world's greatest gathering places, encompassing world-class cultural, entertainment, retail, hospitality, educational, religious, office and residential assets, with the UNESCO World Heritage site of At-Turaif as its center-point. When complete, the development will add 27 billion Saudi riyals to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's GDP, attract 27 million visitors, and employ more than 55,000 people. Inzerillo also serves as Vice Chairman of the Forbes Travel Guide. He previously served as President and CEO of IMG Artists, a leader in artist management, performing arts and lifestyle events planning, from 2012 to 2014. From 1991 to 2011, Inzerillo was President of Kerzner Entertainment Group, where he raised the profile of its properties in South Africa, the Bahamas, Dubai, Morocco, Mauritius, Mexico, the Maldives, as well as conceptualized and positioned the start-up of its One&Only and Atlantis brands. He oversaw the launches of The Lost City at Sun City in South Africa, Atlantis in the Bahamas, and Atlantis, Dubai. From 1991 to 1996, Inzerillo served as COO of Sun City, the South African resort complex built by Sol Kerzner. While in South Africa, he enjoyed a close personal friendship with President Nelson Mandela and, in 1994, coordinated major portions of his Presidential inauguration in South Africa. In 1987, he was the founding President and CEO of Morgans Hotel Group, later rebranded as Ian Schrager Hotels. While there, he conceptualized and opened Morgans, Royalton and Paramount in New York; the Delano in Miami Beach; and Mondrian in Los Angeles. Inzerillo has long been involved with philanthropy, especially with respect to

children, education and HIV/AIDS. He was honored with a Knighthood by the Knights of Malta in Rome, Italy, in 1996. Inzerillo is a founding advisory board member of the Clinton AIDS initiative. In recognition of his leadership and empathetic outreach to the tourism community during the COVID-19 pandemic, he was awarded the prestigious HOTELS magazine “Corporate Hotelier of the World Award” as well as the “Tourism for Peace Award” by the World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations.

Will you highlight the vision for Diriyah and provide an overview of the project?

Diriyah tells the story of Saudi Arabia's three centuries of history. The historic efforts of the House of Al Saud made Diriyah a renowned gathering place for cultural exchange, a hub for traveling merchants, and a sanctuary for its inhabitants. Now, emboldened by the Kingdom's Vision 2030 aspirations, Diriyah Company is fulfilling its role as a dynamic developer of the Diriyah masterplan. The work

across the development is to forge a premier destination to live, work, visit, shop, dine, and celebrate the Najd rich history, unique heritage, and magnificent culture.

To achieve this, a 14 square-kilometer masterplan has been formulated under the direction of The Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, Chairman of Diriyah Company, a \$63.2 billion investment pipeline, as well as a staff of over one and a half thousand are reflecting nearly three centuries of history. It is an unprecedented giga-project that symbolizes the future of urban planning in the Kingdom – modern, dynamic, rooted, and authentic. Diriyah stays true to its history as it builds for the Kingdom's future.

What can guests expect when visiting Diriyah?

We are harnessing the power of Diriyah's centuries of culture to offer a rooted, sustainable and community lifestyle unmatched anywhere in the world.

At Diriyah, you can explore the story of a nation. Our museums and galleries chart the evolution of life in our valley, but those memories are not just confined to glass. Diriyah is



An aerial view of Bujairi Terrace, the Middle East's latest premier cuisine offering



At-Turaif, a UNESCO World Heritage Site

alive – from Ardah traditional performance classes for young Saudis to the replanting of the flora and fauna that once flourished here, we are celebrating all that it has to offer.

From retail to hospitality, we have worked to craft destinations that take visitors on a journey. Bujairi Terrace, our dining district, has become the spot for anyone who wants to explore global cuisine in Riyadh and some of the best Saudi fusion restaurants. Alongside this, our hospitality offering will bring the world's most renowned brands to our community. From Ritz-Carlton, Rosewood, and Six Senses to Four Seasons, Raffles, and Orient Express – luxury is the standard.

As we look forward to the next exciting Diriyah season, where we prepare to welcome the world again, “The City of Earth” is already a must-visit spot for anyone in the region.

Which project or areas of work have you been most proud to launch at Diriyah?

As Group CEO, I am involved in the full breadth of work that takes place across Diriyah. Whenever people ask me about what I am most proud of here, or which project has meant the most to me, my answer is always the same – At-Turaif, our UNESCO World Heritage Site. Restoration work first began on the iconic founding place of the First Saudi State in the 1990s. The Custodian of the Two

Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, then Governor of Riyadh, recognized the incredible importance of protecting and celebrating its place in history. Built in the unique mud-brick Najdi architectural style that is so synonymous with Diriyah, its hallowed walls were the scenes of some of Saudi Arabia's most pivotal moments.

Since the beginning of the amalgamation of the Arabian Peninsula, to the modern-day success through Vision 2030, At-Turaif is a symbol of the perseverance and strength of the Saudi people. Its story, like theirs, is one of triumph over adversity and a shared commitment to common goals and aspirations.

To have the opportunity to complete the vision of King Salman and to open this ancient treasure to the world for the first time, which we did in December 2022, was a true honor and one I will always value.

How important is it to connect all Saudis to Diriyah's rich heritage and for Diriyah to become one of the world's great gathering places?

This is fundamental to the work we are delivering at Diriyah. How many nations have such a seminal and central founding place? In the case of Diriyah, all Saudis have an opportunity to connect with and experience life in the

home of their ancestors. The ancestral seat of the House of Al Saud, Diriyah is a symbol of national pride.

Diriyah is also the cradle to Saudi Arabian modernity and its architectural and landscape legacy makes it unique and valuable in the Kingdom, the region, and the world. It is a place of reverence and respect and all who are working to showcase and celebrate its beauty are driven by the feeling of pride and personal connection that is felt towards it. We feel truly privileged to work in a place of such national and historical significance.

How do you take the culture and heritage of Diriyah and transform it into a global cultural hub?

Diriyah has always been a center for cultural exchange and celebration, particularly in At-Turaif as it was a beacon of knowledge for all the people of Diriyah, and we are simply showcasing what it has to offer. Saudis are warm and welcoming people. When I first moved here, I was struck by their generosity of spirit and strength of community. All who travel to the Kingdom are met by kind and charitable people. Diriyah embraces that spirit and is a place where visitors can forge connections that will stay with them for a lifetime.

As we bring the world to Diriyah, The City of Earth, we are harnessing the power of

our shared love for community to craft a hub for the meeting of cultures and the exchange of traditions. A place to discover not just the history of Saudi Arabia and its people, but also somewhere to indulge in a quality of life and unmatched variety of experiences, Diriyah will be regarded as one of the world's great gathering places.

How do you describe the impact that Diriyah will make on the future of the Kingdom?

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda is unlocking the potential of the Kingdom in a manner never before seen in this region. From investment and infrastructure to education, healthcare, travel, and tourism, it is turbocharging the Kingdom's economic growth at an unprecedented rate. Diriyah contributes to that growth and the positive impact on society that it is aiming to deliver in many ways, but I think there are two that should be highlighted.

The first is tourism. Vision 2030 aims to increase the contribution of the tourism sector from its current rate of about 3.2 percent to more than 10 percent by the end of the decade. Diriyah, a PIF-owned giga-project, has an investment pipeline of \$63.2 billion and is set to add around \$7.2 billion to the Kingdom's GDP annually. In the process, it will create 55,000 jobs and attract 27 million visitors a year. This is a huge contribution for one project and demonstrates the true scale and importance of the work we are doing.

The second is in the nurturing of Saudi talent. As Diriyah progresses, its contribution stretches across many sectors of the economy. From construction and design to marketing, architecture, archaeology, hospitality, retail, and business, we are developing skills in young Saudis in myriad sectors and practices. This will enable thousands of them to pursue careers and interests that would not have been available without the development of Diriyah.

This is evidenced most clearly by the make-up of our workforce. Almost 86 percent of Diriyah Company's staff are Saudi, and 14 percent are Diriyah locals. This is essential as at its core, Diriyah is about Saudis, their history, and their heritage – who better to understand and celebrate this remarkable place? Gender is also an important component of our contribution to the future of the Kingdom. Thirty-six percent of our staff are women, 16 percent of whom hold management roles within Diriyah Company. This champions a core pillar of the Vision 2030 strategy, with female empowerment across the Kingdom a key aspect of extending new opportunities to all Saudis.

Diriyah is a catalyst for the wider success of Vision 2030 and demonstrates the incredible potential of its agenda. We are playing a central role in the transformation of the Kingdom and all of us are working to deliver a quality of life and work that will inspire and motivate all Saudis to seize the opportunities being made available to them.

“At Diriyah, you can explore the story of a nation.”

You have been involved in philanthropy throughout your career and give your time and energy to support many causes. Where did your interest and passion for philanthropy develop?

I have had the privilege of working in hospitality for over five decades. My work, like my life, has been driven by service. I value people. I value elevating the lives of those I come in contact with and improving the community around me. When we work to help one another, we also improve ourselves. Philanthropy, like service, is rooted in helping your fellow man. For me, it has always been the next logical step in my work in hospitality.

I frequently discuss the nobility of service. Few have the vision, courage, and character to devote their time to others, especially in a meaningful and heartfelt way. I was very fortunate to be able to spend time with Mother Teresa in India. She spoke often of the power of a simple act of kindness. She is, of course, famous for remarking, “If you cannot feed a hundred people, feed just one.” Her words and actions stuck with me and inspired me to do what I can for others. A final thought on this subject would be that “man gives awards, but God gives rewards.” Whether you are religious or not, community is a powerful tool for good. I believe in being a good neighbor and am proud of what I have been able to do for others around me.

What does success mean to you?

Well, like many, I recognize that success is highly subjective. I often speak to people who, when starting their careers, have dreams of great wealth or power. In my case, it is in the service of others, much like in my philanthropy, that I find success.

Steve Harvey said that “Success is not comfortable. To be successful you must become comfortable with being uncomfortable.” I like that line. It has meaning. When you truly wish to be successful, you must be willing to sacrifice in order to achieve. Whether that is sacrificing

time with loved ones to go above and beyond at work, sacrificing leisure time to learn a new skill, or choosing to take the more challenging path for greater return over the one that will bring quicker rewards, being uncomfortable is often necessary.

I began my career as a busboy. I have spent more than 50 years climbing through my industry. I was raised to believe that you only get out what you put in, and I have carried that belief throughout my career.

You have led teams for over 50 years across the tourism and hospitality sectors. What have you learned about what makes a successful leader?

What a great question. Leadership is such an interesting topic. As human beings, we have spent a great deal of time looking for an answer to that question – what makes a successful leader?

On a personal level, I have found two traits that often make a person a more successful leader. First is being able to motivate people. If you can inspire others around you to give their best, you will lead your team to its greatest success. The second is being able to listen. No individual holds all the answers, in fact often a leader can be the one with the least answers. It is in listening to and understanding the views, thoughts, and ideas of those around them that a leader harnesses the collective potential of their team.

So, listen and inspire. If you can do those two things, you have the chance of being a successful leader.

With all that you have achieved in your career, are you able to enjoy the process and take moments to celebrate the wins?

Absolutely. In fact, I would go as far as to say it is one of the main reasons that I have been able to sustain happiness in my career. After all, if you don't celebrate the wins, what is the point of playing the game?

However, herein lies an opportunity. When my daughter asks me about what it takes to succeed, I always use the Olympic gold medal analogy. To win an Olympic gold medal, you need to be talented. That is, of course, a given. However, while a one-off win, a “one-hit-wonder,” may be possible purely with a little talent and luck, a second takes more. To win a second Olympic gold medal, you must learn the lessons of the first. Where can you improve? What can you change and how can you change it?

So yes, I have celebrated the wins, but I have also used them to teach me about how to secure the next.

What advice do you offer young people beginning their careers?

Challenge yourself. Churchill once said that, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.” If you believe in yourself and are willing to push yourself further with each new opportunity, your success is limited only by your determination. So, challenge yourself and, as the saying goes, “Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss you will land among the stars.” ●