

Hospitality

Global Growth

An Interview with Raymond N. Bickson,
Managing Director, Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces



A Deluxe Allure Suite with a private sit out at Sawai Madhopor Lodge, a Vivanta by Taj property in Rajasthan, India

EDITORS' NOTE Raymond Bickson began his career at the Berlin Hilton in 1973. Following worldwide managerial postings, predominantly with Regent International Hotels of Hong Kong and Monaco's Rafael Group, he joined The Mark in New York in 1988, where he served as Vice President and General Manager until assuming his current post in 2003. Bickson studied in Berlin, Paris, Lausanne (Switzerland), and at Cornell and Harvard Universities.



Raymond N. Bickson

COMPANY BRIEF Mumbai-based Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces (www.tajhotels.com) is recognized as India's largest and finest hospitality chain. Founded in 1903 and owned by the Tata Group, it consists of more than 60 properties located throughout the subcontinent, as well as in southern Asia, the Middle East, Africa, New York, Boston, and London. In addition to its luxury hotels in India – several of which are members of The Leading Hotels of the World – the group operates business hotels, palace hotels, beachfront resorts, and garden retreats.

With the volatility and pressures in the global economy, what impact have you seen on Taj's business? How is the brand positioned going forward?

The recent roll out of the company's strategic brand architecture and its four distinct brands was to ensure we maintain domestic dominance and meet growing demand and counter supply from the Indian marketplace, as well as from our international competitors, which is even more critical given the economic conditions today.

We also make certain to continually review our offerings and pricing structures. The group invests in ongoing promotions such as the recently launched "Surprises" campaign, which offers great value-added incentives for customers such as free nights and room upgrades.

One of the objectives of the brand architecture exercise was to support expansion in the group across hotel categories, especially the expanding upper upscale and upscale categories in India.

Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces continues to develop as a global brand with the current portfolio including luxury resorts in the Indian Ocean, business and resort destinations in the Middle East and Africa, serviced apartments in the U.K., a hotel in Australia, and three luxury hotels in the U.S.

We introduced an upscale brand, The Gateway Hotels & Resorts in 2008, which now has a portfolio of 25 hotels catering to the 24/7 traveler, thus helping us capture a larger share of this growing segment.

Also, the introduction of Vivanta by Taj in 2010 was to meet the needs of a more contemporary audience, yet the brand remains true to the Taj core values of service and quality.

What has allowed Taj to remain a leader in providing a consistent guest experience?

One of the most frequent comments we get from our guests is regarding the kindness of our employees and the manner in which they go well beyond the call of duty.

A few years back, when we reviewed our service standards for the various brands, we realized that we had to retain this incredible service culture.

The service standards are measured and reviewed using a rigorous system of independent audits, retaining international firms in the case of our luxury and upper upscale brands. We also place emphasis on the guest satisfaction metrics, where we have deployed both online as well as traditional questionnaires.

Both the mystery audits and the guest satisfaction ratings are part of a general manager's performance evaluation. This ensures not only that we have a common understanding of the expectations from our employees, but creates a consistency in the experience of delighting and dazzling guests.

How much of an impact is technology having on the way Taj operates? How important is it to continue to invest in new technology?

The Taj Group of Hotels has gained the ability to retain existing customers and entice potential customers by embracing technology in its various forms. Increased guest satisfaction, operational efficiency, and revenue generation are the factors impacted positively through the use of systems and services that rely heavily on technology. Most systems that directly affect operations are tightly integrated, enabling seamless information flow.

For instance, a booking done through the Taj Web site travels seamlessly to the CRS system and subsequently to the relevant hotel. The hotel's PMS acknowledges the booking and generates a guest profile detailing the guest's preferences so when the guest arrives at the hotel, the preferences are already loaded in the system and the room is allocated with the preferred services.

The profiles are stored in the central information system, from where the profile can be uploaded to any hotel the guest may visit in the future.

The customer loyalty program – also known as the Taj InnerCircle program – integrated with the PMS and CRS, enables all stakeholders to keep track of the points earned and redeemed at any of the Taj hotels. This program helps generate revenues and increases guest satisfaction due to the special stature offered to members.

In the hotels, technology drives business in two major respects: guest satisfaction and revenue generation. High-Speed Internet Access (HSIA), the business backbone for today's travelers, is ubiquitous in all hotels. By virtue of an innovative business model, HSIA and associated services add directly to the bottom line.

Judicious investments made with calculated risks will determine the organization's vision and sustainability in a fiercely competitive market.

How important is corporate responsibility and community engagement to Taj?

Taj prides itself on the symbiotic relationship it shares with its stakeholders, including the society and environment in which it operates.

Among the league of business tycoons, our founder Jamsetji Tata was among the few who found a way to consistently conduct business balancing various stakeholder interests and improving quality of life through the medium of free enterprise.

We have defined "building sustainable livelihoods" as our theme for CSR engagements and programs. Our key CSR strategy pillars are to facilitate skill building for sustainable livelihoods and to preserve and revive indigenous arts, crafts, and culture.

What are your key priorities for 2013?

Our key priorities include maintaining market dominance – we have 16 new hotels scheduled to open between 2012 and 2013; enhancing our presence in emerging markets like Brazil and China; continuing to provide the excellent service that we're known for; providing an enhanced luxury experience for our guests at Taj hotels. We have launched the Taj Royal Attaché to grand suite guests at The Pierre, a Taj hotel, as well as the Kids at Taj program at key international hotels; enhancing the loyalty program and international partnerships and alliances to broaden our reach to the global traveler; planning brand-building activities for Vivanta and Gateway with a focus on reaching customers via digital and social platforms; and looking at new segments that are emerging as growth engines in the country, such as weddings and events. ●