

Hospitality

A Portfolio of Iconic Hotels

An Interview with Hamad Abdulla Al-Mulla,
Chief Executive Officer, Katara Hospitality



Katara Towers, in Qatar's Lusail Marina District, is scheduled to open in 2018

EDITORS' NOTE Hamad Abdulla Al-Mulla assumed his current post and became a member of the Board of Directors of Katara Hospitality in February 2011, having previously held the position of Chief Human Resources and Administration Officer since 2009. Since completing his Hospitality Management & Tourism studies at the University of Salzburg in 1991, Al-Mulla has amassed over 20 years' experience in top management positions within various Katara Hospitality properties in Qatar including the Sberaton Gulf Hotel, currently known as the Doha Marriott Hotel, and Merwebhotel Al Sadd Doha.



Hamad Abdulla Al-Mulla

COMPANY BRIEF Katara Hospitality (katarahospitality.com) is a global hotel owner, developer, and operator based in Qatar. With more than 40 years' experience in the industry, Katara Hospitality actively pursues its strategic expansion plans by investing in peerless hotels in Qatar while growing its collection of iconic properties in key international markets. Katara Hospitality has 35 properties in operation or under development within its portfolio and is now focused on adding another 25 properties by 2026. As the country's flagship hospitality organization, Katara Hospitality supports Qatar's long-term economic vision.

Would you provide an overview of the history and heritage of Katara Hospitality?

Katara Hospitality, formerly known as Qatar National Hotels Company (QNH), was established in 1970 by the Government of Qatar and since then has adopted a pioneering approach to developing the hospitality landscape in the country. The company was renamed in 2012 as Katara Hospitality to reflect its heritage and international expansion plans. Katara Hospitality currently owns properties spread across three continents in Qatar, Egypt, Morocco, U.K., France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Singapore, and Thailand.

Our continued vision is to develop a portfolio of unique properties that are celebrated hospitality icons across the world, and we take immense pride in and enjoy the challenge of converting properties that carry fascinating history into remarkable hospitality complexes. Each of our properties represents a hospitality

icon in its own right, further strengthening Qatar's reputation as a key player in the global tourism market. It's in our interest to preserve these icons by investing in their restoration and discrete modernization to ensure their heritage and luxury offering is available for future generations.

Katara Hospitality has 35 properties in operation or under development within its portfolio. Would you highlight the portfolio and describe the key characteristics of a Katara property?

As an international hotel owner, developer, and operator with 40 years' experience in the industry, Katara Hospitality is focused on its global expansion. Our recent addition of The Westin Excelsior Rome brings our global portfolio to 35 properties in operation or under development and marks our third hotel in Italy. Our vision is to become one of the leading hospitality organizations in the world and our international expansion is very much part of this strategy.

Katara Hospitality acquires properties that offer something extraordinary and unique that will create exceptional legacies that are aligned with our commitment to preserving heritage. We enjoy the challenge of converting and meticulously restoring buildings that carry history and that have become very much part of local communities and cultures. This is why we always ensure that we are respectful to local communities by preserving the heritage of these properties rather than reinventing the wheel, so that they can remain very much part of local heritage.

In this sense, our portfolio and in fact the defining characteristic of each of our properties is that they all represent hospitality icons in their own right, and our investment ensures this prestigious iconic status is secured for the future.

Europe is home to many iconic heritage buildings. In addition to our recently acquired property, The Westin Excelsior Rome built in 1906, these include Excelsior Hotel Gallia, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Milan built in 1932; The Peninsula Paris built in 1908; Le Royal Monceau – Raffles Paris built in 1928; Intercontinental Carlton Cannes built in 1912; InterContinental Amstel Amsterdam built in 1867; and The Savoy London built in 1889. We

are continuously exploring investment opportunities in hotels in international markets that have set the standards in the global hospitality industry.

In Switzerland, we are undertaking the complete transformation of the Bürgenstock Resort Lake Lucerne, an impressive hospitality complex consisting of two luxury hotels, a dedicated wellness hotel, a nearly 22,000-square-foot alpine spa, and two spectacular residence buildings in addition to two operational properties: Hotel Royal Savoy in Lausanne, which was built in 1906, and Schweizerhof Hotel in Bern built in 1859.

At an international level, Raffles Singapore, built in 1887, the flagship property of Raffles Hotels & Resorts, is one of our most luxurious hotels, awarded on countless occasions for its legendary levels of service and known as an icon that epitomizes the romance of the Far East, an intoxicating blend of indulgence, history, and colonial design.

Another core area of focus for Katara Hospitality is the refurbishment and upgrade of our existing Doha portfolio. Sealine Beach Resort will see the addition of 20 new villas as well as the complete refurbishment of the existing chalets, villas, and indoor and outdoor facilities. Further, a phased renovation of the rooms, spa, lobby, and restaurants is well underway at The Ritz-Carlton, Doha.

An exciting project for us, which we can see out of the windows of our global headquarters, is our iconic Katara Towers in Doha's Lusail Marina District. It's currently under construction and expected to open in 2018. The project is an architectural translation of Qatar's country seal. A mixed-use hospitality complex, Katara Towers will include a luxury hotel and an ultra-luxury hotel and branded apartments. Other amenities will include world-class spas, restaurants, retail, and a waterfront pedestrian promenade with spectacular views of the Arabian Gulf.

Another one of our innovative projects is the development of the Tazi Palace in Tangier, Morocco. The building was originally designed to become a royal residence, and after our meticulous renovation will be revolutionized into a luxurious palace hotel.

You are focused on adding another 25 properties to your portfolio by 2026. What are the markets targeted for expansion?

We continuously look to invest in a collection of unique properties in key sought-after international locations and our current portfolio is spread across three continents. However, our investment strategy is not just determined by a hotel's location. When engaging in a project, we always look for something special, something extraordinary that sets that property apart.

With regard to the markets we plan to focus our future investments and developments in, we are open to exploring opportunities in some of the world's most attractive tourist destinations. However, Qatar is and will always remain a high priority for us and we intend to maintain our position as market leaders in the local hospitality industry.

Our current presence in Europe is strong and we are continuing to acquire, develop, and open several iconic hotels across the continent and own properties in the U.K., France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Germany, and The Netherlands, and continuing to explore investment opportunities in other markets, including Mediterranean countries. North America is also a possibility and we intend to further expand into Asia.

Katara Hospitality has gained global recognition for the contributions it has made to the Qatari and international hospitality landscape. Would you discuss the impact that Katara Hospitality has had in Qatar?

Qatar's hospitality industry is witnessing unprecedented growth and as market leaders, Katara Hospitality's local portfolio of iconic hotels has been instrumental in contributing to this tremendous growth. Qatar is quickly becoming a leading global tourist destination with yearly growth on tourist numbers. The government has a target of attracting seven million visitors annually by 2030 and a total of 124 hotel establishments are currently under construction to meet this demand, bringing about an additional 21,400 rooms, suites, and units when completed. Doha's incredibly diverse hospitality is attracting an increasingly international audience as the city has evolved to offer a full spectrum of attractions from cultural, historical, and shopping to an increasingly wide variety of leisure facilities.

We have ambitious plans to not only become the world's leading hospitality company but to continue developing peerless hotels in Qatar while also encouraging private investors to participate in building a solid hospitality network in the country. As Qatar's flagship hospitality organization, we are committed to our role in developing the country's tourism sector. In line with the Qatar Vision 2030 that leads the country on the path of economic diversification and recognizes the hospitality industry as one of the strategic drivers in implementing this vision, Katara Hospitality is developing world-class hotels in Qatar that are relevant not only for our portfolio but emblematic of the country as well.

Katara Hospitality has put in place a comprehensive, integrated approach to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). What is that approach and would you highlight Katara Hospitality's efforts in this regard?

Our approach to CSR is built on our established infrastructure for addressing issues related to the environment, community workplaces, and product development. We support the sourcing of local produce, services, and building local supplier capacity, to bring sustainable economic worth and empowerment to the communities where we are active, whether in Qatar or abroad.

Katara Hospitality's current priority is to focus on the impact of our hotels, where we can have the greatest control in creating positive outcomes. We have undertaken a major initiative with the Ministry of Environment for the protection of the sea and reefs at Sealine Beach Resort in Qatar and we are planning a similar program at the Renaissance Sharm El Sheikh Golden View Beach Resort in Egypt.

We have also significantly increased our priority on understanding the environmental impact of our activities and aim to reduce our electricity and water consumption at all of our properties and continuously seek to reduce negative environmental impacts by adopting environmentally preferable business practices and innovative technologies.

You have assembled a top-level management team for Katara Hospitality. Would you highlight the importance of attracting top talent to the company as you continue to grow?

At the core of any successful hospitality business are its people, the talent that truly drives the business forward, delivering the end result of exceptional guest experiences. Every member of the Katara Hospitality team plays a crucial role in protecting and building our reputation as leaders in our sector. With the dedication of our team, we aim to become one of the leading hospitality organizations in the world, utilizing our 45 years of experience to ensure our ambitious vision is a reality.

In addition to attracting a world of talent from across the globe, we align ourselves with the values and objectives of the Qatar National Vision 2030. We take our role in the creation of a local knowledge economy very seriously, and pay special attention to the country's

Qatarization policies. Our agenda includes training and equipping Qatari nationals for a successful career in the hospitality industry.

Under my leadership and beyond, talent development is, and will always be, a focus area of ours. We will provide robust training and development programs for all our employees to help develop and train young Qataris to become the future hospitality leaders of our country.

How do you focus your efforts in leading Katara Hospitality and what are your key priorities for the company as you look to the future?

Katara Hospitality has achieved major milestones in terms of acquisitions, investment, and development over the past year. One of our main goals was to add 30 properties to our portfolio by 2016, and we have done so two years ahead of schedule, which has been a great achievement. Following the success achieved in 2014 and 2015, we are now focusing on expanding our portfolio of iconic hotels to 60 properties by 2026 and preserving our existing gems by renovating and refurbishing as required.

Katara Hospitality will continue to invest in heritage properties that have set the standards in the industry worldwide. As we redevelop iconic, legacy hotels across the globe, Katara Hospitality is becoming increasingly renowned as a Qatari organization bringing period, heritage properties up to a world-class, modern standard in key international destinations.

We are very focused on our next strategic target of expanding our portfolio of iconic hotels. We will continue with our expansion in some of the world's leading international destinations, while further strengthening our footprint in Qatar by continuing to expand the operator side of our business. The recently launched Murwab Hotel Group is our stand-alone operations arm in Qatar, and will continue to be a key focus alongside our core business of hotel asset management.

As we continue on our journey of global expansion and move from strength to strength, our ultimate ambition is to become the world's leading hospitality company. ●



Raffles, Singapore – a Katara hotel