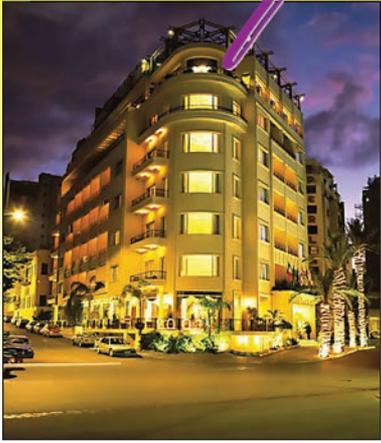


Hospitality



Growth in MENA

An Interview with Jamal Serhan,
Vice President and Chief Executive Officer
of Middle East and North Africa, Warwick International Hotels



Warwick Palm Beach (left); Warwick Hotel Dubai (above);
Warwick Babylon in Bagdad (below)

EDITORS' NOTE Jamal Serhan studied architecture in college before beginning his career in hotel management with the Marriott Corporation. After seven years, Serhan moved to Warwick International Hotels in 1992, initially in the Food & Beverage department of the Warwick Hotel in Denver, Colorado. Since joining the group, he has worked in Warwick properties in the U.S., Caribbean, and the South Pacific. Serhan has been in charge of the South Pacific operation for Warwick International Hotels since 2002. He was made Vice President/Regional General Manager-Pacific in 2005 and is responsible for the operation of Warwick Fiji Resort & Spa and The Naviti Resort in Fiji, and Warwick Le Lagon Resort & Spa in Vanuatu. He assumed his current post in 2012.



Jamal Serhan

COMPANY BRIEF Warwick International Hotels (warwickhotels.com; WIH) is a privately owned company and has a blue-chip portfolio of hotels and resorts. Launched in 1980 with the purchase of the Warwick New York, the company is celebrating more than three decades of hospitality excellence. The WIH Group now includes more than 55 prestigious hotels, resorts, and spas worldwide located in city centers and resort destinations in the United States, Europe, Asia, the South Pacific, the Middle East, and Africa.

Your brand has a strong presence and is growing in the Middle East and North African markets. Would you touch on its history in the region and the key markets of your focus?

Warwick International came to the Middle East at the end of 2011. We have affiliated hotels we work with, especially in North Africa, but none in the Middle East or in the Gulf.

In 2011, WIH decided to create a management company – we primarily managed our own hotels before this. In the Middle East, we didn't have any properties and so we formed a company, which we called Warwick Mena. We identified 18 countries in which we will manage hotels.

We already have 10 properties with four additional in the pipeline. Ideally, we are looking to expand into even more countries.

We're very focused on the Gulf area due to the fact that it is very stable and has great potential for business. We have four properties there now and we just signed another contract in Saudi Arabia.

By the end of 2016, we expect to have around 13 to 15 properties, so the growth will continue. All of the properties are four- and five-star hotels, nothing less.

Are there consistent features throughout those properties that let you know you're in a Warwick?

Warwick International is a collection of hotels. Looking at our history, for the past 35 years, we have operated our own properties, and they are all different in one way or another. We aren't like major chains. What we search for is the four- and five-star properties – nothing less than that.



This could be reflected with design or color schemes. We are flexible when it comes to that aspect, which gives us a lot of strength in the Middle East, Africa, and the Gulf, and gives the owners more options to choose what they like as long as it doesn't go below the four- or five-star international standard.

We also focus on the amenities in the room, the finishes, the quality of the furniture, etc.

How strong is travel today within the Middle East and is there growth within the properties?

The growth definitely has been slow due to various issues happening around the world. Having said that, the potential among all these countries has remained very strong, as has investment.

There are a huge number of people with money who invest on this side of the world. People will continue investing, even more once things are more settled in this region, the instability has been a problem all over the Middle East.

It is normal to have less growth in any country when things aren't stable. However, people have a short memory in the Middle East. A few days or weeks down the road, and life goes on. They are resilient in that fact.

In the future, the Middle East and the Gulf will be a great destination to visit for tourists. There is so much history and culture. Investment has slowed for now, but it will come back.

How challenging is the food and beverage component within your properties?

Food and beverage is a revenue generator and it's as important as the rooms for us at Warwick International.

In the Middle East, people like to eat out a lot and they like hotels. Most hotels here are able to offer three to five different outlets with different themes and cuisines. At Warwick, we also have the expertise in this area, and we manage our food and beverage outlets quite well.

Would you talk about the importance of attracting and retaining talent?

We are only as good as our staff. When we treat them with respect, when we make sure we provide them with the tools and knowledge to do their jobs, and when we are fair to them and develop them within the company, they will be loyal to the company and the customer. We really believe in developing people.

Warwick is a family company overall. We treat our staff as a family. We are very demanding and deliver a great consistent product to our guests. We work towards exceeding our guests' expectations. We're very hands-on. I'm not better than someone who works for me – I have a responsibility to that person. At day's end, we all have the same goal, which is 100 percent customer satisfaction.

Could you have imagined you would have stayed with this brand for so long and what makes it special?

I had worked for Marriott prior to Warwick and I was looking for a smaller company to grow with. I met the President of Warwick and I saw how he managed people, and I knew this was a company with which I would stay. They've also given me so many opportunities to get to where I am today. I started with the company as an executive sous chef.

It goes back to leadership and that comes from our owners. They really take care of us, challenging us with different opportunities when they arise, and giving us opportunity to do things. They challenge us to wear many different hats. ●