

Representing The Past, The Present And The Future

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, 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



Gerard “Jerry” J. 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?

Our focus at Diriyah is to be visionary and culturally rooted placemakers that connect individuals to each other, their heritage, and to the world. We are committed to being a shaper of places that helps to shape humanity. Diriyah is a culture-led project of unprecedented scope and scale and is playing an integral role in helping Saudi Arabia to achieve the Kingdom’s Vision 2030.

That is our vision, but it makes sense to start by explaining exactly where Diriyah is, and secondly, why it is so important to Saudi Arabia – and to the world. Diriyah is located just a few kilometers from Saudi Arabia’s capital city of Riyadh and its population of nearly eight million people. It is easily accessible to all by road, and in the future by Metro as well. The development area itself is very large – at 14 square kilometers it is effectively the size of the city of Beverly Hills. At the very heart of our development project is the historic capital of Saudi Arabia dating back nearly 300 years that is today the At-Turaif UNESCO World Heritage Site. This is the birthplace of the Al Saud family and the modern Saudi state. That places both a huge responsibility, but also a privilege for us to be entrusted with creating Diriyah: The City of Earth.

The name Diriyah – The City of Earth – has evolved from the unique mud brick Najdi architecture of At-Turaif and the stunning Salwa Palace at its heart. This historic architectural theme is also being applied to every aspect of the construction process, from assets already open and developed to the countless



Diriyah City



Al-Turaif, UNESCO World Heritage Site

new projects now under construction. We are essentially building a new city – one that will be home to 100,000 residents, over 40 new hotels, a 20,000-seat multipurpose arena, an opera house, museums, office space, hundreds of shops, world-class restaurants, and a venue for major sporting events. A city that in the future will attract 50 million visits a year.

How do you capture in a sentence what Diriyah is?

If you had to have a very simple explanation of Diriyah, it would be a culture-centric tourism city. If you expanded on that, it would be a culturally-centric, pedestrian friendly tourism city because it is meant for people to walk and bike.

In the way Mecca and Medina are the two holy cities, Diriyah in the G20 capital of Riyadh is the cultural epicenter of not just Saudi Arabia, but of the Gulf.

What can guests expect when visiting Diriyah?

I think they will be amazed at the scale and ambition of what we are doing. For non-Saudi guests it is going to change their preconceptions of Saudi Arabia as they walk into a destination that embraces the past. They will receive the best of Saudi's traditional warm and welcoming hospitality, and stay in world-class hotels including the Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons, Oberoi, Aman, and many more. Visitors will walk along streets that have 300 years of heritage and history; look out to our UNESCO World Heritage site and landscaped wadis and parks from outdoor restaurants and cafes with outstanding views; dive into the rich history of Saudi Arabia through museums and art galleries; attend cultural events at the Royal Diriyah Opera House; tee off on a Greg Norman designed golf course; enjoy easy access to one of our four metro stations being built with direct links to

Riyadh's King Khalid International Airport, and much more.

There is something for everyone here at Diriyah – a place that perhaps like few others can represent the past, the present and the future in one destination.

Will you discuss the importance of connecting all Saudis to Diriyah's rich heritage and for Diriyah to become one of the world's great gathering places?

In Saudi Arabia, and indeed across the Arab World, there is a tradition of storytelling from generation to generation. This means that

Saudis will have heard of and know of Diriyah and its role in the development of the modern Kingdom, but few will have had the chance in the past to visit. Thanks to the Diriyah Company, that is changing. Since opening our UNESCO World Heritage Site and the nearby Bujairi Terrace in December 2022, we have welcomed over two million guests – most of them Saudis – giving them the chance to explore and walk the same streets as the Al Saud family and others over 300 years ago.

The size and scale of Diriyah means it will become one of the world's great gathering places. From the hotels and restaurants, parks and boulevards, event arenas and museums – we will offer an incredible range of places for people to gather, to share ideas, to celebrate together and enjoy life with friends and family.

Many large-scale sporting events have taken place in Diriyah. Do you see Diriyah as a global sports hub?

In recent years, Diriyah has built a reputation as probably the best-known sporting venue for Saudi Arabia on the global stage. We have hosted numerous world championship boxing fights, and we are one of only 10 venues worldwide that host Formula-E racing. Golf is growing in popularity in the Kingdom, and we are delighted to have partnered with Greg Norman to build a championship quality course. We also recognize the power of the horse in the Arabian world and are establishing a world-class equestrian center on site.

How critical is sustainability to Diriyah's developments and will you highlight Diriyah's sustainability initiatives?

Embracing innovation and sustainability isn't just a choice; it's a responsibility we hold at Diriyah to shape a destination that positively impacts society, the environment, and the community. Sustainable development strategies



Bab Samban Hotel



Bujairi Terrace at night

are at the very heart of how we build and operate our many and varied assets from carbon-positive construction techniques to how we use renewable energy, smart water systems and cooling systems.

Let me give you some examples of how that works. The first phase of Diriyah's master-plan has been awarded the internationally renowned USGBC LEED precertification at platinum level – the first in the Middle East to receive this prestigious global recognition. We are an active participant in Saudi Arabia's sustainability certification program, MOSTADAM. Diriyah is working with Partanna – the climate technology company – to explore the use of its carbon-negative building materials throughout the scope of the project.

We continue to look at new initiatives to further our sustainability practices. Much of what we are doing will be behind the scenes for most visitors to Diriyah, but what they will experience is our green landscaping strategies. We are planting over 6.5 million trees, plants, and shrubs across the site – enabling tree-lined boulevards and places like the recently completed Bujairi Park for residents and visitors alike to enjoy.

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

As one of the Kingdom's giga-projects, Diriyah plays an important role in helping to boost both the profile of the Kingdom and generate economic growth and prosperity, attract millions of visitors, and build a new city to live, work, and play. It will help achieve the goals of Saudi's Vision 2030 as the country becomes a more diversified economy to boost the contribution of non-oil and gas GDP to 65 percent by 2030 and boost the impact of tourism to 10 percent of GDP. We are creating

178,000 new jobs at The City of Earth that will become a truly integrated city, one with a vibrant culture for residents and those working there in addition to the millions of visitors who will spend their leisure or vacation time with us at Diriyah.

Will you discuss the strength of Diriyah's workforce?

Diriyah currently has 30,000 workers on the job, and the staff is comprised of 2,400 people. I knew that this was going to be a daunting project because of supply chain, so the first thing I did when I arrived in 2018 was to look at what the Qataris did gearing up for Expo 2023 Doha since when they were winding down, I was winding up. We looked at the entire Gulf to see where there were supply chain resources, and then we put our emphasis on building an amazing culture of pride and self-esteem – this is what we refer to as One Diriyah. As we started to receive a reputation as a great place to work, we have attracted the best and brightest talent. I believe we have the best team in the Kingdom.

You were recently appointed a UN Tourism Ambassador. Will you discuss this role and what makes it so important for you?

I was enormously proud to receive this honor earlier this year at the United Nations in New York. It is an honor for me personally, but also reflects the impact and growing global awareness of what we are achieving at Diriyah. Across my five decades in the industry, I have seen enormous changes in tourism, but one of the biggest is how sustainable destinations are more valued than ever and important to the industry and the individual traveler.

As a UN Tourism Ambassador, I can commit even more to education – of our 2000-strong team who work at Diriyah and others

in the global industry, to the communities we work in as developers, and to the millions who travel to experience the wonder of new destinations.

I am privileged to have joined the ranks of the UN's global tourism ambassadors. Upon being given this role, I pledged to use it to ensure that sustainable tourism can become the driver of change for our industry and a catalyst for the world's fastest growing sector of the economy.

What excited you about the opportunity to lead the Diriyah Company, and has it been what you expected?

When I met His Royal Highness, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, I liked him, and I thought his vision was very bold. I could tell he was sincere and knew it was going to be big. It all added up to me – culture, heritage, authenticity. To me, this opportunity was like playing in the Super Bowl, and I wanted to win another Super Bowl.

Looking back, it has been more than I expected. The Crown Prince has given us all the resources needed to fulfill his vision, and we are on time and on budget – it is extraordinary.

How has your many years as a leader in the hospitality industry and as a leading hotelier impacted the way you have approached your role leading Diriyah?

I think the first thing is to always remember your roots and as I always say, service is nobility. This is the cornerstone of hospitality, and it stems from remembering our origins and that is a message I have always shared both to my team at Diriyah and to those I have been privileged to work with. I believe that humility and connection with our beginnings allow us to create authentic, impactful experiences that resonate with the people we interact with daily.

In my role at the Diriyah Company, I also have the privilege to work closely with His Royal Highness, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, someone I hugely respect and who has that shared belief in remembering our roots and instilling a true sense of humility into Diriyah's development goals. His Highness is also an advocate of the maxim that passion fuels excellence. We must always remember that at the heart of hospitality lies a passion that turns ordinary interactions into extraordinary memories. And when that passion influences every action, excellence becomes the natural outcome. That is what we must always strive for at Diriyah and it is something that I live by every day and has informed every step of my professional journey so far.

With all that you have accomplished in your career, what has this opportunity meant to you?

At this stage of my career, I see it as a legacy project. I do not see anywhere in the world doing a project bigger or more meaningful than Diriyah, the birthplace of the Kingdom, the home of Al Saud. There is still so much to do, and I hope to do as much as I can, and to stay with the Crown Prince for as long as I can. ●