

# Crafting The Future Through Heritage And Insight

An Interview with Gerald “Jerry” J. Inzerillo, Group CEO, Diriyah Company

**EDITORS’ NOTE** LEADERS Magazine has published profiles with Jerry Inzerillo throughout his distinguished career, and we had the opportunity to speak with him again about the progress and developments taking place at Diriyah. 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 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 50 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



Gerald “Jerry” J. Inzerillo

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 provide an overview of Diriyah and where the giga-project stands today?

We are building a city on the outskirts of Riyadh that is centered on the 300-year-old birthplace of the First Saudi State in Diriyah and the historic home of the Al Saud family. This is a \$63.2 billion urban development covering an area of 14 square kilometers. A place where up to 100,000 people will live and call home, tens of thousands of technology, media, and education professionals will work, and a place

that in the future will welcome an estimated 50 million visits a year – many staying in our nearly 40 hotels. This is a truly integrated city that will feature a university, schools, galleries and museums, world class restaurant brands, parks, cycleways and footpaths, a 20,000-seat arena and the Royal Diriyah Opera House. In the Wadi Safar, we will have a Greg Norman designed championship golf course and an equestrian and polo center – reinforcing the centuries of horsemanship and equine excellence here in Saudi Arabia.

In terms of progress, we are moving at pace and transforming from masterplans to construction and opening new assets.

Since opening the restored At-Turaif UNESCO World Heritage site and neighboring Bujairi Terrace dining district in December 2022, we have welcomed over three million visits. Construction work on major districts including the Qurain Cultural District and education focused Northern District are well underway along with building our pedestrianized Diriyah Square shopping precinct that will sit on top of one the largest underground car parks in the world with 10,500 spaces.



An aerial view of Bujairi Terrace, the Middle East’s latest premier dining destination





*Salwa Palace, At-Turaif*

We opened our first hotel in December 2024 – the 134-room Bab Samhan, a Luxury Collection hotel, which is also home to the first restaurant in the Kingdom, and second outside his native U.S., from Michelin-starred chef Michael Mina. Dolce&Gabbana opened a luxury boutique just over six months ago with their first café outside of their home base of Portofino in Italy.

Building work is continuing apace across the whole development area – uniquely using traditional Najdi architectural techniques across elements of all our buildings. Those close to At-Turaif are built using the same unique mudbrick styles of our UNESCO heritage site and create a vibrant and unique flavor to what we are creating.

**How important has it been for the development of Diriyah to respect its heritage while still driving modern growth and innovation?**

As a developer, we were very aware of the responsibility entrusted to us to ensure we both preserved and enhanced the centuries old buildings of Diriyah, ensuring we took the best of the past to apply it to how we are building the future. That meant our master planning process was designed to ensure the protection and preservation of our three centuries of history as the first step and be sensitive to how we developed in the immediate area around it.

But we have also learned an enormous amount from the Najdi architectural heritage of Diriyah, incorporating the same energy efficient

mud bricks they used in the past, traditional cooling systems and other techniques to ensure the sustainability of our City of Earth. Uniquely as well for a project of our size and scale, we have also extended the Najdi design and architectural themes of Diriyah to our new buildings. The restaurants of Bujairi Terrace, our Bab Samhan Hotel and many other buildings like Zallal, our mixed-use complex, all feature traditional mudbrick themes – buildings that look sensational when lit up at night. Our Royal Diriyah Opera House, mixed-use arena, shopping precincts and other areas will either be dominated by these traditional designs or find ways to incorporate them into the look and feel of the buildings – from residential homes to hotels.

**What are Diriyah's main strengths in attracting international visitors and high-end tourists, and what new projects and areas are being introduced to further elevate its global appeal?**

We are uniquely located from a global and regional tourism perspective – remember that Diriyah is under 30 minutes from King Khalid International Airport and 15 minutes from the center of Riyadh itself. It means we are becoming the visitor gateway to the millions of people from around the world who are now discovering the diversity and amazing destinations that Saudi Arabia has to offer.

Here in Diriyah we have been open to visitors for well over two years and we can offer them a unique blend of the past and the

present; the past when they can explore the restored mudbrick palaces and alleyways of At-Turaif and the present when dining in one of our wonderful Saudi or international restaurants in Bujairi Terrace. Recently, Diriyah launched Zallal, which includes two low-rise office buildings along with 12 mixed retail and F&B outlets, many of which are already open, covering approximately 8,000 square meters and is highly accessible from a 1,400-space basement car park beneath Zallal.

Looking ahead, the Royal Diriyah Opera House is set to open as a cultural landmark spanning 46,000 square meters. It will become a cultural landmark with capacity for about 3,500 people across four unique venues. At its heart there will be an impressive 2,000-seat opera theatre designed to host grand productions and world-renowned artists. Adding to that there is a great ambience to Diriyah – it is cooler and tree lined in the center of the capital and is also home to our annual Diriyah Season festival that celebrates the best of Saudi culture and cuisine from the past to the present. With one international hotel brand already open, we are also partnering with the world's major luxury hotel brands who are bringing their properties to Diriyah. These include the likes of The Ritz-Carlton; Aman; Raffles; Capella; Orient Express; Oberoi; Armani and many more. So, visitors will be spoiled for choice in the luxurious options we will have to offer. They will also be attracted to the array of world-class museums and art





*King Salman Square at Diriyah*

galleries and events we will host at Diriyah, and experience the very best retail brands in our Diriyah Square precinct.

**How is Diriyah incorporating sustainability practices into its development to ensure it remains an eco-friendly and future-proof destination?**

Sustainable development strategies are at the very heart of how we build and operate our many and varied assets at Diriyah. These range from carbon-positive construction techniques to how we use renewable energy, smart water systems, and cooling systems. Diriyah Company has received seven international sustainability awards – including the first USGBC LEED certification platinum award in the Middle East for a Masterplan. We are also making sure that the LEED and Mostadam certifications will be implemented across all buildings, gold level at minimum working toward NetZero 2050.

Across the development area we are installing systems to reduce energy consumption by 30 percent; diverting 75 percent of construction waste from landfills; and using carbon-negative materials that cut emissions by 90 percent. In addition, we have a robust green landscaping strategy. We are planting over 6.5 million trees, plants and shrubs across the site – enabling tree-lined boulevards and new parks for everyone to enjoy – something that visitors to At-Turaif and Bujairi Terrace can already experience.

**Will you highlight the strength of the Diriyah team and your focus on attracting high-level talent to be a part of the project?**

I am on record stating that being the Group CEO of Diriyah Company is without doubt the highest profile and most prestigious role I have ever undertaken. A huge part of the pride I take in this role is the incredible team of people I am privileged to work with every day. We now have over 3,000 people in the company – with the vast majority being Saudi nationals, and many in senior roles in the organization. Until you get out here to Saudi Arabia, you really have no idea about the range of talent, commitment, and professionalism there is among the mainly young men and women of this extraordinary country. Their passion, creativity, and desire to succeed and put Diriyah on the global map is something that inspires me every day, and I am also learning so much from a wonderful team.

And as a company – not only are we attracting wonderful talent, but we are also ensuring that we develop the people we have and invest in training in the local community. For example, we have partnered with the London Business School and the first in the Kingdom with the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors. Alongside that, we are helping with entrepreneurial courses and other training initiatives to empower the wonderful young people from the Diriyah area.

We are also enormously proud that the Diriyah Company has recently received the accolade of being recognized by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential companies in the world. This is a powerful global

endorsement of the extraordinary talent and people we have powering Diriyah forward to the future.

**What are you most excited about when you look to the future of Diriyah?**

I have been privileged enough to have been with Diriyah since the project began back in 2018. What excites me today is seeing how our comprehensive and world-class master plans are now rapidly moving from plan to built reality. The size and scale of what we are building across an area of 14 square kilometers is staggering. We have a 5.7 kilometer tunnel system under Diriyah up to 30 meters down for road transport and utilities helping to enable our pedestrian-friendly and people-first approach to a low-rise and accessible city.

We are continuing to open new assets across the area and welcoming increasing numbers of visits to Diriyah – including hosting world leaders like President Donald Trump very recently and others such as President Emmanuel Macron and U.K. Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer. From sporting celebrities to politicians, everyone who comes to Diriyah is amazed at what they see, and I love how we are enriching lives and continuing to build a vibrant new gathering place for the world.

We are building in our City of Earth a new, sustainable approach to low-rise urban living that bridges the past to the present and future and can be a model for urban developers worldwide. ●