

How do you define a luxury hotel?

by Gemma Greenwood on Friday, 01 June 2007

Some of the world's hotel industry big wigs visited Dubai last month to attend two high-profile travel and hospitality events; The Arabian Hotel Investment Conference (AHIC) and Arabian Travel Market (ATM).

They came loaded with very definite opinions as to what defines a luxury hotel and I warn you now before you read on - they were unsparing when it came to shunning some high-profile top-end hotels as true luxury brands.

Industry stalwart, MPS Puri, head of the Americas, General Hotel Management (GHM) put his neck on the line and categorised the Four Seasons and the Ritz-Carltons of this world as 'mass affluent'.

Mandarin Oriental and Raffles, now it had been acquired by Fairmont, were also lumped into this category and "God help us if The W [hotel brand] is luxury", he declared at one of the AHIC seminars.

He said 'luxury' was the most oversubscribed word in our vocabulary and claimed there was a clear distinction between mass affluent and luxury.

But what did he mean exactly? Puri's definition of luxury is something that is bespoke and individualised. True luxury, he said was about imperfections and "a touch of hand".

"It's exclusive. It's an obsession and a passion, without reference to cost," he told me.

GHM properties were true luxury brands because unlike Ritz-Carlton and Four Seasons properties they are not abundant, consistent, or perfect, he said.

Welf J Ebeling, executive vice president & chief operating officer, The Leading Hotels of the World concurred with many of Puri's comments, maintaining that luxury was defined by something rare in numbers whereas 'Mass Affluent' was something of a high standard that could be mass produced.

He claimed that every one of Leading's 435 member hotels possessed its own individuality, noting that Ritz-Carlton and Four Seasons hotels had once belonged to the Leading portfolio.

They fled the nest when they grew to maturity and reached a critical mass, he argued further.

Of course, Four Seasons and Ritz-Carlton begged to differ, with David Crowl, vice president sales & marketing, Europe/Middle East/Africa, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts claiming that each of the 74 Four Seasons properties was unique.

Both Crowl and Pascal Duchauffour, area vice president & general manager The Ritz-Carlton Bahrain Hotel & Spa noted that luxury meant different things to different people.

A true luxury hotel provided extraordinary experiences that exceeded customer expectations and created life-long memories they both stressed.

There is no doubt that like beauty, luxury is in the eye of the beholder. To some, privacy is the ultimate luxury whereas to others it's about antique furniture and priceless chandeliers adorning a lavishly decorated room.

To a certain extent it's horses for courses, but what is clear is that too many hotels are using the word 'luxury' to define their product. This will ultimately confuse and disillusion the customer.

What is desperately required is a worldwide rating system to set the record straight once and for all.