



Levelling the playing field: Saurabh Rai's tips for independent hotels

With more than 600 properties across 80 countries, **Preferred Hotels & Resorts** is a hotel group unlike any other. Billed as the *world's largest independent hotel brand*, the Group's core focus is on providing commercial tools, systems and resources to equip an army of independent hoteliers, enabling them to remain competitive in an increasingly consolidated sector.

Specifically, the Group provides centralised systems and support, including revenue management, distribution technology, marketing solutions plus loyalty services. What sets Preferred Hotels & Resorts apart from the services offered by regular backend technology solutions providers is their ability to also extend their logo to their members. Their brand, cultivated over more than 50 years, is synonymous with quality and elegance, underpinned by the assurance that properties meet (and retain) exceptionally high quality standards. Consistently delivering unparalleled service levels is what the Preferred brand has come to be known for – their *secret sauce* of sorts.

Saurabh Rai, Executive Vice President, South Asia, Middle East, Africa, and Australasia for Preferred Hotels & Resorts recently sat down with Rihlat Travel News to share his thoughts on how independent hotels can continue to prosper in an increasingly competitive environment.



Saurabh Rai, Executive Vice President, South Asia, Middle East, Africa, and Australasia for Preferred Hotels & Resorts

Rai, an industry veteran, is clear on the value offered to each of Preferred Hotels & Resorts' members. In response to ongoing consolidation across the travel industry, and specifically due to the increasing concentration of so many hotel brands under ever-fewer Hotel Group umbrellas, Preferred is helping to level the playing field, preserving space for independents to compete effectively.

Regardless of notoriety of brand, or quality in product, location and service, it is undeniable the role that technology, systems, CRM, marketing and distribution play in determining whether hotel properties thrive (or not). This is where Preferred offers a helping hand. The group invests significantly in providing their members with industry leading platforms where otherwise such services would remain either unviable or commercially out of reach.

Loyalty

The power of hotel loyalty schemes also are known to play a crucial role in biasing traveller's choice when choosing where to stay. This has been a perennial weak spot for independents. Understandably, while the boss is paying, many business travellers direct their work travel stays towards properties with loyalty programs that offer rewards to be enjoyed at a later date with loved ones. With this in mind, and to lure a greater share of Corporate bookings, Preferred has invested significantly in building their own loyalty program that goes toe to toe with some of the industry giants. Partnering with **Epsilon** to create **I Prefer Hotel Rewards**, the Group's loyalty program offers their five million members *earn and burn* options across their broad range of properties. The program has also innovated, allowing members the flexibility to redeem on dining options. A popular choice for many.

Regional growth

Just in Q3, Preferred Hotels & Resorts welcomed 24 new properties to its global portfolio, and while its portfolio has greater depth outside the GCC / MENA region, it's quite likely to see this evolving. Given the size and value of the sophisticated traveller profile residing in this region, it's not a stretch to foresee substantial growth of both independent and boutique properties in coming years.

Traditionally, large international hotel groups have pioneered development of landmark properties in the region. However, given an insatiable thirst for bespoke, hard to replicate and signature travel experiences, Preferred is well placed to provide a foundation stone to the inevitable arrival of more independent and boutique hoteliers entering the region.

Al Habtoor Palace - a recent debutant - growing the Group's local footprint



Earlier this month, Preferred Hotels & Resorts announced *Al Habtoor Palace* as the latest addition to their *Legend Collection*. The 234 key property in Business Bay, Dubai, UAE, truly does justice to its name. An often over-used descriptor, in this case *Palace* applies perfectly to the magnificence of the hotel lobby, complete with sweeping marble staircases, intricate balustrades and monumental flower arrangements. Even a humble flat white is presented together with a bejewelled sculptural adornment, injecting a moment of grandeur into an otherwise regular morning cuppa. The hotel staff have an ease and effortlessness in how they tend to their guests. On hand, while not overbearing, the hotel offers eight award-winning restaurants, bars, and lounges, such as an American steakhouse, a French brasserie, and a cigar bar.



Earning a green thumbs up

Growth for growth's sake does not appear to be at the core of Preferred's DNA. Rather *selective and restrained* appears to be more their style, with ample consideration given to the impact a property has on its environment, both ecologically and also importantly at a community level.

Refreshingly, the Preferred Travel Group is still family owned, and yet despite its size, a sense of responsibility and stewardship continues to permeate the Group's values. This has resulted in a strong commitment to sustainability, supported by a recently published comprehensive Climate Action Plan (CAP), developed in partnership with [the Travel Foundation](#).



Post Ranch Inn – California, USA

The Group has also developed an independent environmental standards monitoring company, *Beyond Green*, that provides standards assessment, consulting services and actionable change management plans to both member and non-member properties enabling them to improve their environmental credentials.

The Group has an ambitious target to halve carbon emissions by 2030 and achieve net zero as soon as possible before 2050. How Preferred Group and Beyond Green will achieve this in practice will be explored further in Rihlat's upcoming Travel sustainably special in early November. Stay tuned.