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## With I Prefer Alliance, indie hotels can expand their benefits

By CJ Arlotta  
Senior Editor

NEWPORT BEACH, CA—Preferred Hotels & Resorts has launched I Prefer Alliance to extend the full benefits of I Prefer Hotel Rewards to independent hotel guest benefit programs.

"This is an example of turning insight into action," said Jeri Salazar, VP of marketing strategy and loyalty at Preferred Hotels & Resorts. "We know that loyalty program members want more earning and redemption options, and we know we have a unique and special offering with the wide range of hotels, resorts and residences participating in I Prefer Hotel Rewards."

Called I Prefer Alliance, the brand's new loyalty platform allows independent hotels and regional hotel brands to give members of their distinctive guest benefit programs all of the benefits of I Prefer.

"Our goal was twofold," she said. "First, we wanted to build greater global awareness of Preferred Hotels & Resorts and I Prefer within the industry, attracting engagement and partnerships with other hotel programs that want to access the strength of our brand loyalty program."

In August 2013, Preferred Hotels & Resorts introduced I Prefer. As of the beginning of the year, more than three million members have enrolled in the program. In 2018, the program produced a 24% increase in reservations revenue and a 31% increase in stays to participating hotel properties, as compared to 2017, according to the hospitality company.

"From a guest standpoint, we wanted to make the process easy for members of our partner programs to understand and utilize, and to give them more flexibility with how they earned and used their points," Salazar said.

The purpose of the brand creating I Prefer Alliance was to provide independent hotels with the "flexibility to personalize their own programs in a way that would help drive more loyalty from current members, while creating more visibility for all hotels that participate in I Prefer among a growing and highly engaged travel community

who prefers authentic, inspiring travel experiences," she said.

"I Prefer is the loyalty program for Preferred Hotels & Resorts' member hotels only, and I Prefer Alliance is the platform through which we partner with other hotel loyalty programs," she said. "I Prefer Alliance allows members of other programs to earn their unique program points at Preferred Hotels & Resorts' member hotels. They can also redeem their unique program points for I Prefer Alliance certificates that can be used toward stays at Preferred Hotels & Resorts' member hotels that participate in I Prefer."

I Prefer Alliance allows partner hotels to incentivize their respective loyalty members by extending access to more than 650 additional destinations across 85 countries, where they can earn and redeem points, while receiving other benefits during every eligible stay.

Preferred Hotels & Resorts debuted I Prefer Alliance with Tokyu Hotels, which has 44 properties across the country and more than 700,000 Tokyu Comfort Members. "Tokyu Hotels was a natural first partner because of the regional nature of the Tokyu Comfort Rewards program, Tokyu's existing relationship with I Prefer and Preferred Hotels & Resorts, and Tokyu's commitment to the partnership," Salazar said. Effective immediately, all Tokyu Comfort Members will receive two Comfort Points for every dollar spent on net room reservations when they book any hotel outside Japan through a dedicated offer page on PreferredHotels.com or a voice reservations line.

"Properties don't have to implement any program, as everything is handled on the brand level and through the back-end systems, with everything running the same as I Prefer," she said. "All the properties have to do is recognize a Tokyu Comfort Member (or member of another alliance program down the road) to ensure they get the soft benefits of the program, such as the upgrade and complimentary internet."

Additionally, I Prefer members visiting Japan will now be able to earn 25 I Prefer points per U.S. dollar spent on net room reservations, as well as

redeem I Prefer Reward Certificates, at 10 participating Tokyu hotels, four of which are member hotels of Preferred Hotels & Resorts: The Capitol Hotel Tokyo, Cerulean Tower Tokyo Hotel, Kyoto Tokyu Hotel and Nagoya Tokyu Hotel.

"We have done a strong global PR and social media outreach campaign to ensure both travelers and potential partners for I Prefer Alliance are aware of the program's benefits," she said. "We are also conducting B2B marketing and proactively pursuing other partners."

With regard to the development of I Prefer Alliance, the challenges didn't arise from member hotels. "The challenges we faced and overcame were related to consistency, technology and compliance," Salazar said. "The overall challenge with designing the program was in the ability to create a framework that allowed enough consistent flexibility to meet the needs of I Prefer Alliance partners, while remaining true to the core essence of I Prefer. When we were mapping it out, we identified the need to be consistent in both the tools and technology we use and the way we serve it up in an individualized way that suits both our existing member hotels and the brands we are partnering with through I Prefer Alliance."

"With that, the challenge with consistency also related to our communication with the traveler—making sure that the concept of I Prefer Alliance made sense to them despite that they would begin to hear from multiple brands and be exposed to hotels that differ from the 'home' brand loyalty program to which they originally subscribed," she continued.

Preferred Hotels & Resorts isn't limiting the program to independent properties in a particular region. "Instead, we are looking at any regional hotel group where an alliance may be mutually beneficial in terms of enhancing the member experience and extending program reach," Salazar said.

"In addition to adding new partners later this year, we are currently working on the deployment of entirely new back-end loyalty management software to enable our program and facilitate new program features," she said. "Our focus is on providing greater flexibility for participating hotels and I Prefer members. On the consumer side, we want to empower both I



**"...We are looking at extending more flexibility provided by technology to enable our I Prefer Alliance partners and individual hotels alike to embrace the program and create a unique set of benefits that attracts more travelers from within the extended I Prefer membership."**

—Jeri Salazar  
Preferred Hotels & Resorts

Prefer members and cardholders of I Prefer Alliance partner programs so they can personalize their earning and rewards to suit their individual needs. We plan to leverage gamification techniques so our interactions with all travelers can be more playful, and we are looking at new ways to encourage members to use their points with a greater emphasis on the entire hotel estate and local community services.

"From the hotel perspective, we are looking at extending more flexibility provided by technology to enable our I Prefer Alliance partners and individual hotels alike to embrace the program and create a unique set of benefits that attracts more travelers from within the extended I Prefer membership," she said. **HB**