



Busy Bickson

Raymond Bickson, head of the Mumbai-based Taj hotel group since 2003, is moving in a number of ways at once, and fast.

He has the charm of the man he once worked for – Monaco-based Georg Rafael, one of the three founders of the Regent hotel group, then of Rafael Hotels, and now also advising Taj.

Bickson, born in Hawaii, has 25 years hotel experience. His last job before joining Taj was running the Mark hotel in New York. At the time, this hotel was in the Rafael Hotels portfolio, a company which was bought by Mandarin Oriental in 2001.

Bickson has pulled the company into the international spotlight with its purchase of the lease of the Pierre hotel in New York. He may have operating experience in the city, but he has taken on a tough task with this one.

Previously part of the Four Seasons group, the hotel was reportedly losing money. Taj is spending US\$35mn on upgrading the hotel. That's the easy part; he admits that he needs to increase the hotel's average rate by US\$250. (*We estimate current achieved rates are around US\$300.*)

Bickson is also busy in India. He told PinT that there are 427 national parks in the country. "So we have decided to build environmentally-friendly lodges"; eight to start with, three of which will have opened this year.

And he is also pushing his group's IndiOne Formule-1-type budget hotels. He opened the first a year ago, in Bangalore, and he wants to open 10-15/year – which may be on the conservative side. After the first 30, he may consider other markets.

Bickson's portfolio expansion map is really a map of the world:

- The US west coast – Los Angeles and/or San Francisco, to balance the Pierre acquisition.
- Australia - particularly Sydney.
- China. Beijing and Shanghai.
- Middle East. In GCC countries,

doing a second hotel in UAE, and where it has opened a sales office (in Dubai).

- Africa (South, because that feeds his resort in the Seychelles, and North).

- And Paris, where he also plans to open a sales office in 2006.

And he wants more management contracts rather than owning the real estate. One-third is his target; currently it is 25%.

All in the family

John W **Marriott III** (44), the middle son of Marriott International's head JW 'Bill' Marriott Jr (73), is leaving the company - where he was EVP lodging. He had been expected to take over when Bill left.

Current favourites now are outside the family - Arne Sorenson, chief financial officer, and William Shaw, president.

However, although John has left his day-by-day job at Marriott, he will still have a presence at the company. He has been promoted to vice chairman. That, together with the 23% of Marriott shares that the family owns or controls, indicates the Marriotts will still have substantial influence in the company.

And just like a Ford family man came back to run the Ford motor company, and a Pelisson to run Accor Hotels, John could still return one day.

There are other family members working in Marriott, but these are not seen at present as likely successors to Bill:

- John's younger brother David is SVP sales;
- older brother Stephen is SVP culture and special events (but he has a hearing and vision deficiency);
- sister Debbie is not in Marriott but her husband heads the company in Canada.

In the meantime, Bill has become head of JWM Family Enterprises, a private investment partnership which he founded – and which has

US\$600mn in assets. Will he do-a-Sternlicht (Barry, now outside the Starwood hotel group, but running Starwood Capital, which earlier this year spent about US\$1.5bn buying a company that has over 800 hotels), and start buying assets for Marriott?

Briefs

- **Peter de Jong**, head of the Pacific Asia Travel Association, wants what he calls a "respectful commemoration" of the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami in Asia.

He says a commemorative event is necessary to achieve 'closure', even if such an event brings back sad memories. "Remember," he adds, "hundreds, maybe thousands of grieving relatives will return to pay homage to lost ones. We must respect their sensitivities."

But he is concerned that the world's media companies will all have converged upon the tsunami locations, looking for telegenic images and captivating stories. The challenge, he adds, is to "to reconcile both needs...(but)...draw a line in the sand and move on".

- **Paul Kirwin**, head of the Carlson companies in Asia Pacific, has hinted that there may be change coming at the group's Radisson Seven Seas Cruises. Most likely is a change to incorporate the name of the group's newer hotel brand acquisition, Regent.

However, Kirwin has hinted the same for the past two years. Will this be third-year different?

- What does **Timothy Clark**, head of Emirates, think of its neighbour airline, Qatar Airways, which seems to be following the same business plan?

"We can find no indication that they have done any damage to us," he says. "They did call our planning manager and said 'we want you to work for us'. He replied: 'But I already do' "... meaning they copy the Emirates' business plan.