

IN-STORE

Starwood responds to democracy of travel through global expansion plans

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Starwood hotels

By JEN KING

NEW YORK – According to a senior Starwood executive during a brand-sponsored luncheon Feb. 19, the hospitality group's luxury portfolio will continue its story of international growth throughout 2015.

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With properties sprouting up in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Kyoto, Japan and Key West, FL, Starwood's luxury brands, which include The St. Regis, Luxury Collection and W Hotels, are embracing consumer sentiment of "where can we go, what can we experience?" Across international properties, hospitality has become focused on "generation luxury" and how the hotelier can enhance the travel experience for a specific individual.

"With the emergence of a luxury traveler who is younger, more diverse and more connected, luxury has been flipped on its head," said Paul James, global brand leader of **Starwood's** luxury hotels, New York.

"Propelled by market gains and skewed economic recovery, this new generation is looking at how they can reward themselves with a reinvigorated desire to do more things

and discover new destinations," he said.

Starwood holds an annual Luxury Luncheon to discuss the brand's projections for the new year.

Travelogues

The modern traveler is not tied down by tradition and approaches travel looking for the highs and lows and the best and worst of an experience. As an anecdote for this behavior, Mr. James explained that travelers still enjoy going to The Metropolitan Museum of Art when they visit New York, but they are just as inclined to explore a strange tequila bar on the Lower East Side.

Travelers now are after much more than a leisurely stay at a property, but rather crave an adventure that does not necessarily have to be glamorous. Now more than ever, consumers are dipping in and out of luxury and testing new experiences and sharing with friends, not so much about where they went but how they felt while there.



St. Regis promotional image

“What’s happened is luxury has become borderless,” Mr. James said. “There are no barriers – we live in real time.

“Travel is democratic,” he said. “Anybody can and will go anywhere.”

Social media furthered this by altering how travel is expressed. Instead of returning from a trip with a photo album to share, friends know where they were because they were watching and following along the journey. The conversation now revolves around the impression an experience has left.

For example, social media is changing the way consumers experience both fashion and art, creating a heightened level of accessibility. Now, instead of a limited number of people who are attending a show and able to take part in the event, everyone is invited via posts ([see story](#)).

Away and abroad

2015 is slated to become Starwood's largest year for growth across its three luxury brands. These openings reflect consumer behavior and are a testament to the reality of the international growth narrative.

Over the next five years, Starwood is doubling its luxury footprint in the Middle East. Properties in the region include the first St. Regis and W Hotel in Dubai, U.A.E. and Luxury Collection's entrance into Lebanon with a hotel in Beirut.

From the Middle East, Starwood's expansion spreads to China with the first St. Regis opening in Macau. Within the next two to three years Mr. James projected that another 10 properties will open as China's interior and second-tier cities become more developed.

Japan also saw the opening of Luxury Collection's first property in the country ([see story](#)).



Luxury Collection's The Suiran in Kyoto

India is also seeing a growth in hospitality with the St. Regis' first Mumbai property. To account for the country's acceleration, Starwood is moving its global headquarters to India in March 2015 for a month-long immersion experience.

The headquarters will be split between Mumbai and Delhi where daily business will be conducted. Starwood will likely gain a better sense of how the country fits into its global ambitions ([see story](#)).

Even with Europe's current economic strife, Starwood's luxury properties are still seeing growth. For example, W Hotel will open what will likely be the last new luxury property in downtown Amsterdam and Luxury Collection has reentered Milan after a 21-year hiatus.



Excelsior Hotel Gallia, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Milan

Also, South America has shown great potential for luxury hotel properties, with the W Bogota Hotel being one of the fastest booking Starwood hotels in the portfolio after its opening shortly before Christmas of 2014.

Over the next 12 months, conservatively, Starwood plans to open 15 new hotels in its luxury portfolio with another seven or eight major renovations and restorations planned for those already in operation.

These endeavours are a reflection of Starwood's strategic plans, its understanding of travel narratives and its response to guests' experiential demands.

"The skill of doing stuff is at the heart of luxury products," Mr. James said. "How good can you be at cooking, how good you can be at service or making the perfect handbag.

"[Starwood] talked a lot about heritage," he said. "We also talked about what ties it all together and inspires and what inspires travel is the narrative and the story that binds it."

Final Take

Jen King, lead reporter on Luxury Daily, New York

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