

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

Marriott International to grow independent luxury hotel brands by 20pc this year

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The Cotton House Hotel takes inspiration from the building's former status as a textile mill

By DANNY PARISI

NEW YORK Marriott International is banking on three newly acquired luxury hotel properties as it preps to significantly expand its hotel portfolio over the next year.

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A major part of its strategy going forward is an emphasis on the Autograph collection, which gives each location a totally unique design, theme and story tied to its location and context in a departure from cookie-cutter hotel chains. Balancing the individuality of each Autograph hotel with global standards of quality was a tricky maneuver, but the company manages it with the help of individual hotel owners.

"The majority of Autograph hotels are designed by the individual owners and developers that have their own idea," said Brian Povinelli, senior vice president and global brand leader for Marriott's Premium Distinctive Brands, New York. "They use some of our approved branding agencies to make sure they're pulling through an immersive story.

"Most of the hotels' design is from the individual owner's vision and we just make sure it meets our criteria. If they want our help, we can give them resources.

"The whole appeal is the independent spirit. This is their hotel; it's not infused with corporate mandated criteria."

Hotel independence

At the Hunt & Fish Club near Times Square, Marriott International reconfigured the space into a recreation of some of the hotels it is opening over the next year under three key brand umbrellas: Luxury Collection, Autograph Collection and Tribute Portfolio.

By the end of the year, these three brands are expected to grow by 20 percent with more than 40 new hotels opening in 2017 between the three of them.



Domes of Elounda, Autograph Collection

The Autograph Collection alone will see 23 new hotels being opened this year. Autograph is part of Marriott's Premium Distinctive brand portfolio and is focused on making each hotel a completely unique experience.

Mr. Povinelli pointed to the Press Hotel in Portland, Maine as a prime example of Autograph's approach to making these hotels not just unique, but intricately tied into the local culture in a way that makes it feel a natural part of the area and not just a copied and pasted replica of other hotels.

The Press Hotel is situated in the historic Gannett Building, the former printing facility of the Portland Press Herald, the local newspaper. This history is imbued throughout the hotel, with newspaper clippings, historic fonts and other design elements that call to mind the history of the building and the city.

Luxury growth

Autograph, Luxury Collection and Tribute Portfolio are a few of the most upscale brands that now make up Marriott International's overall portfolio.

Marriott controls eight luxury brands with a presence in 65 different countries. Its global footprint allows Marriott the opportunity to serve guests all over the world, whether that means a party atmosphere or a more relaxing retreat ([see story](#)).

Since absorbing Starwood, Marriott has also begun integrating more of its customer service features, such as a mobile check-in option that carries over from Starwood's mobile loyalty program.



El Mangroove, Autograph Collection

The new mobile check-in feature will be available for every customer who is a member of the Starwood Preferred Guest program. Global rollout of this new mobile feature is expected to wrap up around the end of 2017 ([see story](#)).

For now, Marriott is focused on growing these three premiere brands. The company is hoping that the independence provided to hotel owners under these umbrellas will attract ambitious hoteliers and, in turn, high-value guests.

Mr. Povinelli noted that the desire for consistent hotel experiences and memorable individuality are not mutually

exclusive.

"There's an appetite for both, and we're dedicating some of our other brands to have a consistent experience in every hotel," Mr. Povinelli said. "There's a huge appetite for that.

"But for Autograph, the owner does their own work, they have to create their own brand and they have to create a unique experience for the guests."

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