

Q&A

Hotels relying heavily on technology risk losing intimate touch of luxury travel experience

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Lebua is focused on how technology can provide an authentic experience without superseding the human element. Image credit: Lebua Hotels and Resorts

By DANNY PARISI

After smartphones and the Internet came into prominence, luxury hotels seemed to be chasing the next technological step that would streamline the travel experience.

But now that smartphones are so ubiquitous as to be distracting, luxury hotels have often found that taking a lower-tech approach to engaging customers is the more effective route. Instead, hotels such as lebua, owner of luxury resorts in Bangkok and parts of India, have been seeking ways to make technology work for customers in the background while all of their experiences are driven by a more human touch.

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In this Q&A, lebua CEO Deepak Ohri discusses his philosophy on how technology and in-person communication can work together to create an experience truly worthy of the term "luxury."

What projects are you working on right now?

Luxury is defined as an experience. We are adding new dimensions to our experiences.

We follow a lot of luxury lifestyle brands and what we've found is that the most discerning customers want something bespoke. The experience cannot be the same for everyone or else it is no longer unique.

What we are doing is we are partnering with vineyards and chefs and they are creating special blends, wines that you can't get anywhere else, just for our restaurants.



Lebuha CEO Deepak Ohri. Image credit: Lebuha Hotels and Resorts

Our restaurant Mezzaluna has just received two Michelin stars. This is the first time an Indian promoter serving French food by a Japanese chef using Bangkok ingredients has gotten a Michelin star.

All this is adding to an experience that cannot be replicated anywhere else

Now, we are debuting some of the most expensive omakase in the world. Part of what we are doing is serving sake in the traditional way, out of wooden casks and ceramic cups, the way it would have been served traditional in Japan, except the wooden casks are stainless steel on the inside.

We want to take you back to the olden days but still give you luxurious experience. You feel the authenticity but you still get the high quality.

We want people to see how sake was made in the olden days without sacrificing modern conveniences.

What are your thoughts on balancing those real, authentic experiences with technological advances?

We use technology only up until we can serve our customer right.

Our tech will always be behind-the-scenes, never up front in a customer's face, because then you would lose the experience. When you lose the experience, it's just an expensive meal.

When you use too much technology, the touch goes missing. We want you to have sake served out of a stainless steel so it doesn't dilute the taste, but from the customer's perspective, they still see the beautiful wooden cask.

What separates a standard hotel experience from a luxury hotel experience?

I can't say that I give luxury experiences. It's for the customers to feel like they had a luxury experience, not for me to tell them.

Standard experiences are things you can experience anywhere anytime. You order Starbucks, you wait in line, you pick it up, it's the same at every Starbucks in the world.

Bangkok is a very old city and none of the other hotels there have a heritage there. That's what we specialize in.

We want each experience to feel carved out, something you can only get there and nowhere else.

What do you think are some of the challenges facing hotels today?

It's very expensive and it's not expandable. Creating unique experiences, specific to each hotel is not scalable because each one must be different.

Where do you think the hotel industry is heading in the next few years?

The hotel industry is moving on a growth platform but there will be a consolidation. Fashion is going in the same direction.

But at the same time, stand-alone hotels and unique places are doing better than chain hotels. And that's because people want unique experiences.

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