

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

Rocco Forte Hotels translates European DNA to more corners of the globe

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Rocco Forte is opening in Shanghai in August. Image credit: Rocco Forte

By SARAH JONES

As family-owned hospitality company Rocco Forte Hotels expands its portfolio of properties to new markets, it is maintaining its focus on European service and positioning.

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By the end of this summer, the group will have grown its hotel locations to 15, with planned openings in Shanghai, Rome and Puglia, Italy, as it undergoes its most ambitious expansion plan to-date. While Rocco Forte seeks to bring the local culture of each location to life in its properties, the main theme underpinning all of its hotels is European at heart.

"It's always been a very Anglo-Italian DNA as a group," said Phillip Haller, vice president of brand marketing at **Rocco Forte Hotels**. "Sir Rocco comes from Italy, but he was born in England. And I think the service and training focus is very European, but respectful of other cultures."

Place-centric positioning

Sir Rocco Forte founded his eponymous hotel chain in 1996. It was his second venture into hotels, as he had previously run his family's 800-strong Forte Group portfolio of properties, which included the Watergate Hotel, Htel George-V in Paris and the Le Mridien brand.

After Forte was acquired in a takeover by Granada in 1996, Sir Rocco moved on to found Rocco Forte Hotels.

Among the properties in the Rocco Forte portfolio are former Forte Group hotels including Brown's in London and The Balmoral in Edinburgh, which were reacquired in the years following the takeover.

Along with chairman and CEO Sir Rocco, the company is run by his sister Olga Polizzi, who is deputy chairman and director of design, overseeing the look of each of the hotels.

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This Spring, this is where you'll find us. Spot Brunelleschi's Cupola in our custom fuchsia pink & turquoise glass table tops and benches inspired by the Mediterranean Sea, designed by #Pucci. #IreneFirenze

A post shared by Irene Firenze (@irene_firenze) on Apr 30, 2018 at 4:28am PDT

Irene at Hotel Savoy in Florence features a collaboration with Pucci, which was overseen by Olga Polizzi

Most of the properties that the group chooses to invest in are historic buildings. For instance, the company has renovated a farmhouse in Puglia, converting it into a 40-room hotel dubbed Masseria Torre Maizza.

Taking a different approach than many of its competitors, Rocco Forte opts to buy or lease hotels rather than entering into management agreements with owners. This enables the company to not only have a level of permanence, but also drive all of the decision making independently.

"The hotels are beautiful landmarks, and they're in really special parts of the city," Mr. Haller said. "We tend not to manage very much, we either like to own or to lease, because we can then make something that is really special."

"When you manage, it's always a bit of a marriage of convenience to some degree," he said.

A number of Rocco Forte's recent renovations have focused on reducing rooms, allowing for the more spacious accommodations that guests are looking for. For instance, Hotel Savoy in Florence got a makeover that reduced its room count by 20, with a resulting 80-room layout.

Similarly, the upcoming opening in Rome, Hotel de la Ville, was previously an Intercontinental property and has undergone a room reduction from 200 to 104.

For the 17th century building situated at the top of the Spanish Steps, Rocco Forte has taken inspiration from the grand tours that the aristocracy used to take as they came of age. This has resulted in a property that is skewed toward a younger crowd.

Hotel de la Ville is situated at the top of the Spanish Steps

The connecting thread between the design and concept of each of Rocco Forte's properties is the desire to portray a sense of place. While this influences the physical building's ideation, it also extends to amenities and experiences.

For instance, The Balmoral leans on its Scottish location to offer a tartan butler that enables guests to find their family's particular plaid. A newly opened restaurant at the hotel, Brasserie Prince by Michelin-starred chef Alain Roux, presents a culinary take on the relationship between Scotland and Bonnie Prince Charlie through dishes that blend Scottish and French cuisine.

In St. Petersburg, Russia guests can take a ballet class at the hotel or join a tour of the White Nights.

Another element of experience building is through partnerships. For instance, Rocco Forte linked with cruise line Silversea on both excursions and exclusive benefits.

Guest profile

Millennials are a growing travel force, but for luxury hotels, boomers still drive much of the business. Rocco Forte sees the most traffic from guests who are 50 and older.

Meanwhile, the millennial luxury travelers are mostly coming from Saudi Arabia and China.

With the number of Chinese luxury travelers only expected to grow, hospitality brands need to strategize how to best appeal to these customers' evolving habits, including their focus on family.

According to a new report by [The Luxury Conversation](#), and commissioned by Reuter Communications, more Chinese affluents are traveling with their families than ever before. Moreover, the demands and needs of young children are having a greater impact on vacation planning with an overwhelming majority of affluent Chinese travelers allowing their children to make travel choices ([see story](#)).

American tourists are the largest audience for Rocco Forte, accounting for about 30 percent of all nights across the portfolio. The American presence is even greater in Italy.

Much of Rocco Forte's business comes from its travel advisor partners. The company runs a loyalty program for its agents, rewarding them for bookings.

Instead of eliminating the role of the travel agent, technology has actually increased consumers' desire for a human interaction, according to a marketing strategist from high-end hospitality network Virtuoso.

During the digital revolution about 20 years ago, many cried that the death of the travel agent was looming, as online travel agencies appeared, giving consumers the ability to book trips themselves. In a presentation during Luxury Interactive 2016, a speaker explained how contrary to this prediction, most travel agencies are looking to hire as affluent travelers in particular call upon their service ([see story](#)).

While travel agents act as a liaison between a brand and travelers, Rocco Forte is ramping up its communication efforts towards consumers, advertising to them directly.

Since the hotels do not share the brand's name, many of the property names are more well-known than the group's moniker. Through marketing, the group is looking to raise awareness for Rocco Forte as a whole.

"We're doing more advertising communication making sure that people get to know Rocco Forte more," Mr. Haller said. "So that's an education process we started last year in the States, and we are doing more of that."