

# Influencers <sup>in</sup> Hospitality

**Influencers in Hospitality** is a regular RLA Q&A with movers and shakers of the hospitality world, providing enlightening industry perspectives whilst sharing some personal traits that have made them successful.

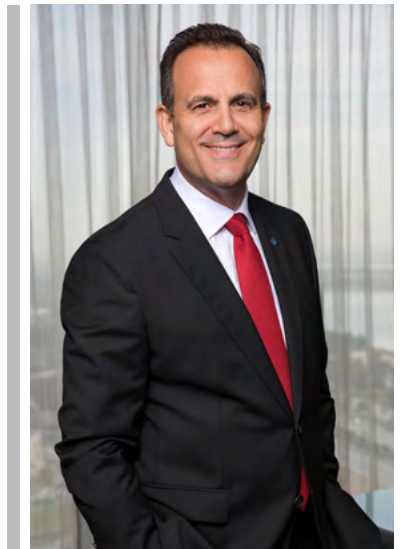
The Rotana and industry legend **Omer Kaddouri** is currently the President & CEO of the highly successful Rotana hotel management company with a portfolio of over 100 properties throughout the Middle East, Africa and Turkey. Prior to his two decades with Rotana in various senior management positions, the Les Roche-graduate Omer gained his professional experiences in hospitality and management at renowned hotel chains like Hilton and Shangri-La.

**RLA: Is there a particular skill or attribute that has helped you in your professional life?**

OK: My love for the profession and most importantly a genuine interest in people. For me, hospitality is a true calling. I am competitive with a drive and passion for perfection and this is how I lead my team.

**RLA: How do you keep all stakeholders, particularly Owners and investors happy?**

OK: We try our utmost to keep it personal with all stakeholders, a luxury most international hotel chains cannot afford, and what most likely sets Rotana apart. Our proximity, our availability and our personal touch, the fact that we treat our owners' properties as our own despite being a management company, gives us that edge. Also, it's all about delivering the right results and managing the owner's expectations. Within the current challenging business environment, and with a deeper involvement of asset managers and owners, we must be passionate about business and become business people. We strive every day to uncover the revenue potential of our hotels and use all the techniques we have developed to grow both top and bottom line financial results.



Omer Kaddouri, President & CEO, Rotana Hotel Management Corporation PJSC

**RLA: As an industry what should we stop or start doing?**

OK: We need to go back to the basics of our business and never forget what hospitality is all about and why people stay in hotels. Over the past five years the hospitality industry has introduced a raft of high-tech innovations designed to enhance the guest experience. From robots that act as a virtual concierge to smartphone room keys, technology is revolutionising the way in which customers interact with hotels and hospitality firms. Remote check-in and check-out options are becoming increasingly popular as many guests prefer the convenience of conducting simple tasks such as these remotely and online. Emotion and travel are intrinsically linked. From the second we decide to book a hotel or destination, often inspired by photos or the enthusiasm of friends and family, to the moment we are warmly greeted by name in the hotel lobby after a long and tiring journey, travel is about sensory experiences and how we are made to 'feel'. If we introduce technology at every guest touchpoint, we are desensitising the experience and it becomes inhospitable, which is the opposite of what hoteliers are trying to achieve. While technology will play an increasingly important role in the guest experience in the future, we must ensure we maintain a balance and never forget we are first and foremost, a people business, based on real human relationships. The digital world is here to stay but it should not intrude to the point where it isolates our guests and increases their anxiety.

**RLA: In the next decade or two, what do you foresee changing about the Hotel Guest Experience?**

OK: Definitely not a robotic experience! But as I mentioned earlier, technology will certainly continue to play a big role in the guest experience. The hospitality industry is in a state of constant evolution and the guest is at the heart of everything we do. Successful hoteliers adapt to current trends, demands and new source markets and also take a proactive approach to anticipating the needs of future travellers too. I believe hotels will break the boundaries of a room or a space and will offer guests a richer experience that goes beyond the confines of the hotel. Furthermore, we all need to be much more aware of operating sensibly with regards to the environment, and I think sustainability will become more and more evident in hotel operations.

**RLA: During your long career in how many hotel developments and operations have you been involved, and which country was the most complicated hotel operation and why?**



Omer Kaddouri with Roger Allen, Group CEO of RLA

OK: Apart from my Hilton and Shangri La life, since I joined Rotana in 1998, I have been involved in more than 52 openings across the Middle East, Africa and Turkey. The company's ambitious development strategy has seen us enter many emerging markets before our competition, winning us multiple accolades and cementing our reputation as one of the region's most visionary hospitality firms. Our expansion strategy has always been conducted in a sustainable fashion and I believe one of our biggest achievements has been our consideration of the positive impact we can have on a society when we open new properties, helping people to learn about our industry and how to capitalise on our presence. Our hotels are located in diverse markets, some are more challenging than others, Kinshasa or Erbil to a certain degree, yet we have achieved consistency, and at every property across all five brands, guests can expect

the same quality of service and attention to detail. In Khartoum as an example, we opened the hotel with 90% expat colleagues and 10% local talent and today, we are running the hotel with the complete reversed ratio and this is very rewarding for us.

**RLA: In our industry where can we find additional or hidden value?**

OK: I started this interview stating that we need to strive to uncover the revenue potential of our hotels and use all the techniques we have developed to grow both top and bottom line financial results. We have to analyse which parts of the business truly add value to the bottom line, and which don't and explore every space and every opportunity. Today, we need to turn the tradition on its head and deliver better value. Our meeting rooms, food & beverage outlets, lobby lounges and so on, can be converted from their traditional status to delivering more results. It's going to be the decade of the square metre!

**RLA: What is the best piece of advice you have ever received?**

OK: A dear mentor of mine once said to me that we should always look at things in a different light, continuously enhance and improve what we do and how we do things. I live by this and I never stop thinking about ways to improve all elements of running a business, which is a culture that I embraced throughout my career and pass on to my team.

**RLA: What do you think is true that many people might disagree with?**

OK: I am a true believer that people are what makes the difference and for some this is not necessarily true. You can have the best product in the world but if the service offered is not up to your expectations, then there will be less value in the product. I also believe that the salary is not the only matter that motivates someone to stay with a company. People feel way more motivated if you spark their interest and engage with them every step of the way to feel part of any company's success and growth. However, I am not saying money is not important...

**RLA: What is the most unusual thing you've had to do to "make it work"?**

OK: I would like to think that the unusual is usual in our business. This is the only way we can make a difference. If I had to recall one particular moment where we had to adapt quickly, it would be when the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan paid an unscheduled visit to the newly renovated lobby of the Beach Rotana hotel. We created improvised lobby seating in front of the reception desk to make sure he was comfortable. Being able to meet him in person and talk to him was truly one of the most inspiring experiences in my time with Rotana.

**RLA: Having completed 20 years with Rotana, you will be leaving at the end of 2018, what will be next?**

OK: Certainly not retirement! We have decided to relocate to Amsterdam. Not only to be closer to family and friends, but also to pursue my passion in restaurants and hospitality enterprises throughout Europe.