

Different strokes

Guy Poujoulat, GM of the new Sofitel Bahrain Zallaq Thalassa Sea & Spa in Bahrain, talks to *Hotelier* about pre-opening, Bahrain's tourism industry and the growing value of spas



GM INTERVIEW

Every new luxury hotel that opens in the Middle East promises to be bigger, better and bolder. Often, some might argue that they are in fact doing exactly the same things as every other hotel in the region, just with shinier doors and — if it's possible — even more marble. But in the case of Sofitel Bahrain Zallaq Thalassa Sea & Spa, the claims may well be true.

As the first hotel in the Middle East to offer thalassotherapy, it is bringing something new to the region and tapping in to the trend for wellness spas.

Despite the current unrest in Bahrain, the hotel opened as scheduled at the end of February and like all businesses, is now focused on coping with the ever-changing environment.

Looking ahead, general manager Guy Poujoulat — who has worked for Sofitel in Beijing and Bangkok — tells *Hotelier* the property is definitely something to get excited about.

"Bahrain needs something like this," he explains. "We are opening a fully-fledged leisure hotel on one of the very few natural beaches on the island, so we have a prime beach location, we are unique in offering thalassotherapy, and we are a destination within a destination. And this destination, this island, needs this hotel."

For those not in the know, thalassotherapy comprises a variety of treatments (including body wraps and hydro massage) carried out using seawater and seaweed, which reportedly contain healing properties.

The inclusion of the thalassotherapy in the name of the hotel is, Poujoulat explains, a tactical move to publicise the spa and encourage more people to come and try it.

"Thalassa is definitely a market that has no offering in the region, so in the market we have organised some brochures, while in Saudi Arabia there



THIS DESTINATION NEEDS THIS HOTEL

Guy Poujoulat, the GM of the Sofitel Bahrain Zallaq Thalassa Sea & Spa, says the hotel is unique in the region.

are already two operators specialising in spas, so there is very big interest from the market," he says.

"People in the region are increasingly concerned about losing weight and we are also proposing programmes for children and teenagers as this hotel will cater primarily to families."

The families paying the hotel a visit are expected to mostly come from GCC countries, says Poujoulat, who believes that the country has yet to really target the international visitor.

"From a tourism perspective, the sector has been not very aggressive in marketing and offering Bahrain as a tourism destination."

"So basically it is more open to the regional market, like people coming over from Saudi Arabia at the weekend, apart from all the international conferences, of which there are several," he adds.

Poujoulat was also counting on the Bahrain Grand Prix to bring in business, but as it is postponed — possi-

HOTEL FACTS

The hotel is located on Zallaq beach and each of the property's 262 rooms boasts a private balcony with sea views. It is located 30 minutes from Bahrain International Airport, with easy access to the capital Manama, only 25 minutes south-west of it. The hotel has nine restaurants and bars, as well as meetings and conference facilities and the Thalassa spa, which covers 2000m². The facility features 14 treatment rooms and will combine seawater hydrotherapy, massages and wellness programmes.

bly indefinitely — amid the country's unrest, this does not look likely, while the violence reported by media worldwide will do little to entice overseas travellers to visit Bahrain.

Sofitel Bahrain Zallaq resident manager Fares Yactine spoke to *Hotelier* as the magazine was going to print about the impact on the opening.

"We have to deal with the situation with caution, as we can't really go big and create a buzz for the opening in such events, and at the same time we want to promote the hotel and generate business, so we had to change our marketing strategy," he explains.

He is keen to assert, however, that the resort is "a destination in itself".

"This hotel was and is an important opening for us, like any new opening following the repositioning of the brand into the luxury segmentation, because it is a hotel which boasts thalassotherapy and is the first of these [types of spas] opening in this part of the world," he concludes.

Something truly different in the heart of the Middle East that has opened against the odds — we can't wait to try it. ■