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'We have a flagship Hilton in Malta'



Jean Faivre: "Hilton Malta is absolutely one of our key hotels in Europe and is recognised as such". Photos: Chris Sant Fournier

*Hilton Europe vice president operations, western and southern Europe **Jean Faivre** speaks to **Anthony Manduca** about the Hilton brand as well as the potential for its growth and that of the travel and tourism industry.*

Hilton Malta has just completed a €15 million refurbishment programme carried out in a record 10 weeks. "I have been in this business for 40 years and I have never witnessed such an impressive embellishment programme carried out over a span of just 10 weeks," Jean Faivre says with some satisfaction.

Mr Faivre, who is responsible for Hilton hotels in Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Malta, Spain and The Netherlands, takes pride in showing me around the various areas of the Hilton Malta that have been beautifully embellished, including the hotel's event spaces, restaurants, all the bedrooms – which have been given a blue Mediterranean look – the executive lounge facilities as well as the hotel's lifts.

The extensive refurbishment project, Mr Faivre explains, was headed by fellow Frenchman Jean-Philippe Nuel, an internationally acclaimed designer and architect behind some of France's boldest new boutique hotels, who had said: "Hotel interiors should reflect an oasis to relax and escape. It's important that if you had to spend a couple of days in your hotel, you'd love every minute of it."

Mr Faivre is full of praise for Hilton in Malta: "Malta is extremely resilient, we really have a flagship Hilton in Malta, it's an outstanding hotel with a lot of facilities and it is also one of the best locations in Malta. Our founder had said: 'It's all about location, location, location.' The product is constantly being renovated and the quality of our team members is superb, so I think Hilton Malta is absolutely one of our key hotels in Europe and is recognised as such. We have been here for many years, we have great relations with the Fenech family and the Tumas Group, and together we have achieved great results, so we are very proud of this hotel."

The polite soft-spoken Frenchman believes there are many opportunities for growth for Hilton in Europe and beyond. "If we go to our customers and companies, large corporations, they are looking for more locations and we are talking regularly to them on how we can act. Last year we crossed the 100-countries barrier and we have more opportunities in the pipeline. We are opening a new Hilton hotel in Catania, probably next year, which will be the largest conference centre in the Mediterranean. We are also opening a 162-bedroom Hilton in Lake Como next year," he says.

Is the present political and economic climate in Europe conducive to expansion?

"We understand what is happening in the world. Our eyes are definitely open. However, we feel that through travelling and through the hospitality industry, we create a lot of opportunities not only for us but also for employment. Travel and tourism is the world's single largest employer, accounting for almost 10 per cent of global employment, and it is expected to generate 73 million new jobs by 2022.

"As our CEO Christopher Nassetta said at Davos two years ago, Hilton aims to impact at least one million young people by

Two out of five hotel rooms under construction today is a
Hilton

2019 by helping them to reach their full potential, either through training, education or indeed employment itself.”

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The Hilton has established a portfolio of 13 world-class hotel brands, including the flagship Hilton Hotels & Resorts brand. What is the thinking behind this strategy?

“These hotels are all part of the Hilton Group, ranging from high luxury to a focused service, and over the years brands have had to diversify themselves to increase the choice to the market.

“For example, we had the Waldorf Astoria, our flagship in the US, as well as expertise in the luxury field, so we felt there was an opportunity, and we have about 50 luxury hotels between Waldorf Astoria and Conrad Hotels [also part of the Hilton portfolio]. This creates more choice in the markets. We have a huge variety to respond to customers’ demands and market pressure.”



Jan Faivre, third from right, Matthew Mullan, general manager of Hilton Malta, right, with some staff members of Hilton Malta.

Asked about who he considers the Hilton’s direct competitors to be and what makes the Hilton brand so special, Mr Faivre says that he considers everybody to be a competitor.

“Many hotel chains we compete with have a similar approach to the business because they are global, and some of these groups like us are of American origin.

“What I think differentiates us from our competitors, if we look at the big chains, is first of all the heritage of our founder, Conrad Hilton, which has really created a cement across the world.

“A few years ago we merged Hilton Hotels Corporation and Hilton International into one single company.

“We have grown in terms of development, we have more than 4,700 hotels, we are developing very fast, and two out of five hotel rooms under construction today is a Hilton room.

“Our deployment, the number of hotels, the reach we have, our loyalty programme with five million active members, and all we do in terms of training and development for our team members are important strengths.

“Hilton is still known as ‘the school after the school’, so anyone who is undergoing hotel training will generally want to join Hilton to further his expertise.”

Mr Faivre was in Malta to address the Mediterranean Leadership Summit organised by The Economist. Last Thursday he addressed the conference on ‘Trade and investment in the Mediterranean’ where he stressed the need to invest in interconnectivity across the region as a means of achieving economic integration.

“We are represented in 100 countries so it is important for business that we ease access of travel. We need to speak to our government representatives and all relevant bodies about how we can lift visa restrictions. Malta returned to Schengen at the beginning of January [after it was suspended due to the Valletta Summit on Migration and the Commonwealth Heads of

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Government Meeting in November] and we have seen an immediate increase in the arrival numbers.

“This is always the case when visa restrictions are addressed, it facilitates travel for both business and leisure and definitely brings additional income to the country and increased GDP. So we are obviously very much in favour of this and we have made our views known in Brussels, London and even in Malta. We don't necessarily insist on the lifting of visa restrictions into the EU but at least the facilitating of the visa process, the length of time it takes for visas to be issued.

“Some people might decide to travel on the spur of the moment, but in some cases a visa might take up to three weeks to be issued, so they might decide to go elsewhere.

“We do understand the constraints involved and what is happening in the world but nevertheless our message is for governments and authorities to help facilitate the process,” he says.

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