

Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts stakes first claim in Vietnam

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Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts' first foray into Asia's hottest hotel development market centres on the country's very first upscale property.

Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts, the Swiss chain with more than 90 hotels existing or under construction worldwide, made Ho Chi Minh City's five-star accommodation scene this month by assuming management of the Omni Hotel Saigon, which opened in 1994 as the city's inaugural international-standard hotel.

Now called Mövenpick Hotel Saigon, the landmark is undergoing myriad upgrades and changes that will allow it to sparkle in the high-end category, a segment that has grown by leaps and bounds here in recent years but still pales in comparison to demand.

'This is a move we've been eyeing for a long time,' said Hubert Klemenzenz, the hotel's general manager and the chain's vice president of operations for Vietnam. 'Statistics continue to show that Vietnam has massive tourism and business traveller appeal but a shortage of hotels that possess warm-hearted hospitality and quality-our signature. The timing is right in every way.'

Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts arrival in Ho Chi Minh City is the first in a series of steps the group plans for a country that welcomed more than four million visitors in 2007-a 16 percent increase over the previous year. A similar overhaul-and-operate strategy has been plotted at the former Guoman Hotel in Hanoi, starting in January, as well as the development and handling of up to three more hotels in Vietnam by 2010.

In Ho Chi Minh City, Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts inherits a storied address. During the Vietnam War, the site was headquarters of America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), according to a 1994 South Morning China Post report. In the early '90s, Hong Kong's Marco Polo Hotel Group razed what was left of the edifice and constructed a gleaming hotel of a standard never before seen in a city taking its first baby steps toward a market economy.

Today, the seven-storey building near the international airport and not far from downtown will be managed by Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts, which has committed to revitalising not just the hotel property but the greater Phu Nhuan District, an area fast becoming one of Ho Chi Minh City's most desirable locales for business travellers and holidaymakers alike.

'From an exhibition centre nearby, to all the office and retail space being developed up and down its streets, Phu Nhuan is booming,' said Klemenzenz. 'Throw in the amenities that Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts is adding and we're confident this will be a favourite stopover for any kind of visitor.'

Alterations are being made from top to bottom, with a high-tech gym and open-air bar slated for the rooftop and a collection of boutique shops and a European-style gourmet café set to take the place of existing eateries at street level. Inside, the lobby's elegance is being elevated throughout, with the help of Bangkok-based Leo International Design.

All guest rooms will be restyled, too, with windows that create a sense of seamlessness between the bathroom and living areas and robust rain showers chief among the additions. The old gym, on the third floor, will be turned into rooms, boosting the total number to 267.

On the same level, guests will enjoy a spacious outdoor pool area that overlooks the front courtyard and a spa facility with its 17 treatment rooms, sauna, steam bath, whirlpool and hair salon.

Despite recent inflation, Vietnam continues to experience a high rate of economic growth. Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts has positioned itself to service this market with six multi-purpose rooms that can accommodate most any type of function, from small boardroom meetings to large ballroom events. High-speed Internet coverage is available throughout. The business centre will be expanded.

The old Omni Saigon was renowned citywide for its superb dining options, and so, Klemenzenz noted, the popular Japanese restaurant Nishimura and Café Saigon will remain in place on the ground level. Upstairs, Lotus Court, whose Dim Sum lunch menu has been attracting Cantonese cuisine lovers for years, offers three private dining rooms and, soon, a wall of fish tanks to enhance the authentic Chinese experience.

Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts was founded in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1973 and moved into Germany in 1980. In 2003, it was recognised as the 'fastest growing hotel chain in the Middle East' at the World Travel Market in London.

The enterprise began its Asian expansion in 2006, when it signed a management agreement with a hotel in Bangalore, India, and assumed operations of a holiday resort in Phuket, Thailand. Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts current plans for this region include adding three or more properties to its portfolio in Vietnam.

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