

## Inside 7-Star Hotel 'Emirates Palace'

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The 7-star Emirates Palace Hotel in Abu Dhabi was built at a cost of \$3 billion - the most expensive hotel ever built. It opened its doors in 2005, offering 302 rooms and 92 suites. The Emirates Palace sits upon 222 acres of plush landscape with 114 domes rising almost 200 feet into the air. The Grand Atrium rises higher than the dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and is topped with a 20-karat gold finial. A total 86,114 square feet of 22-carat gold leaf adorns the hotel, in addition to more than 1 million square feet of marble and it is decorated with 1,002 Swarovski crystal chandeliers. About 20,000 fresh roses are used in the hotel daily, and guests are served in 20 eateries from 128 kitchens and pantries.

The Media Line's Felice Friedson traveled to Abu Dhabi where she was a guest of general manager Hans Olbertz at The Emirates Palace Hotel. The following is her conversation with Mr. Olbertz.

TML: Hans Olbertz is the general manager of the Emirates Palace hotel in Abu Dhabi. You're the general manager of one of the most prestigious resort hotels in the Middle East. What does it feel like?

Hans Olbertz: It actually feels very good. I can be quite proud of running such a unique property. I would say it's even one of the best hotels in the world. You mentioned resorts. It has everything. It's a business hotel. It's a palace. It's a leisure hotel, a resort hotel and it's a congress hotel, so those are four incentives. At the same time, we have all sorts of exhibitions, and music exhibitions and performances, as well as art exhibitions here.

TML: Bon Jovi was just here. I know you have all kinds of business clientele coming in and out. You have kings coming in. But let's get back to the beginnings of the hotel. Who owns the hotel? And how quickly did it get built?

HO: The Emirates Palace is owned by the government of Abu Dhabi. It's managed by Kempinski Hotels and Resorts. It took over three years to build, with a workforce of over 20,000 people. We have been open now for three years and have established ourselves as the icon, definitely of the UAE, and of the Middle East.

TML: Twenty thousand people. You must mean around-the-clock work or you wouldn't have finished.

HO: We wouldn't have finished on time.

TML: I marvel at the marble and the gold, or gold leaf around the hotel.

HO: Gold.

TML: ...which is extraordinary.

HO: Well, it is for sure the most expensive hotel ever built. The figures go between \$2.3 to \$3 billion. And you can see it from all the products and the finish. There have been no shortcuts. And everything has come [together] to [create] perfection. Even the way we brought the sand... and the stones... and the marble and whatever you see, our operating equipment and [we have] only the finest pieces and we worked with the best companies and materials from around the world.

TML: People are coming from all over the world, different nationalities, different dialects, so how do you deal with that?

HO: Just to give you a review of the last four months here. It started with the PGA tour golf tournament, the European PGA golf tournament, where all the players were staying here because Abu Dhabi has the open championship every year. Then... President Bush, the president of the United States and Condoleezza Rice came here on a state visit, followed by the French President, Mr. Sarkozy. And meanwhile we had Mr. Mubarak, the president of Egypt, the president of Iceland, we had [dignitaries from] Kazakhstan, from Sudan, the King of Malaysia, the King of Swaziland. We recently had the King of Spain with his delegation here. And also business icons come here. Alan Greenspan came here, we had Bill Gates.

We've had huge success in music performances. We had Justin Timberlake on the beach performing live with 40,000 people. We had Elton John - a great success. And, as you know just a week ago we had Bon Jovi, with over 17,500 people. We opened the largest Picasso exhibition outside any museum, which will be featured here at the Emirates Palace for several months up until the middle of September. We just had the largest Islamic exhibition since the beginning of the year until April. Besides that, [we've had] many other shows in our auditorium, we had operas like Aida. We had philharmonic orchestras here. We have ballets here, plays. This place is a very, very vibrant place. It's not a palace of 'Sleeping Beauty', it's a very live beauty.

TML: It just sounds fabulous, but Hans, I want to go back to something, you talk about world leaders coming, do you have CIA on staff?

HO: Of course, the security aspect is one of the very important things. Each delegation comes and the embassies have their own sort of security people and so-called 'CIA,' etc. Then, the Abu Dhabi government, naturally. I think we have a very good security system in order to cope with all the different delegations. The interesting part here is the Emirates Palace consists of 394 rooms. A part of the hotel, we call it 'the palace.' There is a palace within a palace. It is completely isolated or can be isolated with special access and its own elevators. Even its own air conditioning...

TML: What about its own entrance?

HO: It has its own entrance. We have dedicated palace employees who just work in these areas. There is palace equipment, linen even - the palace room service. It's very, very dedicated. So any state visits we have, usually they have been accommodated. Everything from a security aspect is also quite fine-tuned. So we're pretty well ahead of the game.

TML: As I entered the hotel, I was overwhelmed by the numbers of staff that were approaching me and my colleague. I was wondering about the ratio of employees to guests at the Palace?

HO: It's a very good question. Abu Dhabi in itself is growing tremendously. Over the last few years the boom here is just endless in terms of development but also in terms of tourism as well. It is becoming a real culture hub as well in the world. And the Abu Dhabi Tourist Authority is really driving it. ...the Emirates Palace, being the icon of the United Arab Emirates, also attracts at the same time, international customers, developers, tourism, people who are interested in art. And that in itself requires that you have a variety of nationalities. We have 49 different nationalities with multi-language capabilities. And we have a sort of a main force which totals 1,350 employees. But then we also have outsourced employees doing the beach, the gardening, the landscaping here. It's horrendous here with this climate - it requires a large labor force and then the security [force] as well. So if you calculate everything together, we're talking approximately 1,800 employees, which gives you a ratio close to four employees per room.

TML: This hotel is more of an institution. If you look at landmark places to go to, and people, particularly tourists, will look for places to see. You are on the 'to see' list, so many people will come through the hotel who are not staying here just to see its beauty. Have you ever done a study on what drives that and who comes?

HO: Not really. Most of our guests usually stay in our hotel. However, we have a lot of visitors who would like to see it almost like a museum. The crown prince, Sheikh Muhammad Al Nahyan is very fond of showing the people in the world what Abu Dhabi has and what Abu Dhabi can do. I think he is very proud that we are absolutely in line with what he can show the world what Abu Dhabi has done. You can't beat the Emirates Palace from a landmark point of view, architecture-wise and in terms of the service we have here. So, of the people we have coming here usually you have tourists, you see investors coming here, wanting to show their colleagues and friends what the Emirates Palace looks like. Most of those guests who come here [to look], they drink coffee, they have a glass of water. We even have tours organized by tour operators that are planned as guided tours throughout the palace. So, while there still is privacy for houseguests who are being looked after, we're also opening the palace to the public.

TML: Cuisine. You can't have a grand hotel without it. You twenty places to eat in the Emirates Palace. Tell us about them.

HO: We have several exciting restaurants. We have also, over the years, been recognized by the industry with different awards. For a start we have Sayad, which is a Pacific Rim seafood restaurant. [Then we have] our very famous Italian restaurant Mezzaluna. It's been considered by far the best Italian restaurant in the United Arab Emirates. Another very enjoyable restaurant is Diwan Auberge, our Lebanese restaurant, and the Anar, our Iranian restaurant. Besides that we have two large outdoor pools, which are in the east and west wings and both of them enjoy the Cascades and Las Brisas, unique pool restaurants. And then Le Vendome Brasserie is our dining restaurant, one of the most fascinating international-style buffets of international cuisine. We have for the smokers - because here you still can smoke - a dedicated area in the Havana Club bar where you have Cuban music and can enjoy your drinks and a wonderful selection of cigars. And then we have our caviar bar, which is in the center of the hotel. And then our café, where you can enjoy the best of the lobby and at the same time enjoy local music in the background.

TML: You have been virtually all over the world in the hotel business, and for the past five months here in Abu Dhabi. Where have you been and what's left to do after managing a seven-star property?

HO: Okay, start with the first question, where I have been. I am a tour hotelier. I travel around the world, throughout Europe, throughout Germany. I am from Germany, so I have been traveling around the world. If I look at the Middle East itself, I was here in Abu Dhabi 18 years ago, then we have Cairo, Jordan. And in Asia, it's Hong Kong, Bangkok and my last post was in Seoul in South Korea. Throughout Europe, it's several places in Germany and then London, then Vienna and Athens.

TML: You've been around the world!

HO: Absolutely. So what is my plan? You run this beautiful property. First I think it is an honor to run it. It's something that is not being given to you because you have been traveling around. It has been given to you due to the fact that you can bring something, an added value to the property here. So my aim is of course to stay here as long as I can, because to run such a flagship is very hard to top in my career, and it's wonderful. It's absolutely a wonderful place and a wonderful experience. The dignitaries and the VIPS, and the VVIPs, and the kings and the queens, head of states and dignitaries and politicians and art and film [stars], and the who's who in the world come out here. So there's no other place in the world I think [where] you can meet [so many] people in such a short period of time.

TML: Is there any lull? Is there any downtime when you find you have to fill rooms like any other hotels?

HO: First of all, we are like any other business institution, so we have to make money in the end.

TML: Does it?

HO: Of course it does. This hotel is managed by Kempinski, so we are managing it here and we have the obligation to make enough money for the government and of course at the same time, I have to make money for Kempinski as well. So it's not a walk in the park. It's challenging like most of our places in the world. But here I think the support the government has given in order to bring business into Abu Dhabi and using the Emirates Palace [itself] helps a great deal.

TML: There are people looking to come who have never been. I know there are Americans talking about Dubai and Abu Dhabi as the next place they want to visit. Do you see an increase in American travel?

HO: We do. You know, for the States, anything you talk about [regarding the] Middle East, it's still an education process. The Middle East is huge. And there are certain areas where maybe at certain periods of time it is not advisable to travel to. But I would say most of the Middle East is very safe for travel, and definitely the United Arab Emirates. Otherwise you wouldn't have all the investors here, you wouldn't have the increase in tourism here if it wasn't a safe place. And Dubai and Abu Dhabi are fantastic examples of what's happening with this country. So we have actually seen over the last two, three years, a positive increase in American business, not only investors but at the same time also in tourism. Not to as great an extent as maybe the people coming from Europe, for which there are several reasons. One of the reasons, for sure, is the travel time. From Europe you can travel 5.5 hours to 6.5 hours from anywhere to be in the United Arab Emirates. Of course the States is a much longer flight. And I think the Europeans' understanding is that it is actually a very safe place to move around in. And you can get anything here. At the same time it's an adventure as well. You can get desert, in which a lot of activities can be done, like an explorer. And you have the seaside, where you can do all sorts of water sports. And shopping is good here. It's value for money. You get luxury products here. You have wonderful hotels like this one. And you know it's in general a very safe place.

TML: Can you break down in percentage the tourism market? You brought up the Americans. Can you tell me a percentage in terms of the Europeans, locals?

HO: I don't know in total the [percentage for the] United Arab Emirates, but I am speaking for the Palace. The majority of our tourism is the German-speaking world, which is mainly, Germany, Austria, Switzerland. The second biggest market is the United Kingdom, followed by France, Italy and Spain. The Asian market is now increasing as well from a tourism point of view. Especially we can see interest from China, Japan, Korea and other parts of Asia. Next I would say are the Americans, then to a smaller extent, the South Pacific. Naturally we are in the Middle East, the largest numbers of our customers are the Middle Eastern clients from all our neighboring countries.

TML: Hans, what do you do on your spare time?

HO: I do a lot of sports. I'm a sport fanatic. First of all I spend time with my family, and playing golf and doing water sports and keeping myself fit. The other thing that is wonderful here is the hospitality. I have made a lot of local friends here and they are fantastic in their hospitality. Very generous, so it's not like, these are expatriates and these are the locals and there is no interconnection. It's one country. You always feel very comfortable. The interaction is actually quite interesting, so it keeps me busy in my spare time.

TML: Do you live on premises?

HO: Yes I do.

TML: It's very difficult to run a place of this size I would think if you didn't.

HO: Yes, you have to be here almost 24 hours [a day]. There are so many things happening. With all the different state visits we have, there are always last minute demands that are sometimes not planned, so you have to act accordingly - very fast, give the right directions and decisions to your people.

TML: Which brings me to the question of the most outrageous request you have ever received from a head of state or otherwise.

HO: No, they actually don't make any outrageous ones. But it can be that all of a sudden you have to provide a special three-course dinner for 20 people at 2 o'clock in the morning because they just arrived. You have to tune into their local TV station as they have been traveling 14 hours from their home country and they would like to see their news at home, so that's been requested at very short notice sometimes. Special amenities at the last minute are things that are quite challenging, but we have coped very well because we expect the unexpected.

TML: Dates are flying through the halls of the Emirates Palace. So what's the price tag on them and how many are devoured in a year?

HO: Well, the dates are not [exactly] flying. This is the United Arab Emirates. It produces wonderful dates. It's a local culture. You have an Arabic coffee and you eat a date [with it] as a hospitality we show to our customers. So when you arrive, usually you check in at reception and you get Arabic coffee, a date - some dates - not a date. You lie by the pool and you sunbathe and chill out and the waiter will pass by and offer you some dates. And the same VIP amenities [apply] when you order a coffee throughout our restaurants. In total I can tell you we are spending \$1.5 million offering free dates and this is a wonderful thing to give a taste of the culture of the United Arab Emirates to our customers.

TML: Thank you.

HO: I hope we have more American guests coming over.

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