

People, Purpose, Process

With a recently-expanded role that sees him heading up operations for the South East Asia Pacific region on top of his existing role as COO for the Middle East and North Africa region, Radisson Hotel Group's Tim Cordon is ready to take his people-first approach to leadership across the map



When a great organisation begins a major new path of growth, it's usually down to having a great leader at its helm. And this is absolutely the case for the Radisson Hotel Group, where in January this year, Tim Cordon – COO for the company's Middle East and Africa (MEA) region saw his role expanded to take on the title of COO for their South East Asia Pacific (SEAP) region as well.

Expanding Cordon's role was a natural and significant move, intended to leverage internal talent to drive growth in Radisson's fastest-growing markets. The new appointment allows the SEAP region to benefit from Cordon's leadership, which has already fostered immense success in the MEA region.

The company has a central office in Madrid, focused on their properties in Europe; an administrative headquarters in Brussels; and a big office in Dubai. "I suppose if you look at that geographical organisation, and you were to say, 'Which is the best-suited to support our hotels and our growth strategy in South East Asia Pacific – is it the office in Madrid or the office in Dubai?', the answer is fairly straightforward," Cordon says.

"I think on top of that, we've had some modest success in the Middle East and Africa. We've managed to grow the brand fairly well. Replicating a lot of what we do here – the tactics, the support we give to the

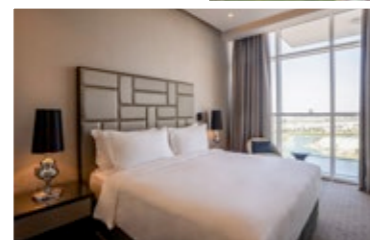
hotels, and the way we've been able to grow the business – into South East Asia has also been part of the plan. So integrating my role into the Singapore office, and taking the business into that part of the world made a lot of sense really," he adds. "I'm excited about it. It's a lot of air miles! It's been fun so far."

In the last three years, Radisson has opened more than 45 hotels in the Middle East and Africa region, and at least 160 more are underway. The company has major plans for APAC expansion, with a bold goal of 400 per cent growth by 2025. It hopes to achieve this by adding 1,700 hotels and resorts to its current portfolio of over 400 properties,

ABOVE: Tim Cordon

RIGHT: Nofa Riyadh, A Radisson Collection Resort

BELOW: Radisson Hotel Dubai DAMAC Hills



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harnessing the vast potential of China and focusing on five more key growth markets: India, Thailand, Vietnam, Australia, and New Zealand. Indeed, during the last several years, the relationship between the Middle East and the Far East has been strengthened, and clever hotel brands are aligning their growth plans accordingly.

Cordon explains that there was some internal reorganisation with the company's shareholders in China, which freed up the opportunity for him and his team to support Singapore. Radisson is owned by a Chinese company – its majority shareholder is Jin Jiang International, which, according to the 2023 Hotel World Ranking by MKG Consulting, is the second-largest hotel conglomerate worldwide in terms of the number of rooms and hotels.

Cordon notes that the growing links between the Middle East and East Asia are a major opportunity not to be overlooked. "Really, if you look at the tourism business over the next ten years, and where the growth in travellers is coming from, I don't think you need to look West. I mean, those markets are very developed. Europe and the United States are always going to be important feeder markets for our businesses in the Middle East, Africa, and the Far East, but if you look at that expansion, and the exploding middle class in China, [its importance is undeniable]. We've got to talk about India as well, with the incredible growth we're seeing there, and this explosion of the middle class there as well. The work that's being done in India is just mind-blowing, really. Those markets are primed to explode into the rest of the world, including ours. You also have markets with

dense Muslim populations, such as Indonesia for example, where we can say that's an important source market for religious tourism. Those markets are very important to us for a number of different reasons," he says.

Religious tourism is another major part of Radisson's growth strategy. The brand has already begun intensifying its efforts to expand in Saudi Arabia, with a focus on the holy cities, within the next five years. Radisson currently operates more than 26 properties in the kingdom (including hotels, resorts, and serviced apartments), and 18 more are currently under development. It hopes to double its footprint by 2030, aiming for a total of 100 hotels within the next six years across Riyadh and Jeddah, Makkah and Madinah, and other key locations.

"Saudi is a very important market for everybody. I want to talk about Radisson of course, but I think it's fair to say that the current hotel development in Saudi Arabia is probably a once-in-a-generation opportunity for everybody. And the things that are being done in Saudi Arabia now are going to change the country forever, I imagine. So it's quite exciting to be part of that.

"[Radisson] has had a long history in Saudi Arabia. We understand the market very well, we've been there for many many years, so the natural progression for us is to expand organically. And not just anywhere, but in positions of activity. We haven't really done any purchasing activity – what we've done is expand through our network, predominantly through management agreements across the kingdom, to the point that we now have about 50 hotels already in operation or in development. We've been in Makkah for nearly eight or nine years. So growing in the holy cities is not a new business model for us,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Radisson Hotel Riyadh Airport; Radisson Blu Hotel, Galleria Mall, Amman; Radisson Blu, Dubai Waterfront; Mansard Riyadh, A Radisson Collection Hotel; Radisson Resort Ras Al Khaimah

but it's a business model that excites us. Not just because historically it's always been important, but the way that Makkah and now Madinah are changing along with Saudi, and becoming more open, means it's becoming a much less

seasonal market. This makes it a lot more sustainable for hotel operators and hotel investors in the long term. We're beginning to take advantage of that as people realise that."

In a fast-growing industry where people are increasingly spoiled for choice in their hotel options, it's Cordon's approach towards work that is inspiring the rest of his teams in a way that truly stands out: through a people-first approach, in every sense.

"I wish we had the perfect balance. My view is that we should forget about perfection, and strive for improvement. So if you're doing something today, and then you try to do the same thing a little bit better tomorrow, and continue doing that every single day, then that, for me, is winning. Trying to go from where you are today, to saying 'This is [what I consider] perfect, and this is where I want to be,' is difficult for people to understand [at first] – but it becomes easier to understand when you think of it as just trying to get better every day. That marginal gains business strategy is one that I fully buy into," Cordon says.

"The [other] thing is to not lose sight of the fact that we're a hospitality company. We do lots of things, but ultimately, we deliver services and experiences for customers. That's what we do. If we aren't delivering that within our own organisation, how can

we expect people to deliver it in our hotels? It's a combination of trying to have some fun at work, definitely, and empowering people. The way we run our teams is to give the best people we possibly can the opportunity with the right tools to do the best job they can, and then to get out of their way. Don't micromanage people and constantly tinker with what they're doing. Just make the key decisions and move forward. With that approach, not only can you have a highly-motivated team, but you can also have a scalable team," Cordon says. "Because if you get it right, people can take on additional responsibility at a faster rate, because their teams are also autonomous, or semi-autonomous. That bit of empowerment is part of the 'secret' of creating that working environment," he adds.

Even though Radisson is a big company, when speaking to employees, you can't help but get a sense of a small-company feel, in terms of how connected they all seem. "We're very proud of the fact that we have some extremely high ratings from our employees on engagement and enablement – industry-leading, in fact," Cordon says.

With Radisson having swept five wins at the *Business Traveller Middle East Awards* this year, clearly they're doing something right. "The credit goes to the teams that actually do the work to deserve those awards and make these wins possible!" says Cordon.

When asked to sum up his leadership philosophy, his approach is clear and simple: "Take risks with people. And don't lose sight of the fact that it's all about the people. There's a comment I use with my hotel general managers – I say, 'Try not to be a general manager. Try and be a general leader.' And by that, what I mean is, take 100 per cent of the responsibility, and zero per cent of the credit. So when something goes well, congratulate your team. It's about them, not about you anymore. When you reach the top of the tree, and you're the general manager in a hotel, you need to empower and make your teams feel great about the work they're doing. And then we, the organisation, will give you credit. But don't try and take credit from the people in your team." ■