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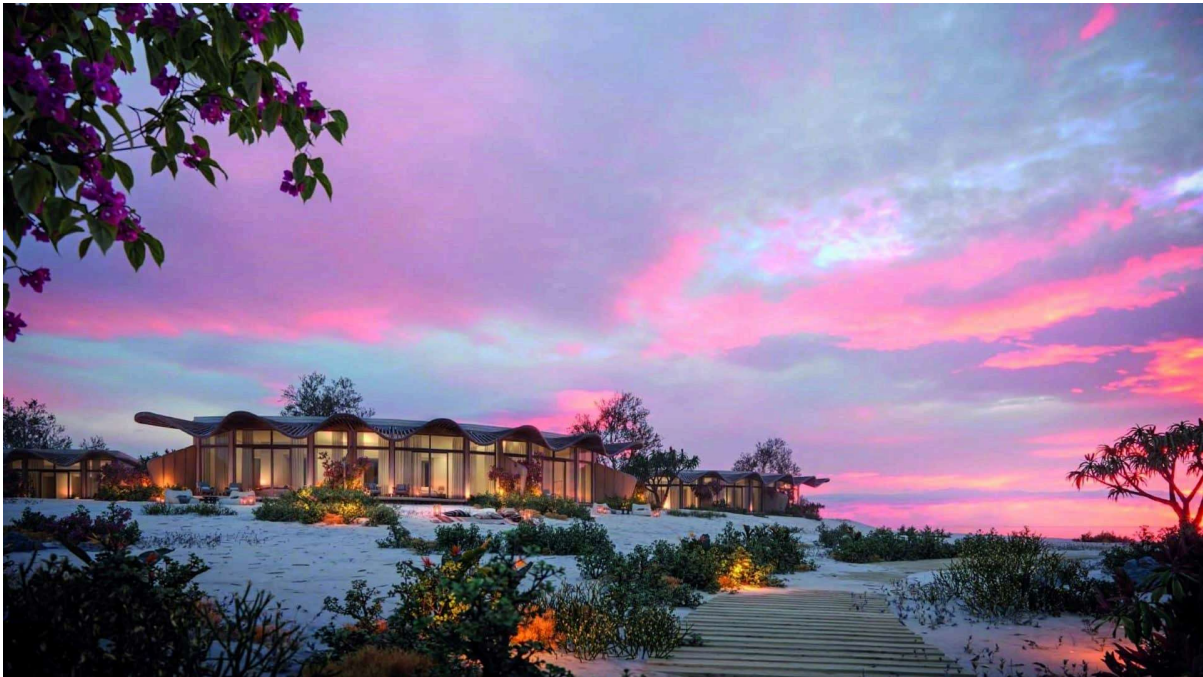
SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi's next luxury chapter: connecting with history and culture

Saudi Arabia's Red Sea properties plan to help tourists connect with and learn about Saudi history and traditions

by Emily D'Silva January 14, 2025 02:30 PM GST

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Rendering of Guestrooms Outside View Sunset;Main feature - Miraval

Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's Red Sea region is positioned to become a leading destination in luxury hospitality, where high standards of service align with a commitment to cultural heritage.

Operational properties in the region are setting new benchmarks by embedding authentic Saudi traditions into the guest experience to provide international visitors with a meaningful introduction to the Kingdom's culture and heritage. Meanwhile, set to debut in 2025, hotels in their pre-opening phase are gearing up to make a powerful impact.

We connected with Red Sea hotel general managers, Carla Puverel of Shebara Resort, Kai Dieckmann of Four Seasons Resort and Residences Red Sea at Shura Island and Juan Paolo Alfonso of Miraval The Red Sea, to explore how their properties are contributing to the future of hospitality in the region.

Blending past and present

As Saudi Arabia modernises, luxury hotels are playing a pivotal role in showcasing the Kingdom's cultural heritage and offering global travellers a unique connection to its rich history and traditions.

Puverel believes the Red Sea hotels contribute significantly to Saudi Vision 2030 goals by attracting a niche market of international tourists and high-net-worth individuals seeking meaningful cultural engagement. She sees these hotels as "cultural ambassadors, blending contemporary luxury with deep-rooted Saudi traditions," positioning them as vital players in promoting heritage amid rapid change.

At Shebara Resort, Puverel emphasises that the design and services are thoughtfully crafted to reflect *Hafawah* – a core Saudi principle symbolising generosity, warmth and care, which is evident in local daily practices, poetry and stories shared with visitors. This integration provides an opportunity to educate tourists on local terminology and deepen their cultural immersion.

As the resort opens, Puverel aims to establish a standard for culturally respectful hospitality aligned with Saudi Arabia's growth, offering not only personalised luxury but also an authentic sense of place through immersive experiences.

She elaborates: “Our ambitious design is complemented by exceptional service, seamlessly integrating real Hafawah, authentic Saudi hospitality. Through these efforts, we hope to set a benchmark for culturally respectful hospitality, offering guests a true connection to Saudi traditions.”

Dieckmann says: “I firmly believe that a strong anchor in history and tradition enables faster progression. When you understand your origins and have a clear vision of where you want to go, it becomes much easier to accelerate development.”



Shebara Resort

With international brands bringing expertise and global visibility to the Kingdom, Dieckmann notes that there is a fantastic opportunity for cultural promotion, emphasising the importance of aligning with key stakeholders to balance tradition with progress, ensuring authenticity remains central. He further adds: “Traditional elements, such as welcoming rituals, can create a sense of origin and promote local traditions.”

Discussing Four Seasons' role, Dieckmann underscores the brand's deep connection to Saudi Arabia, underscored by Four Seasons Riyadh and its local partnerships. He shares: "The resort's guest journey will be enriched with local and regional touches, beginning with the arrival experience, extending into rooms with thoughtfully designed decor and culminating in immersive excursions. Guests will encounter locally inspired designs in their rooms and engage in unique experiences that celebrate the diversity of the region, from pristine underwater landscapes to traditional desert adventures."

Highlighting the growth of resorts in Saudi's Red Sea region, Alfonso remarks: "By transforming curiosity into engagement, these resorts will play a key role in fostering a deeper understanding of Saudi Arabia's heritage. Luxury hotels are well-positioned to host worldly, well-travelled guests who seek genuine connections with the places they visit and it is the responsibility of hoteliers to facilitate these connections."

Alfonso sees this cultural engagement as a way to expand international recognition and appreciation for Saudi heritage, supporting the preservation of cultural identity. He notes that at Miraval, this mission is furthered through a mindfulness-based approach, aligning with Saudi Vision 2030's emphasis on wellbeing.

Alfonso notes: "With mindfulness at our core, we aim to contribute to a vibrant society that values physical, psychological and social wellbeing. Our resort empowers guests to embark on a wellbeing journey through diverse activities, spa services and wellness programming, fostering personal growth in body, mind and spirit."



Rendering of spa arrival and retail: Miraval The Red Sea

Culture infused experiences

Taking a deep dive into the rich and flavourful Saudi cuisine and aligned with Red Sea Global's sustainable approach, Dieckmann expresses: "I'm eager to collaborate with local producers, from Umluj's mango farmers to fishermen along the coast."

He recalls witnessing fishermen in Thailand presenting their daily catch tableside, allowing diners to choose directly. He adds: "This practice brings the ocean's freshness right to the diners. Imagine bringing this experience to Saudi, where guests could choose from the Red Sea's diverse offerings, immersing themselves in both the culinary and cultural richness of the region."

Alfonso highlights Miraval's mindfulness-based programs as a platform to celebrate Saudi culture and heritage, explaining: "This approach weaves cultural experiences into creative expressions, culinary offerings and historical insights, fostering an appreciation of the country's traditions." The property's food and beverage approach emphasises sourcing ingredients close to their origins and collaborating with local producers.

Alfonso shares: “Alongside cultivating ingredients in our own Sensory Garden, we are committed to partnering with local producers. Through the Life in Balance Culinary Kitchen, a dedicated learning space, guests can explore local ingredients and heritage cooking techniques, engaging with Saudi culinary traditions through mindfulness-focused programs.”

Collaborations with local artists, craftsmen and culinary experts enhance authenticity, offering guests unique cultural immersion.

Alfonso adds: “We celebrate local artisans by integrating their skills and stories into our activities, allowing guests to experience their craft first-hand. Through immersive, hands-on activities, guests gain insight into artisans’ skills, fostering a meaningful connection with Saudi heritage.”

Puverel highlights Shebara’s focus on offering guests an “immersive and informative Saudi experience” that moves beyond typical resort offerings. Her team’s approach centres on storytelling to deepen connections with Saudi culture, history and modern life.

She explains: “We want our guests to feel they’re not just visiting, but deeply connecting with the Kingdom’s essence. This is achieved by weaving cultural narratives into every aspect of the experience, from staff interactions and resort design to dining and location-specific activities.”



Four Seasons

Puverel also emphasises the importance of culinary authenticity, noting: “Our mission is to celebrate the richness of Saudi cuisine by elevating traditional dishes while preserving their genuine essence. By incorporating traditional cooking methods, the team ensures authenticity and quality in each offering.”

Further, Puverel points out that Shebara’s community collaborations extend to unique marine experiences around the islands. She adds: “Through art displays, interactive cooking classes and live music, we bring Saudi heritage to life, allowing guests to form meaningful connections with the Kingdom’s past, present and evolving future, making each stay both memorable and transformative.”

Saudi youth-driven industry

Alfonso says: “Hiring and developing local talent allows us to bring the richness of Saudi culture directly into our hotel, enabling guests to connect with local traditions. Local employees contribute unique insights, creating memorable, meaningful guest interactions. This approach also supports local communities by developing a pipeline of skilled Saudi talent, fostering sustainable growth in the industry.”

Puverel views Saudisation as “a critical element of fostering an authentic guest experience while supporting Saudi Arabia’s broader social and economic goals.”

She explains: “Integrating Saudisation into the resort’s strategy goes beyond regulatory requirements; it’s about enriching the guest experience with authenticity, genuine insights and local flavour. Working alongside young Saudi nationals has given me invaluable insights, enhancing our understanding of cultural nuances that truly resonate with our guests.”



Shebara Resort

Dieckmann explains: “The most authentic way to tell stories about Saudi Arabia is to tell them through Saudi Arabia.”

He emphasises recruiting top Saudi talent to create meaningful connections between guests and local culture, reinforcing a bond with the region’s heritage. To support this, he shares: “We are pursuing collaboration agreements with hospitality schools and universities. We’re looking to bring young Saudis into the fascinating and rewarding

world of hospitality, leveraging Four Seasons' reputation in the Kingdom as large-scale recruitment ramps up next year."

2025 hospitality forecast

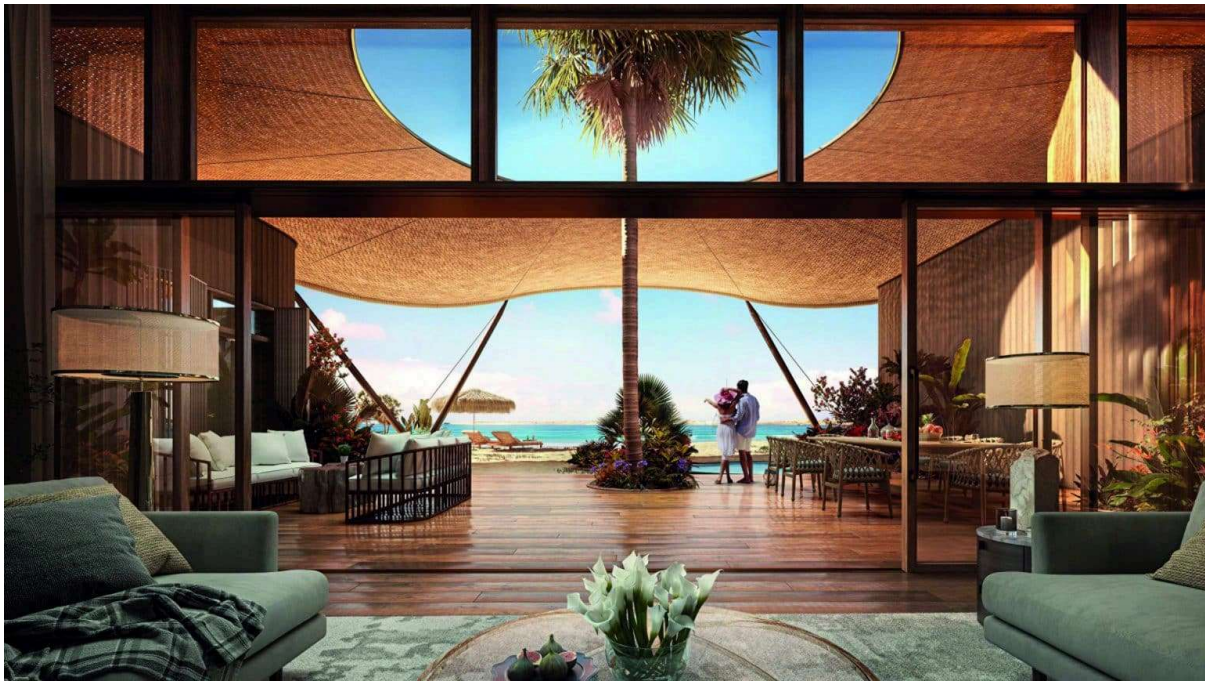
As Saudi Arabia advances towards Vision 2030, the hospitality sector is set to play a central role in positioning the Kingdom as a global tourism destination.

Puverel notes: "For hotels, this shift emphasises cultural integration, where preserving and celebrating local heritage is as essential to the guest experience as luxury and service. To meet these expectations, hotels will need to curate authentic local encounters, adopt sustainable practices and empower local talent."

She sees Shebara's legacy as one of cultural pride and engagement, showcasing Saudi Arabia's rich heritage to the world while supporting its preservation. Through authentic experiences and community engagement, the hotel aims to foster meaningful dialogue and exchange, promoting a deeper understanding of Saudi Arabia and its people. This approach not only ensures that Saudi culture is appreciated on a global stage but also aligns with Vision 2030's goals of economic diversification and cultural growth. Shebara aspires to leave a lasting impact in promoting and celebrating Saudi culture internationally.

Dieckmann sees hyper-personalisation as a key trend in 2025, recognising that guests perceive luxury differently today. He explains: "The era of white-glove service, chandeliers and marble-filled restaurants defining a property as luxurious is long gone. Service has become more relaxed yet increasingly focused on details and individualisation. Technological progress, particularly AI, is aiding this shift, allowing for greater customisation.

"Although, it's important to note that AI and technological assistance cannot replace human interaction, intuition and empathy, which are hallmarks of luxury service. AI and technological assistance cannot replace human interaction, intuition and empathy, which are hallmarks of luxury service."



Four Seasons

As Four Seasons prepares to launch on Shura Island, Dieckmann envisions it as a leader in redefining luxury hospitality in the Red Sea, offering a distinctive new destination within the Middle East's high-end tourism landscape.

He adds: "An endeavour of this scale has rarely been undertaken and we are confident Four Seasons will set new standards in personalised guest experiences."

Alfonso expresses: "I'm excited to see the growing interest and enthusiasm among the younger generation for careers in tourism and hospitality. The Kingdom's awe-inspiring giga projects have sparked a passion for this dynamic, expanding industry."

He notes that young people are inspired to join a sector poised to become a source of national pride, where they can contribute to an industry that highlights Saudi Arabia's beauty and heritage. Alfonso believes this trend will help build "a vibrant industry" that embodies the Kingdom's identity, offering the next generation meaningful roles in hospitality and a chance to represent Saudi culture to the world.

Blueprint for upcoming resorts

Dieckmann believes that hotel brands entering Saudi Arabia are well-prepared to deliver curated, immersive experiences. He shares: “Brands need to ensure a consistent approach as this is required for building trust in the brand and Saudi Arabia as a new luxury destination.”

Alfonso recommends that for a truly immersive cultural experience, hotels must “it’s essential to go beyond the surface, delving deeply into the essence of Saudi heritage.” He highlights that only by capturing these layers can hotels create a guest experience that authentically represents Saudi Arabia’s rich traditions and identity.

Puverel encourages hotel brands to pursue genuine cultural immersion by “integrating local culture into every aspect, from architectural design to staff training and culinary offerings.”

She adds: “By engaging closely with the community and honouring traditions, hotels can create experiences that resonate on a personal level, becoming memorable parts of each guest’s journey.”

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