

Magic in a magical land

Rani Resorts is a tourism development company that owns and operates luxury hotels and lodges in some of the most unique, remote and naturally beautiful locations in southern Africa.

It comes under the umbrella of Rani Investment, a Dubai-based investment holding firm for the Aujan Group which started as a family business in 1905 in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait trading in commodities including rice, tobacco and beverages. Today, it has more than \$300 million of dedicated investments in the Middle East and Africa.

Rani Investment CEO Dr Kamel Abdallah, also executive vice chairman of Aujan Industries, the largest privately owned beverage and confectionary company in the GCC, is passionate about the small collection of discreet properties designed for luxury travellers with an eco-consciousness in search of a life less ordinary.

Any one of the six Rani Resorts superb properties in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, which include private game reserves on the African mainland and island retreats in the Indian Ocean, can provide the discerning visitor

with a memorable safari or marine adventure, or indeed both.

“The experience that you find in Africa – being one with nature – is an experience of a lifetime. The non-commercialisation of the open space is really special and we don’t want to spoil it,” says Abdallah.

This passion stems from the Aujan Group’s ethos set by its chairman Sheikh Adel Aujan, whose personal commitment to Africa is absolute.

The group as a whole calls its involvement there “sustainable economic development through private sector initiatives”. “In Africa we are long-term investors so we are not trying to make a quick buck and then get out when the going gets tough,” Abdallah explains. “We have a high level risk tolerance so can achieve very healthy profits for our shareholders. We understand that high risk equals high return.”

He continues: “We take on challenging projects – investing in hotels in Africa means that not only are we investing in the hotel but we are also investing in the infrastructure, for example generators, airstrips, sourcing a water supply, training a local workforce with no historical

An aerial view of Victoria Falls.



The first Rani resort to open in Zimbabwe was the Stanley and Livingstone Hotel, in 1999.



experience in hospitality and so on. So suddenly we are not only the hotel operator but in a way we are like the master planner for the community. So this makes it more challenging.”

The properties operated by Rani Resorts are for guests who want an unspoiled eco-experience in safety and comfort in a place where they blend with nature and where “very few people have walked before”, he says. “Our hotels, safari destinations and private islands have been designed to meet world-class standards of luxury and service.”

The thing is, Rani Resorts has been operating in an altruistic manner way before it ever became fashionable, indeed essential, for tourism providers to do so. That was always the chairman’s vision, way back in 1999 when Rani Resorts was launched under the philosophy of “long-term investment, tolerance for risk, commitment to the local community”. It has always taken into consideration all aspects of the now rather over-used words “sustainability” and “eco-tourism” long before these were high on World Travel Market (WTM) and other global travel meetings agendas.

The reason is simple – while a short-term focus aims to pander to the hedonistic pleasures of visitors, a long-term plan helps create a better world for the people living in these locations, alongside being able to eventually operate a profitable business. So in the end, everybody scores.

“For any developments to work they have to be economically feasible and sustainable. As very long-term investors we saw the value in investing in the hospitality sector in Africa. In Mozambique

it is getting there, and in Zimbabwe we believe it will get there in the long term. In fact we believe Zimbabwe will be very successful for the investor with the long-term horizon because, frankly, there are very few pieces of land in the world untouched like it is there,” says Abdallah.

He says that the investment company was very sensitive to preserving the anthropological and ecological nature of the communities in which they operate. “We do not want to change the ecology in any way and the same goes for the community. We try to ensure our guests do not hand out lots of money, do not buy and change currency and don’t get local people to become dependent on the hotel. We are not here to commercialise them.”

“For any hotelier in Africa you have the added challenge of making sure there is access to the basic necessities such as water and electricity; then you have to provide everything for your workers. Not only are you providing them with a job, you are responsible for providing them with housing, schooling and healthcare, the things governments in other countries typically initiate themselves.”

Rani insists on providing this as not only does it ensure the retention of employees but is part of the company ethos of improving the community in the areas they have chosen for their resorts.



All the Rani Resorts offer guests an unspoiled eco-experience in safety and comfort.



In predominantly Muslim northern Mozambique in the Quirimbas Archipelago, which consists of 31 islands just off the coast but partially linked to it by sand bars, coral reefs, mangroves and water rich in marine life, Rani has built schools and mosques, helped with Ramadan packages and Haj trips, and has provided medical support. In the south too, where there are other tribal mixes and religions, the community has been supported by the introduction of medical and educational programmes. In addition, the resorts purchase as much as possible of the local produce, notably fish from the islanders.

The first Rani establishment to open in Africa was The Stanley and Livingstone Hotel in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, in 1999. This is where elegance and refined luxury harmonise with the surroundings set on a 6,000-acre private wildlife reserve, not too far from the famous falls dividing Zimbabwe from Zambia.

Later the same year the company bought Indigo Bay Lodge, set on Bazaruto Island in the Bazaruto Archipelago of southern Mozambique, as it offered both bush and marine adventures including whale watching and sports fishing for marlin, barracuda, kingfish and sailfish. In 2006 it reopened as the revamped Indigo Bay Island Resort and Spa.

The Arabian-styled Pemba Beach Hotel and Spa opened in 2002 in the ancient port town of Pemba, northern Mozambique. The following year Matemo Island opened on a palm-studded island within the Quirimbas Archipelago, close to the historic island port of Ibo. Next on the agenda was Medjumbe Private Island also within the archipelago, an exclusive island retreat supporting



The Matemo Island located in the Quirimbas Archipelago offers guests a host of bush and marine adventures.

only 13 luxury chalets and no-one else, not even a local population.

In 2006 Rani Resorts established the Lugenda Wilderness Camp set in Mozambique's remote Niassa Game Reserve of 42,000 sq km which is, as Abdallah puts it, "three quarters of the size of Lebanon". This remote area is ideal for adventurous travellers wishing to explore one of the last few examples of a wild and untamed Africa.

This year saw Rani's open its second accommodation in Zimbabwe. The Old Ursula Camp was unveiled despite the gloomy past and uncertain future of the destination. Situated next to The Stanley and Livingstone overlooking the same private game reserve, bookings have been phenomenal particularly among Americans and Europeans, says Abdallah, adding that there is "definitely a market for this type of property". It is a very luxurious "tent" experience with a self-catering option, ideal for groups and families of up to eight people.

"Arabs like, or rather need, unique experiences. Historically, our Arab guests used to go to Europe for vacations, but now we are starting to see more Arabs interested in our properties, particularly those in northern Mozambique where there is an Islamic flavour plus unspoiled, very private islands," he says.

"Game viewing in unchartered territory such as the Niassa Game Reserve or seeing Victoria Falls, one of the seven wonders of the natural world, are also unique experiences."

Air links to the region have improved recently with Emirates, Etihad and Qatar Airways flying

daily into Johannesburg, and providing some links to Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam. "Once they have even better connections, these areas will become even more accessible," says Abdallah.

Mozambique is made up of a vibrant mix of African, Portuguese and Arab cultures. Its prime location on the East African coast led to the region becoming a significant trading post for gold, ivory and later on slaves between the 16th and 19th centuries, with forts, palaces and mosques still very much in evidence. Much of this northern area is Islamic; the towns of Pemba and Nacala contain much Arabic architecture, cuisine and locals here even call markets souks.

The country is a recent entry on the global tourism map, so it was one of the first to be badly affected by the worldwide recession.

"We had a drop of about 30 to 35 per cent on occupancies but we did better than other hotels in the country, and we have since seen a recovery beginning from April. However because of our overall group structure we were able to continue to finance and support these properties. Our services did not suffer and we did not lay off any people, either in Zimbabwe or Mozambique," says Abdallah.

In neighbouring Zimbabwe occupancy rates sank to 20 per cent over the last four years, but they have been and are still being supported by an American Tour series since 2006.



Guests at any of the Rani Resorts can dabble in whale-watching and sports fishing for marlin, barracuda, kingfish and sailfish.

“Visitors from the US are now on the increase since the travel ban has been lifted, and we have won another two series this year,” he says. “We believe that Zimbabwe will in time regain its market share in southern Africa’s tourism industry and that there are definitely opportunities for future investment in Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa. The ideal scenario would be to ‘own’ a circuit whereby guests stay in all our own properties around southern Africa.”

In the not too distant future, in fact next year, building work will start on another property purchased by Rani and put on hold due to the global downturn. It will be on Paradise Island, known officially as Ilha Santa Carolina in the

Bazaruto Archipelago. In the 1960s when the Portuguese ruled Mozambique there was a famous art deco hotel here known as the Santa Carolina Hotel. At the end of Portuguese rule in 1975 civil war followed, and the hotel was abandoned. The structure left behind is now to be completely demolished and rebuilt.

It was here, on an old piano in the hotel lounge, that Bob Dylan was reputed to have stroked the ivories and created the song Mozambique. That piano is still with Rani Resorts, being cared for on its Indigo Bay island property.

“When the new hotel is finished, we will bring the piano back. It’s a bit of history,” says Abdallah. ■■■

