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El Dorado Seaside Suites opened in Mexico last month.

Karisma gears up for global expansion: 30 by 2020

By Nicole Carlino
Associate Editor

MIAMI—Karisma Hotels & Resorts plans to own and operate 30 resorts around the world by 2020.

"That will be Karisma Hotels & Resorts' 20th anniversary," explained Rafael Feliz Jr., senior corporate brand manager. And, while 30 in 2020 would serve as a lovely symbolic milestone for the company, Feliz noted that Karisma's recent and expected activity supports that objective. The Karisma portfolio currently includes the adults-only El Dorado Spa Resorts & Hotels, family-friendly Azul Hotels and Generations Resorts, and the city-brand Allure Hotels, as well as Karisma Hotels Adriatic and Hidden Beach Au Naturel Resort. The properties are located in destinations including Mexico, Jamaica, Colombia, Croatia, Serbia and the Dominican Republic. "At the rate we're going, it looks like we're going to achieve that goal," he said. Feliz pointed to the economy and brand awareness as factors. "We're going into our 16th year operating as Karisma Hotels & Resorts, and we feel that, finally, the brand has positioned itself and has worldwide recognition enough to invest in the growth of the company," he explained.

Over the next two years, Karisma Hotels & Resorts will invest upwards of

\$125 million to expand across Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, with new offices opening worldwide. With field offices here in Miami, as well as in Cancun, Belgrade, Bogotá, Mexico City, London, Toronto and Quebec, the company will open sales offices in five destinations within the next year: Argentina, Peru, Chile, Brazil and New York City. "When you go into a new market, you have to go by baby steps," said Feliz. "First, you have to open a sales office, make sure that people know you, create demand and, if you see that there's a demand in that country, then we can start looking at hotel opportunities. We're testing these markets."

To accommodate its expansion and refocus on new markets on a global scale, the company has undergone some internal restructuring. The former VP of sales and marketing, Armando Chomat, has been promoted to EVP, having been with the company since 2007. Rienk de Jong, who has been with Karisma for more than 10 years and who previously managed worldwide sales for the company, has taken over the VP of sales and marketing position. Seven-year vet Alejandro Perez was named sales manager of group & niche markets; Feliz was promoted to senior corporate brand manager; Nadja Dimitrijevic was named senior e-commerce manager; and Anabel Sanchez is the new senior marketing manager.

Feliz noted that the company's growth could be seen in its planned openings. "This year, we opened two new hotels in Croatia, and we have plans to open three more next year: two in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic—the Sensatori Hotel and the Nickelodeon Hotel—and, then, we're also going to open another hotel in Jamaica. We've been so successful with [Azul Sensatori Jamaica by Karisma] that it's completely sold out for the rest of the year. We had to build another one right next to it, and that one is scheduled to open next year." Side-by-side properties like this are nothing new for Karisma. For instance, the newly opened El Dorado Seaside Suites, located near Mexico's historic Tulum Mayan Ruins, offers 192 swim-up and infinity suites and neighbors the former El Dorado Seaside Suites (now Sensimar Seaside Suites).

As for the Jamaican properties, Feliz noted, "We believe Jamaica is getting stronger as a destination; it has great offerings, some of the best beaches in the world and it's a big area of opportunity."

Colombia will also continue to be a focus for Karisma. "Colombia is great for us," said Feliz. "We just launched this new brand, Allure Hotels, our city, boutique brand, in Cartagena, Colombia. The two hotels are top 10 on TripAdvisor, and the Colombian public loves them." Feliz noted that 80% of Allure's guests come from internal Colombian travel. "That's why we decided to open two more in the coffee zone of Colombia," he said.

"Third is the Mediterranean," said Feliz. "It's been a top destination for the past 300 years, and it's going to

keep being one. We're looking all over, whether it's Turkey, Greece, Italy, Croatia—that's a big focus for us."

Another new development for Karisma is its partnership with Viacom International Media Networks, a division of Viacom Inc., and its Nickelodeon brand. Azul Hotels by Karisma properties debuted the Nickelodeon vacation experience this summer, which includes character dining and interactions with characters such as Dora the Explorer, SpongeBob SquarePants and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. "Azul has always been a family brand, and having Nickelodeon be a part of it brings another aspect into the vacation," said Feliz. "The kids can enjoy the Nickelodeon characters, they can get slimed, and they can play, while the parents can still experience the luxury vacation. It's a perfect balance for the family vacation."

Karisma will take it one step further with the first Nickelodeon Hotel—Nickelodeon Punta Cana—in the Dominican Republic in late 2016. A second Nickelodeon Hotel is planned for Mexico as well. Like Karisma's other properties, Nickelodeon Hotels will feature the Gourmet Inclusive Experience, Karisma's dining concept. "We wanted to get away from the all-inclusive reputation of everything being a buffet," said Feliz. All restaurants are à la carte, and the company has associations with numerous culinary schools to elevate it from the competition. "Everything has just lined up for expansion," said Feliz. **HB**



Rafael Feliz Jr.
Karisma Hotels & Resorts