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TRAVEL AGENT MAGAZINE  
JULY 6, 2015

# KARISMA KLOUT:

## HOTEL GIANT IS GROWING IN MANY DIRECTIONS



PHOTO BY BRIAN SWITH

Rafael Felix, Karisma Hotels & Resorts' CEO, and Lubo Kratojic, the company's executive vice president of sales and marketing, have big plans to expand Karisma's brands and add more hotels.

**Travel Agent** took advantage of a rare opportunity to chat with the two founders of Karisma Hotels & Resorts at their Miami office and was given some major scoops regarding future hotel developments.

**WHEN** **Travel Agent** was told that the two founders of Karisma Hotels & Resorts, Rafael Feliz and Lubo Krstajic, were going to give us the first interview they ever conducted together, we somehow assumed we would be chatting with a couple of shy, soft-spoken, reserved gentlemen. As soon as we stepped foot in the company's Miami office, however, we knew from the bright colors, the erase boards with brain storming ideas, the chic layout and the countless number of Millennials punching on keyboards or fielding phone calls that the two-headed monster behind Karisma's success might be shy about a lot of topics, but travel was not going to be one of them.

Thankfully, we were right.

Feliz, the company's CEO, and Krstajic, executive vice president of sales and marketing, gave **Travel Agent** a scoop fest including what destinations we can expect the Nickelodeon Hotels brand to expand to in the future as well as the skinny on a massive, 1,200-room resort development to be built between Montego Bay and Ocho Rios, Jamaica, by 2018.

We break down those stories as well as other topics that arose during the roughly two-hour sit down with two of the sharpest hoteliers we spoke to all year.

### **Nickelodeon Hotels to Expand To Europe and Latin America**

In March, **Travel Agent** was the first to tell you about a new hotel brand after Karisma Hotels & Resorts and Viacom International Media Networks (VIMN), a division of Viacom Inc., signed a landmark agreement to develop Nickelodeon Hotels.

A Gourmet Inclusive collection of luxurious family-friendly properties, Nickelodeon Hotels will represent the first and only international hotels for Nickelodeon, one of the most globally recognized and widely distributed multimedia brands for kids.

The milestone deal included plans to debut Nickelodeon Hotels with the opening of Nickelodeon Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic in late 2016. A second Nickelodeon Hotel will open in Mexico shortly thereafter.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg.

After the Dominican Republic and Mexico properties are up and running, Feliz and Krstajic said the plan is to expand Nickelodeon Hotels to Central and South America with destinations such as Brazil; Cartagena, Colombia; and

Panama being heavily discussed. Nickelodeon Hotels will also be expanded to Europe. Specifically, the plan calls for Nickelodeon Hotels in such destinations as Sardinia, Italy; Spain; Croatia; Antalya or Bodrum, Turkey; and Greece.

"After we came to an agreement with them about bringing the Nickelodeon experience to the Azul Hotels, we really learned a lot about their company, about their brand, their characters," Feliz told us. "They also learned a lot about our gourmet-inclusive concept. Both companies started to look at a closer relationship. It's like a perfect match."

From interactions with favorite Nickelodeon characters such as SpongeBob SquarePants, Dora the Explorer and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to resort attractions and entertainment, Nickelodeon Hotels will be a hot spot for children and adults alike.



On hand for the announcement last November that Azul Hotels by Karisma would introduce, exclusively, the Nickelodeon Vacation Experience – which foreshadowed the announcement this past March of a full-blown Nickelodeon Hotels brand – are, from left, Rafael Feliz Jr., then corporate brand manager for Karisma Hotels & Resorts (now doing the same for Premier Worldwide Marketing); Gerald Raines, SVP, Global Nickelodeon Recreation Partnerships and Mandy "Mr. Mustache" Chomat, Karisma's VP of sales and marketing.

Nickelodeon Hotels is the second offering from partners, Karisma Hotels & Resorts and Viacom. It followed news of the Nickelodeon Experience at Azul Hotels, by Karisma, debuting at Azul Beach Hotel, Azul Sensatori Hotel and Azul Fives Hotel in the Riviera Maya, Mexico, this summer.

Mandy Chomat, vice president of sales and marketing for Karisma Hotels & Resorts, told **Travel Agent** last year that

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discussions had been ongoing with Nickelodeon since Karisma ended its very successful, seven-year partnership with Fisher-Price.

### Big Plans for Jamaica

Less than two years after Karisma Hotels and Resorts expanded to the Caribbean in the form of Azul Sensatori Jamaica in Negril, the company is looking to build a second hotel in Negril.

Rafael Feliz, Jr., corporate brand manager for Premier Worldwide Marketing, which is the exclusive sales and marketing representatives for Karisma Hotels and Resorts, told us earlier this year that Karisma is looking to open a roughly 100-room, boutique-style hotel next door to the existing Azul Sensatori Jamaica.

Feliz, Jr. said there is no timetable in place for the groundbreaking or opening of the hotel, but did note that it

will be a more luxurious, intimate hotel than its future neighbor, Azul Sensatori Jamaica. The name of the hotel has not been decided, Feliz, Jr. said.

But that announcement was not nearly as big as the one Feliz, Jr.'s father dropped on us during our interview.

"This is the first time that we are going to say it outside of the company, but I think the travel agent community would love this great news that I'm going to share with you," said Feliz. "We are in the process of securing land for a big development in Jamaica that will total 1,200 rooms."

It will represent an investment of more than \$100 million, said Feliz. He also said the plan is to include all of Karisma's brands in one resort development. Although the Nickelodeon brand is not quite on board yet, Feliz did say if they cannot eventually secure a Nickelodeon hotel, there would at least be the presence of the Nickelodeon Experience at the Azul property. The

other brands he would like to see there include Azul, Generations by Karisma and El Dorado. Having an El Dorado hotel on the site would also be pretty big news since it would represent that brand's first hotel outside of Mexico.

For those agents who aren't familiar with the Generations by Karisma brand, Feliz told us that, as its name suggests, it caters to multigenerational clients. These are all-suite hotels in which all of the accommodations have around 2,000 square feet of space.

"We really think that Jamaica is a great destination, especially for Canada and for North America, and also for Europe," said Krstajic. "The British market is strongly growing in Jamaica too. That means now you get a balance with the winter and summer. We believe in Jamaica as a destination. We have a fantastic experience with employees in Jamaica, with authorities in Jamaica. We feel welcome over there and now is the moment to grow in Jamaica."



Oceanfront Balcony Infinity Pool Suites (here and right) at Generations Riviera Maya by Karisma give families plenty of room to stretch out in. The Generations by Karisma brand was created with multigenerational travelers in mind.



Although Feliz didn't tell us the exact location of the development site, he did tell us it will be somewhere between Montego Bay and Ocho Rios. Feliz told us he is anticipating that construction would begin sometime at the third or fourth quarter of 2016. Krstajic said the hotel will be completed roughly two years after the groundbreaking.

"Now that the British market is growing aggressively, and the European market, in Jamaica where those source markets are traditionally strong in the summer, it brings a balance to the destination as we have in Cancun, Riviera Maya and Punta Cana," Feliz noted.

### Further Expansion in The Caribbean Ahead?

As part of the company's Karisma 2020 plan, Karisma Hotels & Resorts' vision for the next five years, Feliz told us the company could roll out about 30 new hotels around the world.

"We see most of this, not all, but a big part of this happening in the next five years," said Feliz. "It takes a lot of planning; it's a long process to obtain permits, to get the licenses, and actually to build, especially in some of the Caribbean islands. Even though as we speak, we have already in our pipeline 2,300 rooms more or less scheduled to open between now and winter 2016."

So what about some possible islands in the Caribbean for future expansion?

"We would like to see ourselves in St. Maarten and St. Lucia," said Krstajic. "We would love to see ourselves in Barbados. Barbados is probably number one."

Karisma Hotels & Resorts has grown by 56 percent over the past three years. This growth includes the introduction of three new brands: the luxurious family-friendly Generations by Karisma; Allure Hotels by Karisma, boutique city hotels with two locations in Colombia, one in Serbia, and plans to expand throughout Latin America and the Caribbean; and Karisma Hotels Adriatic, a unique hotel collection in Europe, which debuted with the opening of Croatia's first couples-only resort last summer.

With investments of \$28 million by 2015 and the goal of attaining 5,000 new rooms by the summer of 2017 including two additional hotels, Sensimar Makarska by Karisma and Adriatic Beach by Karisma in summer 2015, Karisma Hotels Adriatic is the destination's strongest new economic driver.

Over the next two years, Karisma

Hotels & Resorts will invest upward of \$125 million to expand across Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

### New Travel Agent Sales and Marketing Portal

In early February, Karisma Hotels & Resorts announced the debut of the Karisma Travel Agent Sales and Marketing Portal, which aims to offer easy access to resources and added incentives to assist valued travel agent partners.

The Karisma Travel Agent Sales & Marketing Portal features:

- Learning Center (training modules, FAM trips, site inspections, resort fact sheets and maps)
- Sales and Marketing Tools (branding, collateral, social media, digital solutions, consumer shows support)
- My Dashboard, with personalized info and the ability to instantly track bookings, points, exclusive promotions and rewards certificates as well as a feature that provides a real-time snapshot of agents' status in relation to Diamond Level Certification
- Sales Manager Contacts

Agents can also use the website — considered Karisma Gourmet Inclusive Headquarters — to register bookings, request sales and marketing materials, attend webinars and book commissionable transfers and tours through Lomas Travel.

"Our loyal travel agents are responsible for targeting the destinations that we expand to," said Krstajic. "As part of our [Karisma Gourmet Inclusive Vacation

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## COVER STORY

The opening of Azul Sensatori Jamaica in Negril a year-and-a-half ago marked Karisma Hotels & Resorts' expansion into the Caribbean. Now the company is looking to build a second hotel in Negril.



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Consultant] program, our executive vice president always organizes a party for agents at the end of November or beginning of December where we spend three days with our top travel agents. We have fun but we work too. And that's where we get new ideas and information about what is new on the market."

The Karisma Travel Agent Sales and Marketing Portal is a resource center for agents not only in the U.S., but around the world, catering specifically to Russian, United Kingdom and French Canadian travel partners with information and tools available in their native languages.

### Meet "Mr. Mustache"

The physical feature that the constantly smiling, always-polite vice president of sales and marketing for Karisma Hotels & Resorts may be known for is his bushy, bright white mustache, but the real force behind Mandy Chomat, who Feliz calls, "Mr. Mustache," lies within his always-thinking mind.

"The first time we spoke to Mandy he gave us such a strong first impression," said Krstajic. "We just loved that

he believed so much in travel agents and travel agencies and knew that was how we were going to build our brands."

Armando "Mandy" Chomat joined Karisma Hotels & Resorts in 2007 as the vice president of sales and marketing, where he oversees brand concepts as well as provides sales and marketing leadership for the collection of Gourmet Inclusive properties.

With more than 35 years of hospitality sales and marketing experience as a corporate executive, Chomat brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to his role. Prior to joining Karisma Hotels & Resorts, Chomat spent 17 years as the Unique Vacations Worldwide Representative for Sandals Resorts and Beaches Resorts, where he developed many aspects of the market.

In 2012, Chomat spearheaded a new partnership with Jackson Family Wines for 2013. As part of the collaboration, Karisma Hotels & Resorts features selections from Jackson Family Wines portfolio at each of its properties and hosts The Jackson Family Wines Culinary Series by Karisma, a monthly wine and food program spotlighting top chefs and wine masters from

around the world.

"Mandy immediately started to associate our brand with strong brands in the market," said Krstajic. "He understood that very well: branding and associating brands. He's the person who helped us to get Kendall Jackson. He's the person who was negotiating with Fisher Price."

Since Chomat's commencement at Karisma, he has been a key driver of the company's growth and evolution, including welcoming new properties to the Karisma portfolio and overseeing the brand's expansion beyond Riviera Maya, Mexico, to Jamaica.

"Aside from his professional abilities, he's a great human being," said Feliz. "He's a leader. People follow Mandy. He has a great sense of humor, and he cares a lot, a lot for his employees and the people around him." ■

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