

LUXURY

Pool room at Dusit Devarana



# Bird Group set to open D2 at Aerocity, its second luxury hotel



**ANKUR BHATIA, ED, BIRD GROUP**

**T**his is that time for the project when last minute touches are being given – every area is in some stage or the other of completion. The furniture is all there, the kitchens are ready, and so are the rooms. The top floor with its suites, the rooftop swimming pool, the spa and fitness centre, it appears, will be the last to get finished. The developer, Ankur Bhatia, chief executive of The Bird Group, is feverishly supervising the finishes, with his able and young team, at the soon to open D2 at Aerocity, Delhi. This would be the second of his Dusit hotels, the other being the Dusit Devarana that opened a few months ago – with its 60 odd rooms in what many consider a stunning boutique property. The two hotels are a few minutes apart from each other, and are meant to complement each other's facilities and so will share a common leadership team. You could dine at one hotel and just sign, should you be staying at the other. Ankur is almost displaying a child-like happiness with the end result, enjoying every bit of appreciation for what he is studiously working upon. He

is confident he has a winner in what he is doing, a luxury hotel that will bear his personal stamp. TOURISMFIRST catches up with him on two central themes, one of luxury as he will embody in D2, and the other on India as a luxury market for foreign tourism.

**What would be comparable existing products to what you are working upon – in terms of luxury, the setting, etc? What would be your competition, so to say? How would you compare this to say, the Luxury Collection of ITC, a Starwood brand?**

We won't compare ourselves with them in terms of our product, they are not straight line enough. They try to get into complexities in terms of design. Here, we are looking at a more functional design.

**I believe you have a concept of having a dark room and a light room?**

The rooms are called chapters and we have seven kind of chapters in this hotel. They are defined in a way. We brought out a book, released at the recent Jaipur Literary festival. In a way it captures the essence of the hotel.

The book is about that that, as hospitality is becoming a very impersonal thing. Or, it is getting to become a very impersonal thing. You have a younger generation of travellers. This hotel is meant for the 18-40 age bracket of travellers. This is for the age group wanting to discover more.

**Are you somewhere like the W brand of Starwood?**

See W becomes more eclectic. We are not that. D2 in Delhi is very different from what Dusit D2 hotels internationally are.

**I believe you also have a Platinum theatre here?**

Yes, we do. We have 4000 keys around Aerocity here but there is no entertainment except for the malls. As a cinema viewer you would want some entertainment as well. So here at D2 you can actually get to a hotel and watch a movie. It will be through membership and for hotel guests, and we may have general screening shows as well.

**And is that developing a club concept?**

Perhaps, the concept is that of a private club, but the cinema will be separate as well. None of the hotels have a formal theatre either - our ballroom will be attached and will serve multi purposes. So if you want to have corporate presentations or a recitation or a book launch, you use this facility that comes in a luxury setting, ensuring the best of comfort.

**So when we talk about luxury, your first hotel and now this, your focus on luxury is flowing into both, perhaps one into the other?**

Yes, it is. My whole intention, even with Devrana, was to recreate something that did not exist in India. So, the Oberoi Vilases exist. But they are generally outside the city. For this particular hotel, there are 11



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assets around us and we needed to do something different in terms of our offering and this is where these concepts are coming in. The question before us was: how to design differently and how to connect with the luxury traveller.

**But that is something which everyone is endeavouring as well, even around Aerocity?**

I am sure. But the problem is that JW Marriott already has their written down concepts. So, it is not that JW Marriott India who would want to say that they want to do something different. With Dusit, there was freedom for us. They are not an American brand who said what you can or cannot do.

**How much of your D2 would be similar to others in the same brand?**

Not much. The only thing is that it is catering to the same audience which is the younger generation of travellers. But if you go to D2 Nairobi, it will be very different.

**Will it be more like Nairobi? Because my first impression walking through your property was it was not looking Indian to me. It was looking very contemporary.**

You know I am not selling 'Indianness' to the people. They can see that elsewhere, in the city. They want a comfortable stay both for travellers within our country and those coming in. People want to see internationalization when they travel. Someone may not like Thai or Indian or French. It is always better to be neutral as you are catering to an international audience. The Indians who are coming in, they haven't seen this and internationally people also wish to see a neutral environment.

**Is there any Indian ethos anywhere in the hotel?**

There is a restaurant called Kheer which is an Indian restaurant and the interiors are designed by a Japanese but yes, there is a lot of 'Indianness' in the particular restaurant.

**How will your uniforms be. For instance, will they be more Indian?**

We had the first cut presented to us today. They do not belong to any one country. Yes, among them, we also have a sari but these has been given an international edge, not the traditional saree!

**So, how international have you set your targets?**

Our rooms are made in Italy. Our production cost was cheaper. When we ordered our furniture, most factories were not working to capacity and were ready for cheaper rates.

**What does your cost of project come to?**

Same as everyone here. We will not be close to Leela's range but more similar to JW.

**How do you plan to price your product?**

We will be the highest priced in Aerocity and we will keep ourselves in that league. Our rooms will start at 9000 rupees and then go up further. We intend to remain firm with our rates.

**On a totally different note, what is happening to luxury across the globe?**

If you look at luxury, that is a segmentation that does not get affected by any economic situation. Buying and travel does not get affected. When there is an economic downturn, the growth in the segment gets reduced but that segment always has the ability to buy. This does not water down.

**When you say the growth in the segment reduces, what do you mean?**

It is the number of people getting converted (that graduate to the next level) to that segment because every year people sell companies or they do something fabulously well and then get converted into the luxury bracket, go up the ladder. But the core group remains resilient to economic changes that may happen across the globe. The concept of luxury initially was 600 keys and this was considered super luxurious, that has also changed. Internationally, when you talk of luxury resorts, they are now in a range of 80-120 keys at the maximum because you can't have this as a mass market situation any longer. Luxury has become more boutique and offers more personalized service. The effort is that the traveller who is coming to stay with you must feel a difference. It is at the end of the day, an experience. There are multiple areas of that experience. Architecture is one, because that is your hardware. You want to stay in a room that is unlike where you stay normally. The service has to be exemplary. But then again, one is overwhelming service and the other is that many experienced travellers want to be left alone as well. Because they know that the service is available for them at a nod, but they might not want to have that service. Little tweaks of doing certain things can make that difference.

**All that you are saying, how much of that is applicable to Indian situations?**

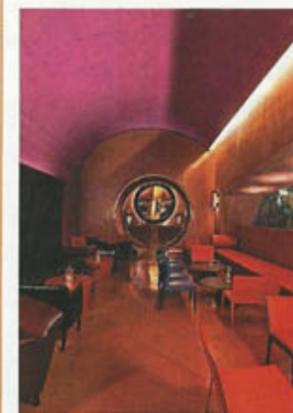
Most of it, really. Luxury travellers remain luxury travellers, regardless of where they are. The top segmentation of the market is actually a guy who is going to top resorts in the world and there is a lot domestic travel for them as well. A person coming from Mumbai stays in Delhi and if he can get that luxury experience and he can afford it, then why not. And it is very applicable in the Indian context as well. There is a 5 star experience that everyone offers but then there is a top end luxury experience. Our group is concentrating on that area of delivery and expertise which is available internationally in the top end luxury segment.

**Where do you see competition to Devarana?**

Even I would not do that product again in Delhi. It is too expensive and too cumbersome to deliver. It will take me at least five years to establish that product. Because the city hasn't seen it; India hasn't seen it. This



Twin room at the soon to open D2 at Aerocity



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is a new product, and to my mind, remains unique.

**What is happening to luxury at the moment?**

The investments that are coming in from hoteliers are more in the mid-market, standard five star or budget hotels. This market is growing. For high end luxury, growth is very limited. India is a very far removed destination.... for luxury travellers in the Middle East, the problem is that India has never been sold as a high end destination. For us, I see the Middle East a prime market keeping in mind the travel time and advantage of price competitiveness. It is the bigger market for India in luxury spend than even Europe or the US.

**How do you plan to tap this market?**

Conde Nast and Time Out magazines.

**How do you think India can be sold as a destination?**

A lot of work is required. It has to be done. But if you ask me whether the city will be ready in my lifetime as

luxury destination, I don't see that happening. But does that mean that I cannot sell my resort. No, I still can. It's just about creating the whole experience right from the time the guest lands at the airport. It is experiencing India but with controlled hands.

**Do you think any of the smaller cities can be sold?**

Connectivity would be a problem... again with Udaipur, you can get there but...But why would you not want to go to the Maldives... as a destination, I don't think we are ready yet.

**What do you make of The Lodi, as an example of a luxury offering?**

The Lodi was a great idea. But I don't think it was meant for a city. Those sizes don't make sense.

**How is the totality of the Indian industry – are they ready for luxury,**

**and are there Indian agents who are actually in the luxury market?**

There are very few because the numbers are few.

**How many Indian do you see using your properties?**

If you tell an Indian right now to spend 300 dollars on a room in Delhi he will come and hit you with a stick. But he would happily spend 500 dollars in Thailand!

**So how do you break that mental block?**

I think it is time that we did that. But much depends upon the product offering.

**Typically, a hotel close to any airport, looks for crew business. Are you open to crews?**

Yes, but to high end crews only. It gives you fixed business, so why not.

**Are you going to sell more on the net?**

Again it is a mixed business. So OTAs pick up for Devarana is much higher than for other similar hotels.

**Does a luxury traveller buy on the net?**

Yes, he does.

**There are some exclusive websites as well.**

Yes, there are and we are a part of them.

**So you are saying, as far as India as a destination is concerned, we are not quite ready.**

We have the capability but we are not there yet. But it does not stop us from selling our products. There is an opportunity to create that market. If

by NAVIN BERRY