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TRAVEL

Floating Day Clubs May Be The Next Big Thing In Travel And Hospitality

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LebuA Hotels & Resorts is launching the first floating day club in Bangkok by the end of the year. Plans are to expand to Paris, London, and New York. LEBUA HOTELS & RESORTS

Day clubs are hot. Not only in Las Vegas, but New York, Philadelphia, Scottsdale, Miami, Bali, San Diego, and other places. Gone is your father’s resort pool, surrounded by lounge chairs adorned with rolled-up towels and menus serving up club sandwiches. Nearly anywhere you can build some cabanas, a DJ booth and offer bottle service, the once under-

performing space has become a major profit center.

An article in the Las Vegas Review-Journal reported as of 2016 the city’s day clubs were generating over \$250 million in sales despite being open only half a year. It noted in 2010 typical revenue was \$1 million a week and just five years later Encore Beach Club was topping that amount on the average Saturday.

Of course, not every hotel has a pool

area that can be easily converted to a cash register. For Deepak Ohri, the CEO of LebuA Hotels & Resorts, such matters don’t stand in his way.

In 2003 when he joined the company, he inherited a 60-story plus Bangkok skyscraper with serviced corporate apartments with a recognizable golden dome and not much else.

In a city where 5-star hotels struggled to charge \$100 per night, he used his

background in food and beverage taking the unused roof creating Lebua's much-copied Skybar.

He then did the unthinkable. He launched an al fresco restaurant, Sirocco, using the extensive outdoor space, besting naysayers who believed he would get rained out. Instead, within two years its Mediterranean cuisine backed by live music and stunning views gained global recognition making Conde Nast Traveler's Hot List.

In 2007 he was back on the Hot List with a second rooftop restaurant, Breeze, noted for its outdoor bridge leading to a grand stairway. It was Instagram moments before Instagram.

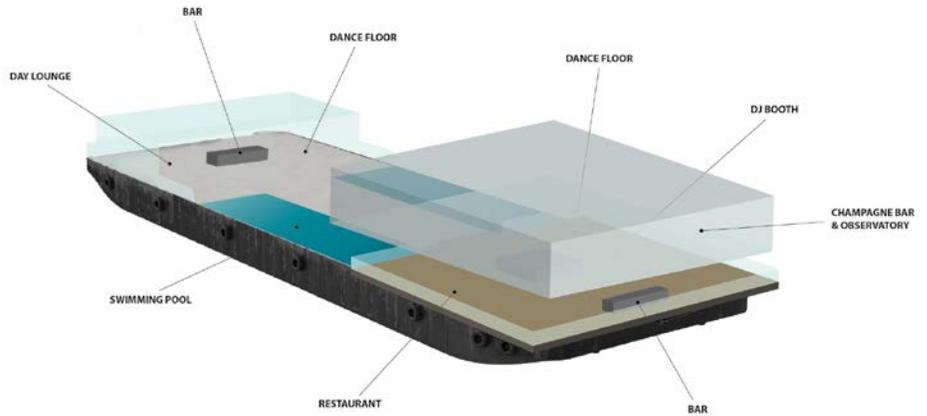
Still, in a city where you pay less for a luxury hotel room than a decent lunch in London, Ohri had another idea. Broadening Thailand's appeal to high-spending travelers by creating a modern take on fine dining.

To gain media attention he used his Mezzaluna restaurant as a venue for what he billed as the Million Baht Dinner, roughly \$29,000 a person, bringing in Michelin chefs from around-the-world who each created a signature course. The event was featured by CNN and received write-ups from Time Magazine and even The New York Times.

Seeing an increase in reservations for his restaurants, higher room rates for the hotel and fatter profits, he helped support efforts by Thailand's tourism board to bring Michelin to the Kingdom.

"There are lots of dining awards, and many of them aren't credible when it comes to fine dining," he says. He showed Forbes.com an invitation from The World's 50 Best and his letter to the group declining to be included.

Mezzaluna today is one of only two establishments to win two Michelin stars in each of the first two years the award has been given in the country. So far no restaurant has earned three stars, although Ohri may be positioned to change that when the new list is revealed in November.



Float will feature glass-enclosed lounges, private cabanas, indoor and outdoor pools and decks, a DJ and a variety of food options. LEBUA HOTELS & RESORTS

Earlier this year he opened Chef's Table, a creative open kitchen design French fine dining restaurant led by Vincent Thierry, who helmed 3-star kitchens in both Hong Kong and Paris before bringing his talents to Lebua.

Ohri says having Michelin has brought "multiple millions of dollars" in coverage that is highlighting the diversity of the country's food scene. "People now come to Thailand to eat the Michelin list," he says.

At the same time, he has made his mark on the hotel side as well. In July, Lebua at State Tower was voted as the top-ranked hotel in the city by the readers of *Travel + Leisure* in its annual World's Best list.

However, it's not just about awards, he says. "We are a business. We need to make a profit. There are a lot of restaurants that win awards, and they close down."

So, while his plans are to continue expanding Lebua's "vertical destination," a half dozen floors at the top of State Tower with more dining and drinking concepts, recently featured in *USA Today*, he now plans to start what might be the next big trend in hospitality: a floating day club.

"The average stay in Bangkok is 1.9

days, so people visit the temples, they see the river markets, they go shopping, and then they leave," he says, adding, "This will give them something unique to do, to have fun, and see more of the city as they cruise up and down the river. The goal is that they stay longer and spend more money."

Launching by the end of the year, Float will feature two barges, one converted into luxury day club, the other contemporary with accessible price points. "We want to have an affordable option," he says.

On each vessel, partygoers will have various choices at different price points, including private cabanas, daybeds, banquets, a variety of lounge concepts, indoor and outdoor pools, and of course, bottle service.

Glass-enclosed and air-conditioned venues mean being able to stay cool, enjoy views of the river while partying or relaxing, and Ohri says the DJs will be indoors so to ensure there is no noise pollution.

While Lebua has expanded to India and New Zealand with hotels, Ohri says he already is planning to bring his river-based floating day clubs to Paris, London, and New York.