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Hospitality at its heart

The world's finest hotels combine the very best in accommodation, food and service to offer their guests an unforgettable experience. Okura Hotels & Resorts certainly delivers on that front; and with the recent acquisition of JAL Hotels, the company looks set to bring the very best of Japanese hospitality to new markets, as Becky Done discovers

If you were asked to create a shortlist of the world's most exciting culinary destinations, Amsterdam might not instantly spring to mind. The city is perhaps more famous for its canals and cultural attractions than for its food; but those in the know head to the Hotel Okura Amsterdam, on the banks of the Amstel canal, for a gastronomic fix to rival anywhere in Paris or indeed, in Europe.

"We are very unusual in that we have two Michelin-starred restaurants," explains the hotel's general manager and president, Marcel van Aelst. "We have two stars for our





French restaurant, Ciel Bleu, and one star for the Yamazato—the only traditional Japanese restaurant in Europe with a Michelin star.”

With such stunning cuisine to whet the appetites of its guests as well as non-residents, the hotel has barely suffered from the effects of the global recession, says van Aelst. The figures are impressive—80 per cent of those visiting the hotel’s restaurants are non-residents, a high percentage which more than cements its reputation as a quality dining destination in its own right.

It’s distinctions like these that set Okura Hotels & Resorts apart, and that no doubt led the Hotel Okura Amsterdam to win the Netherlands’ Leading Business Hotel award at last year’s World Travel Awards. As in most cities, the hotel is pitted against some pretty formidable competitors who certainly know their way around the luxury market. The Hilton Amsterdam is a close neighbour, with the city also boasting such reputed establishments as the Pulitzer and the Heineken family-owned Hotel de L’Europe. But only two hotels in the Netherlands are Leading Hotels of the World members—and one of these is the Hotel Okura Amsterdam, an



accolade which speaks for itself.

And now Okura Hotels & Resorts looks set to expand its (very distinguished) footprint, following last year's purchase of 57 management contracts from the JAL Hotel Company (JHC) after the Japanese airline JAL filed for bankruptcy.

"A great number of the JHC hotels are international," says van Aelst, who alongside his role in Amsterdam is also president and CEO of JHC. "We are now in San Francisco, London, Mexico, Dubai, China...there are several very, very nice properties that fit the portfolio well."

The company now has four individual brands with which it can move forward. To Okura Hotels & Resorts, and Frontier (five- and four-star chains respectively), it has added Nikko and JAL City, their JHC counterparts.

"Internationally, we will only expand with Nikko and with Okura," says van Aelst. "And our intention is to move into some of the major cities where we currently don't have a presence. For example, I'd love to be in New York, Los Angeles and Singapore." He indicates that expansion could either be organic or via the acquisition of a smaller hotel chain, though he emphasises no specific targets have yet been identified. In the meantime, the company is pressing ahead with construction of a number of hotels, including the Okura Macau, which opens in spring 2011, the Okura Prestige Bangkok, due to open next year, and the Okura Taipei, which will welcome its first guests in July 2012.

Visitors to these superb new locations have much to look forward to, if the facilities at the Hotel Okura Amsterdam are anything to go by—it boasts a shopping arcade, culinary institute, health club, the largest suite in the Benelux and its own parking garage and boat jetty. All of which is underpinned by a firm belief that management of hotel facilities should remain in-house: nothing is outsourced. "That way, we control our own destiny, as well as the quality," van Aelst asserts.

And quality is the watchword for this Tokyo-based chain. "The Japanese are very reliable in terms of quality and service," says van Aelst. "They have a zero defect mentality—if something goes wrong, they take it very seriously. It's their reputation at stake."

Of course, reputation not only depends on what a brand offers, but also how it behaves; and the

company's future hotels will no doubt seek to emanate the way in which the Hotel Okura Amsterdam approaches its CSR commitments. "Corporate social responsibility is more than just lip service here," says van Aelst. The hotel runs a full and comprehensive CSR programme and is also a Green Key holder, an award which certifies that its environmental efforts go substantially beyond the standard legal and regulatory requirements.

Perhaps unusually, the Hotel Okura Amsterdam has also been careful to focus its CSR efforts on its immediate neighbours, in a manner that would be hard to imagine of the more heavyweight hotel brands. "One of our neighbours is a retirement home," says van Aelst, "so one of the most recent things we did was invite the residents of the retirement home up to the 23rd floor. They came for tea and a concert, and they could see their home from the top of the hotel—something they would never normally experience."

And following renovation of the lobby and the restaurants, the hotel again opened the door to its neighbours, this time for a special tour. "The interesting thing is that some of these people had been living here for 20 years and had



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never been inside, because it is a luxury hotel," says van Aelst. "But they can go to the Twenty Third bar and have a beer. Yes, maybe it's slightly more expensive than some places but it is a great view; it's an experience. So we invited the whole neighbourhood for drinks, snacks and a tour of the hotel—again, to be good neighbours."

Further CSR work includes the ongoing provision of financial support to the nearby Emma Kinderziekenhuis Academic Children's Hospital. The hotel arranges regular visits by its chefs to the hospital, who stage gourmet evenings for the children. It also created a special kitchen where patients and families can prepare their own food; and an Okura Suite where families can stay to be close to their children during periods of treatment.

With international expansion on the horizon, those living in the environs of future Hotel Okura properties can look forward to the arrival of illustrious neighbours who will surely become icons of hospitality wherever they choose to call home. <http://www.okura.com/> ●

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