

design spring

Sadly, political unrest has long marred the natural beauty and captivating architectural narrative of the Middle East and North Africa. This year's Arab Spring, unleashed in Tunisia in January, inspired uprisings among its neighbors, from Yemen to Syria. As countries fight to break free from oppressive dictatorships, the landscape changes daily—one day watching images of Gaddafi's death unfold on television, another contemplating suspending Syria from the Arab League, and the next seeing Egyptian protestors fill Tahrir Square yet again.

While the Middle East continues to be in flux, it certainly hasn't stopped developers from unveiling a number of new hotel projects—with plenty on tap. The snippets of violence shown on newscasts are just one

of the latest hospitality projects that prove tourism is viable even in a precarious Middle East.

Abu Dhabi

For years, Abu Dhabi played second fiddle to Dubai, its flashy, ex-pat-loving sister. Then quietly, the capital of the United Arab Emirates emerged on the scene as a hotspot in its own right, with the 2006 announcement of plans for the world's largest Guggenheim Museum (construction is currently on hold) by Frank Gehry on Saadiyat Island, Zaha Hadid designing the Sheikh Zayed Bridge with curved arches referencing sand dunes, and Abu Dhabi Art becoming an Art Basel for the Middle East.



From left: A rendering of the pool at the Park Hyatt Abu Dhabi; a glimpse into the newly opened grand Hilton Zamalek Residences in Cairo.

side to a story of shifting, empowered cultures. As Larry Traxler, global head of design services for Hilton Worldwide, says, "When you spend too much time in North America reading the papers and watching TV you get a myopic view—it's not all doom and gloom. The Middle East is much easier and much busier than anyone forecasted. 2012 will be even stronger. We're very bullish in our work in the Middle East, maybe even more than we are in some other areas. We're not looking for significant growth in France or Portugal or Spain."

Paul James, global brand leader for St. Regis Hotels & Resorts and the Luxury Collection, cites a figure from the UN World Tourism Organization: the number of tourists traveling to the Middle East is expected to reach 136 million by 2020 compared with 54 million in 2008. "Starwood's luxury brands have been operating in the Middle East for almost 50 years, longer than any of our competitors. In fact, the Sheraton Kuwait was among the first hotels to join the Luxury Collection portfolio," he notes. "Because of our long standing presence in the region, we continue to view hotel development as a long term investment and look at our business growth 20, 30, and 40 years down the road."

From the United Arab Emirates to Kuwait to Iraq, here is a glimpse

Tristan Dowell, director of brands for Hyatt Hotels, says of Abu Dhabi, "It's a key central point in the Middle East for both business and leisure and luxury, especially with a number of events like the Grand Prix."

Striking design-forward hotels like Kempinski Hotel Group's 7-Star Emirates Palace and Viceroy Hotel Group's recently acquired—and renamed—Yas Viceroy Abu Dhabi also help lure visitors to the city, and there's more, from a 532-room Ritz-Carlton in the cards for 2012, to Accor's new extended stay brand, Adagio, also due in the new year in conjunction with a Novotel.

Hotelier Rocco Forte chose to venture outside of Europe for the first time this fall with the Rocco Forte Hotel Abu Dhabi, a curved blue and green glass tower by WS Atkins & Partners headquartered in the UK, with interiors by Olga Polizzi, director of design for the hotel brand, that marry Middle Eastern artwork with marble and mosaics.

Hyatt is soon to unveil its second property, the Hyatt Capital Gate that boasts a significant design triumph: a building that leans 18 degrees. This comes on the heels of the November opening of the Park Hyatt Abu Dhabi on Saadiyat Island, an urban resort with four restaurants and a bi-level spa by New York-based architects Perkins Eastman and Singapore-based designers Wilson Associates. Meeting LEED Silver standards, the hotel is set amid landscaped gardens and is appointed with a range of globally sourced materials including oak and black American walnut from Finland, Chinese lava wave marble, and white marble from Oman. "The Park Hyatt complements our Dubai property. It's located on an

island, situated in a tropical oasis surrounded by beautiful beaches, some of the most pristine beaches in that part of the world, and the design is very residential in its approach, it has that tranquility of being a resort,” Dowell says.

Also new to the island is the St. Regis Saadiyat Island Resort, site of the region’s first Iridium Spa. Here, rooms have balconies and a neutral color palette of brown and cream hues with splashes of coral turquoise. “Almost 30 percent more hotel guests stayed in Abu Dhabi this year than the year before, according to the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority. With Abu Dhabi only an eight hour plane ride from four billion people, the region is emerging as an important global hub,” says James, who points out the St. Regis Abu Dhabi is next in February. “Saadiyat Island is particularly interesting as its cultural scene has been developing rapidly, with plans to open the Louvre, the Guggenheim, and the Zayed National Museum in the next coming years. This growth is illustrative of an emerging generation of wealth, who demand experiential luxury and bespoke service. It also doesn’t hurt that the city experiences sunshine year-round and sits on the coastline with pristine beaches and sparkling turquoise waters.”

Dubai

“Dubai is unlike any other place in the Middle East,” observes Margaret McMahon, director of New York-based Wimberly Interiors, who has worked on several projects in the region, including the Four Seasons Hotel Cairo. “It’s more like Shanghai.”

The over-the-top, bigger-is-better approach to design for which Dubai is known may have suffered in a faltering economy that built too much too soon, but it hasn’t stopped new developments from springing up. Jumeirah Zabeel Saray Hotel opened last winter on Palm Island with ornate handpainted frescoes and the two-story Talise Ottoman Spa, while the Ritz-Carlton, Dubai International Financial Centre made its debut with a 10-story outdoor waterfall. Now, the city anticipates the arrival of the J.W. Marriott Marquis Hotel Dubai, a sprawling 1,614-room property comprised of two towers, 13 restaurants, bars, and lounges, and a Saray Spa. The first phase is expected to be complete by 2012 and the second in 2013.

Traxler is looking forward to Hilton’s “strong pipeline in Dubai” including the soon-to-open DoubleTree by Hilton Dubai Al Barsha Hotel and Residence, the Conrad Dubai in 2012, and the Waldorf Astoria Palm Jumeirah in 2013. “It’s a very exciting project that is probably going to rival anything ever built in the UAE in terms of architecture and interiors,” Traxler points out.

Egypt

The Mubarak regime may have toppled, but as Egyptians gear up for



Clockwise from left: The colorful lobby of Hotel Missoni in Kuwait; a rendering of the eco-friendly Wadi Resort in Jordan; and an airy suite at the St. Regis Saadiyat Island Resort.



open elections, hotel brands keep their eyes on Cairo. The Hilton Zamalek Residences, “a relatively small property,” according to Traxler, opened this year. Marriott has immediate plans for a Courtyard by Marriott Cairo Mirage City in 2012, as well as a number of other properties including the Ritz-Carlton Palm Hills Resort slated for 2016. Abu Dhabi wasn’t the only Middle Eastern city Rocco Forte had his eye on either: a hotel in Cairo is in the works as is one in Luxor.

Iraq

Perhaps the most surprising country in the Middle East to be in the midst of hotel development is war-torn Iraq, with Best Western, Hilton, Marriott, and Starwood all expressing interest in Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan in the northern part of the country,

on the Turkish border far from shattered Baghdad, in particular.

“I think the Kurdistan Autonomous Region (KAR) is where the development will happen in greater Iraq first,” says Simon Turner, president, global development, Starwood Hotels & Resorts. “The KAR is very different than the green zone in Baghdad. I think you will see us, and possibly some of the other international operators, there in the relatively near future. It’s complicated, but not necessarily any more complicated than developing in certain parts of Africa and other parts of the Middle East. Security issues aren’t as significant as you would think in Kurdistan.”

Ground is about to be broken on both the Best Western Premier Erbil and Best Western Premier Erbil Airport for fourth quarter 2013 openings. With an influx of foreign business travelers from Turkey, the GCC, and Asia, specifically South Korea and Japan for the automotive industry, Glenn DeSouza, VP international operations, Asia and the Middle East, Best Western International, believes it’s time for a globally branded property. “One of the few limitations of the city is the lack of international quality accommodations to cope with high demand and expectations of international travelers. Current visitors opt for sub-standard local hotels while having to pay very high rates for their stays,” he says. “Tourism is relatively new for Erbil (and all of Iraq). Our announcement earlier this year of our intent to establish a footprint in

the city has drawn much international attention. It will take some time for Erbil to blossom, but this planning and development stage is critically important. Also important is the opportunity to learn from overdevelopment in places like Dubai, once glorified, but now hemorrhaging financially.”

Jordan

Jordan, which has remained relatively quiet during this year's neighboring political upheavals, has the benefit of longstanding tourism appeal. The streak continues in beach resort city Aqaba with the DoubleTree that opened earlier this year, the brand's first foray into the Middle East. “It's a brand that's becoming something quite different outside the U.S.,” points out Traxler. “Edgy and boutique.” Marriott also has plans for the JW Marriott Aqaba Hotel & Spa in 2015.

Also on the horizon is Wadi Resort. Miami-based Oppenheim Architecture + Design recently won the World Architecture Festival Award for this property, opening in trekkers paradise Wadi Rum in 2014, an eco-friendly resort of 47 desert lodges carved into sandstone cliffs.

Kuwait

Twenty years ago, oil-drenched Kuwait was the site of Iraqi occupation during the Persian Gulf crisis, and now it's a luxury getaway. After first opening in Edinburgh, Hotel Missoni decided on Kuwait for the second location of its boutique properties swathed in the fashion house's signature zigzags and stripes.

“In Kuwait, the majority of our guests have been from the Middle East, with also some Europeans and North Americans. What's been surprising has been the incredible support locally,” says Rosita Missoni. “The hotel has a very modern look, and, of course, we love color, so there is a strong design that is very different from anything else in Kuwait. It easily could have rubbed some people the wrong way. Instead, we have been so pleased by the number of bookings.”

Another renowned brand is headed for Kuwait, too: Radisson Blu Hotel Kuwait will debut in mid-2013.

Lebanon

2009 was an important year for Beirut with openings of hotels like the Four Seasons and Gordon Campbell Gray's designer Le Gray. Now, Traxler notes the city is picking up again: Hilton Worldwide just signed two deals there; a Grand Hyatt under construction is due to open by the end of 2012; and the Kempinski Residences Al Abadiyah Hills-Beirut resort is on the boards, due in 2013.

Oman

The Sultanate of Oman, emerging as a high-end vacation destination, will be the site of the third Hotel Missoni. “Oman has a truly lovely coastline and unspoiled natural beauty. Like UAE, it has become a very popular destination for travelers around the world, but it has its own character,” shares Missoni. “The location is inspiring: Oman is a very intriguing place, with a beautiful beach, a fantastic turquoise sea, and a dramatic



Left: The lobby of the Renaissance Doha City Center in Qatar.

landscape.”

Other brands hope for the same: Muscat, Oman's capital, plans to make way for Bangkok-based Absolute Hotel Services' extended stay Eastin Residences, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve, and Kempinski the Wave, set on a beach in a mixed-use community.

Qatar

Marriott made significant inroads into Qatar this fall with a three-hotel Doha City Center complex that opened in the business district, spanning the Renaissance Doha City Center Hotel, Courtyard by Marriott Doha City Center, and Marriott Executive Apartments Doha City Center. While all hotels share seven floors, each has a distinct look.

“We have also had our eye on Qatar for some time and are thrilled to debut the brand in Doha early next year, promising to bring St. Regis' legacy of luxury to this thriving region,” notes James. Tapping into Doha's growing passion for the arts, St. Regis has also collaborated with Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York to open a jazz club, joining a pulsating arts scene comprised of the new Qatari Music Academy, Jean Nouvel's National Museum of Qatar, and I.M. Pei's Museum of Islamic Art.

Saudi Arabia

Because of its exacting rules regarding women's rights and unforgiving policies towards crime, Saudi Arabia has been deemed one of the region's harshest countries. However, Wimberly's McMahon says the kingdom has evolved, now showcasing more progressive thinking than other neighboring countries.

This growth is reflected in the hospitality sector, with Marriott, for example, busy plotting eight new properties. Rocco Forte plans to land in Jeddah in 2013 and Kempinski, opening several hotels in Saudi Arabia, will create the country's first eco-friendly building there a year later. Work on the Hilton Riyadh Hotel & Residence in the capital city, slated for 2014, already snagged an award for its architecture and interiors; it will open after the Hilton Al Khobar Hotel & Residence. “Tourism to Saudi Arabia is beyond the Hajj,” says Traxler.

Syria

Currently, it is Syria suffering the most violence in the region. As president Bashar al-Assad clings to power in a bloody crackdown against stalwart protestors, it seems that growth in a country once ripe for tourism is stymied. As one example of the Middle East perpetually changing, McMahon was working on a project in Damascus that was forced to cease. “It's kind of amazing that when the Egyptians had their Arab Spring, it was pretty non-violent,” she reflects. “There's such a controlled energy in Syria by contrast. Two years ago they said Damascus was so safe, you could leave your keys in the car.”