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Chill Out

Monday, June 16, 2008

Malkai: A metaphor for luxury living

Driving north from Oman's capital city Muscat to Sohar, you come across a major intersection next to the town of Barka. While the road to the left meanders to the rugged Hajar hills, the right turn takes you to the sparkling blue waters of the Arabian Sea. Once a sleepy fishing hamlet, Barka has gradually developed into a small poultry town, known outside only for its crates of eggs. But such a marginalised status is about to change in a major way. Omani entrepreneur Pankaj Khimji's latest venture, Malkai, promises to put this non-descript village in the top tourist destinations of the Sultanate.

Named fondly after his wife Malvika and two daughters, Malkai, in Khimji's words, sets "a new benchmark in luxury living, not merely locally but globally." Malkai is not being planned simply as just another resort. It will be different from Al Sawadih or Ras Al Nahda, the two other resorts within the 50-km range. It is envisioned more like a country club, with a spa and a nine-hole golf course (Oman's first) designed by three-time master champion, Gary Player.

Launched a year after the destruction unleashed by the super cyclone Gonu, Malkai is one of the key projects attempting to rebuild the Sultanate. Together with four other ventures at different stages of completion - The Wave, Blue City, Muscat Golf Course Project, and Yitti project - Malkai intends to target top-end tourists from Europe, Asia and the United States. All these projects are being conceived under the new property clause: integrated tourism complexes (ITC). The ITC is a model law laying out the ground for free-hold, real estate ownership by foreigners in a country where property ownership was, until recently, restricted only to citizens. Armed with such liberal reforms, picturesque and tranquil Oman is rebranding itself to grab the status of the hottest tourist destination in the Arabian Gulf.

Scheduled for completion by the end of 2010, the Malkai will include 101 four-bedroom villas, each worth

From \$ 4-million villas to a salubrious spa, a nine-hole golf course to other cool comforts of a country club, the Malkai not only promises to be the dream destination for top-end tourists, but is also an attempt to rebrand Oman, writes *Qatar Tribune's* Editor **Ajit Kumar Jha**



Omani entrepreneur Pankaj Khimji, who has launched Malkai.

who have firmly ensconced themselves in businesses as far away as California in the United States, parts of Africa, Europe and the Gulf.

With his first venture, the Chedi hotel, in Muscat's Ghobra area, Khimji got a major head start. The spectacular Chedi was number two in last year's Condé Nast Traveller's readers poll of top tourist destinations to visit around the globe. The fact that the Chedi was severely damaged by the destructive Gonu has not deterred Khimji. "Such a risk comes once in every 50 years or so, and we are taking all precautions," he assures. Although Barka was unaffected, thanks to its

location outside the cyclone zone that was devastated, wadis are still being constructed all around.

Today, there are four natural wells on the property. They will be capped in order to preserve the water table. Residents will rely on water from a local desalination plant. A third of that water will be recycled and handed free of charge to the fishermen of Barka to help them keep fresh their daily catch. Khimji has also requested the local fisher folks to offer the resort supply of fresh seafood thus integrating the local community with the resort.

With 10,000 feet high jagged mountains such as Jebel Akhdar and 17,000

kms of pristine coastline, Oman is virtually a paradise in the middle of a beautiful desert. An atmosphere of simplicity and tranquility pervades the entire Sultanate. Projects such as the Malkai attempt to capture that tranquility and transform it into a dreamland. Khimji's childhood dream during the summer vacations was to build something bordering on fantasy. The inspiration came from the spectacular Omani architecture. Today, the plan is to preserve the tradition, yet reinvent a modern metaphor for luxury living. "We are not selling real estate, we are creating a lifestyle," adds the dreamer.

\$4 million, 92 two-bedroom suites (of \$1.2 million) and a boutique hotel containing 41 luxury suites. Besides the nine-hole golf course and spa, the project will include a main clubhouse

with two restaurants, a boutique, a delicatessen, tennis courts, a special playground and park for children. The country club will be a merely 10-minute drive to a beach club next to the Arabian Sea.

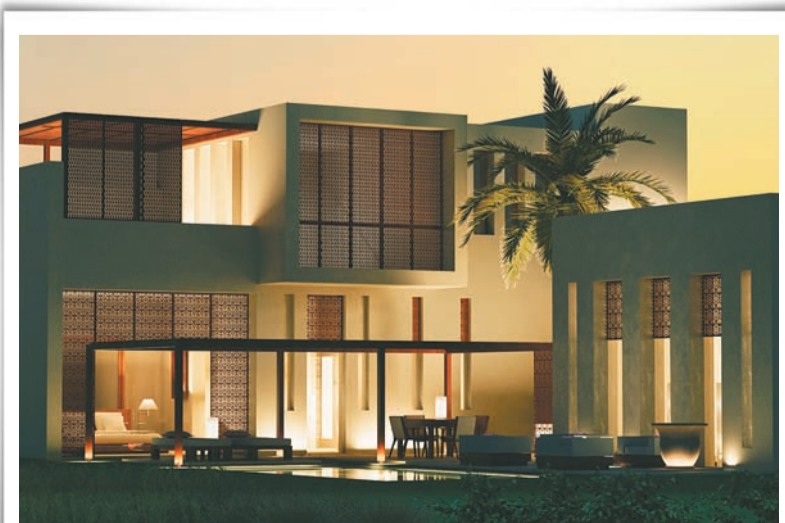
What was the main inspiration behind the Malkai? "I am just trying to actualise my childhood dreams during the long summer vacations in Barka, where my family-owned property is," says Khimji. The sobriety and sophistication of the conventional Omani architecture has influenced Khimji who is trained as a building construction engineer from Hammersmith and West London College. Therefore, the structural plan of Malkai combines the most striking aspects of traditional Omani architecture with the latest in modern interior design.

Today, you encounter camels and mountain goats at the construction site. Different varieties of Indian mangoes and other indigenous plants surround a concrete fish tank. "Most of this will change but there will be no uprooting of the local flora or alienation of the area's fauna," promises Khimji. The blueprint of the golf course designed by Gary Player visualises a desert oasis lined with date palms and local vegetation. Undulating fairways, sand traps and tiered greens will wind their way through desert canyons with a large artificial lake between holes six and seven as the centerpiece of the project.

Son of Kanaksi G Khimji, Pankaj, dressed in a spotless sparkling dished, appears as a typical soft-spoken and suave Kutchi-Gujarati Indian businessman whose family has been settled in Oman for the last five generations. The Kutchis, best described as "sugar mixed in tea, you get the taste but yet not visible", are one of the most enterprising communities of India



The Malkai combines the most striking aspects of traditional Omani architecture with the latest in modern interior design.



A computer-generated image of the two-storeyed two-bedroom villa.

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