

homes

Oman's new luxury

Philippa Kennedy takes us inside The Malkai, a new development that aims to sell not just real estate but a lifestyle concept

In a world where the wealthy have so many choices about where to spend their money, it is an increasingly difficult challenge for a property developer to create something that will attract clients. While there is no one formula for success, an imaginary mental checklist might include such things as exclusivity, beauty, peace and tranquility, a proven track record, a reliable team, and above all else, high end quality. If, as F Scott Fitzgerald stated, "the rich are different from you and me", they are always going to require something out of the ordinary when it comes to their precious leisure time.

It was with that in mind that Pantakl Khinjji set out to fulfil his long-held dream of building what amounts to a ready-made haven on a piece of land he owns outside Muscat in Oman. With his first venture, The Chedi hotel, already settled at the top of any discerning traveller's must-visit list, he has a head start. The Chedi, also in Muscat, was number two in last year's Conde Nast Traveler's readers poll of best places to visit around the world. It was narrowly beaten by the Maldives One & Only. Khinjji believes



An artist's impression of one of the villas at The Malkai development in Oman.

"Set a new benchmark in terms of luxury living, not only for Oman. It's a project that will compete with the best in the world."

The Malkai, the name created from the names of his wife and three children, is a country club and resort set inland from the pretty fishing village of Barka. The Malkai will combine the most beautiful aspects of traditional Omani architecture with the ultimate in modern interior design. What will make it unique is that it will be completely furnished to international standards, with a spa and a nine-hole golf course which will be designed by three times Masters champion Gary Player.

"When the new owners walk in to their villas in 2010, they will be completely furnished down to the last designer teaspoon, with landscaped gardens and individual 15 by 15 metre swimming pools," Khinjji says. "People are short of time these days. They are looking for the best, but they simply don't have the time to go out themselves and shop for sofas and cups and saucers. At The Malkai you are purchasing collectors items designed by people who are at the top of their field."

"If it's their second home, they will be able to close the front door at the end of their holiday and walk away, knowing that it will be well looked after and managed with a

potential income should they decide to let it."

Scheduled for completion by the end of 2010, it will comprise 101 four-bedroom villas, 92 two-bedroom suites and a boutique hotel containing 41 luxury suites. Besides the nine-hole golf course, there will be a spa, a main clubhouse with two restaurants, a boutique, a deli-casser, tennis courts, and a special area for children. From the resort it is a 10 minute drive to a beach club close to the picturesque fishing village of Barka.

Khinji, who was born in India and is now an Omani national, has put together a formidable team to develop his resort. Two years ago he met Gary Player at a conference in Cyprus. The South African, a highly successful golf course designer known for his selectivity, took very little persuading to agree to build a signature course at The Malkai.

"When I met Pantakl the thing that impressed me most was his dream," Player says. "I have met many people with dreams and many who start projects but don't complete them. The most important thing as far as I was concerned was that he wanted quality. My company has been offered all sorts of jobs that we don't accept. If they don't have quality, it's best to stay away from them, because it will only give you a headache."

Design will have completed 300 of the villas by the end of this year and is currently set to design an 18 hole course on Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi, flew to Muscat for the launch of The Malkai directly after his 51st appearance at the US Masters. "I have an affinity with the Middle East," Player says. "It's such a great education to understand the culture and the way people live. Tourism is a very important thing for this part of the world seen that in 15 years time they will run out of oil."

The concept behind the design of Player's Malkai course is that of a desert oasis lined with date palms and indigenous vegetation. Undulating fairways carved down into the site will wind their way through gentle desert canyons with a large lake between holes six and seven as the centrepiece. The Malkai course will be just nine holes because that is all there is room for at present. "It will be a demanding course that is playable for the average golfer, but which the professional will find a challenge off different tees," says Player.

Water is also very much on the minds of both Player and Khinjji. Although there are four natural wells on the property, they will be capped in order to preserve local water table levels. Residents will rely on water from a desalination plant. A third of that water, in the form of ice, will

be given free of charge to the fishing fleet of Barka to help them keep their daily catch fresh. Khinjji has also asked the fishermen to stop off every day near the beach club and offer the resort a fresh supply of seafood.

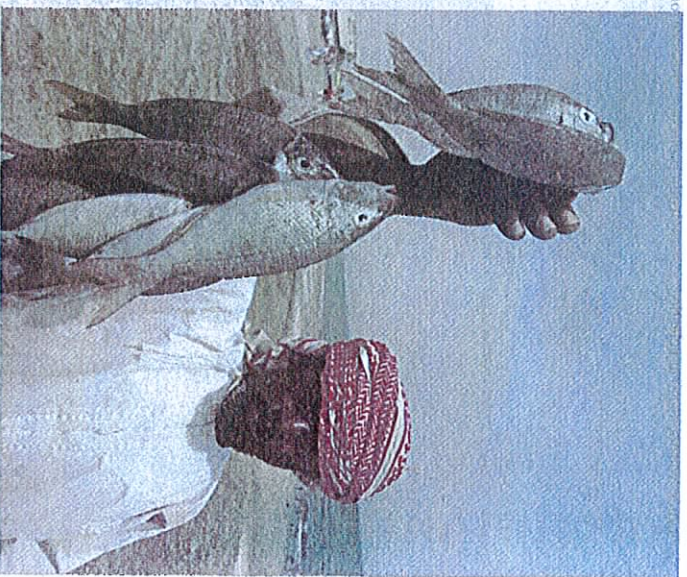
Player hopes to implement water-saving devices that he has introduced to a course he is building at his 13,000 acre farm in South Africa. "Lack of water is at a crisis level in the world," he says. "At home I am using 20 per cent less water, fertiliser and machinery, and it's working."

He continues, "Of course, people want to make money, I want to make money, but I also want to contribute something to society and build every golf course as a gift to nature. We will create a beautiful lush green golf course at The Malkai where [because] there was only desert. I hope young people will come and learn the game here and my ultimate dream would be to discover a young Tiger Woods here. It's not an impossible dream either."

"You have to understand what it is today that attracts people to spend money. It's better to have 10,000 people come to your country who are going to spend money, than 100,000 backpackers. Golf is a great way of attracting those sort of people," Player says. "Apart from the beauty of the coastline and the mountains in Oman, there is something else that is unique, and that is fresh air. You don't get that in China or India or London. To come here when it's freezing cold in London and have sunshine and fresh air is a very attractive proposition."

Oman's tourism industry was given a boost in 2006 by a decree issued by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Saïd giving foreign nationals the right to purchase lands and property. Oman is a tax free country and has no restriction on repatriating funds. There has been considerable investment in the past three years and other major projects include The Wave, the Yiti and the Blue City, premium beachfront residential developments.

The Malkai will be marketed by international chartered strategists and property consultants Citigroups and developers Al Maereen Real Estate Services Co. LLC, with Hanscomb as the cost and project manager. Also on the team: architect Reda Amanlou, interior designer Jaya Ibrahim, lighting designer Nathan Thompson, and landscaper Karl Prince. Another key member of the team is Adrian Zechta, chairman of General Hotel Management (GHM), who has a formidable reputation in the management of exclusive resorts. He oversees Amanouresorts, Benfort Hotels, Regent International, Orient Express Hotels and of



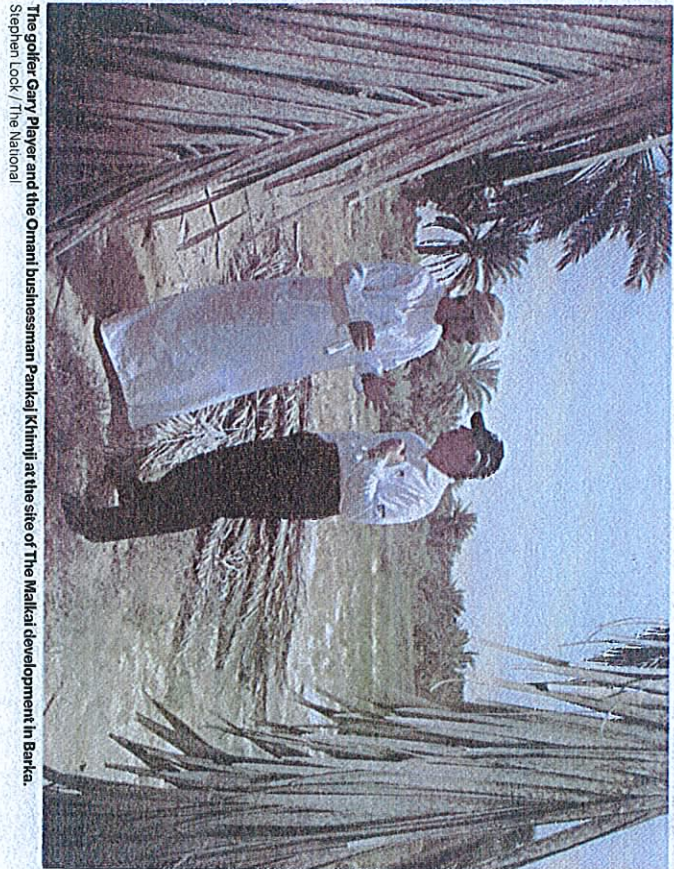
A local fisherman with his catch on the beach in the small fishing town of Barka, near the site of The Malkai development. Stephen Lock / The National

course, Khinjji's Chedi resorts. Amanlou, who is from Paris, is in charge of the architecture, which aims to create an atmosphere of tranquillity with clever use of subtle lighting and strategically placed water features. Furniture for the villas will be handcrafted, with specially commissioned artwork for the walls. Amanlou is convinced that there is a desire for such ready-made high end luxury. He doesn't think people will mind having a similar decor to their neighbour and points out that there will be a certain amount of choice in furniture designs and fabrics. "People all over the world employ interior designers to do it for them," he says, "and sometimes in development it can be a bit of a mess. Here at least everything will be in keeping with the rest of the resort."

We are not selling real estate, we are creating a lifestyle," Amanlou continues. We are trying to create something different. We try to analyse the tradition of the country to give a sense of belonging to the land on which we are building, deeply rooted in Arabian architecture and tradition, but reinvented and reinterpreted."

Citigroups believes that the inland country club will bring something different to the area. With no publicity up until now, they are quite confident about selling the units. Prices for the two bedroom suites start at US\$ 1.3 million and US\$ 4 million for the villas. Alex Upson, partner in the residential agency division, has already had six serious inquiries after what he describes as a "whispering campaign". He says, "Oman has huge appeal throughout the GCC because of its topography and climate. It's the next big thing in property in the region. It's a really beautiful place to come on holiday. It's all about low density with quality integrated tourism complexes. Other countries such as Saudi and Kuwait offer very little in terms of variation. There is also a long established link with the UK through military and diplomatic connections. British engineers have been building roads here for generations."

He continues, "In the luxury market, The Malkai represents incredible value. A high quality resort like this would sell for Dh 4000 per square foot in Dubai's Emirates Hills compared to Dh 2,700 per square foot for this resort." He adds, "The Malkai is going to be to the Gulf what the South of France is to Europe."



The golfer Gary Player and the Omani businessman Pantakl Khinjji at the site of The Malkai development in Barka. Stephen Lock / The National