

South Beach goes sleek

Rebranded the JW Marriott Hotel Singapore South Beach, the property's quirky accents are toned down for a sleek, muted vibe



Natasha Ann Zachariah

Edgy, quirky and appealing to the savvy luxury traveller, The South Beach hotel was Singapore's first Philippe Starck-designed hotel.

It had one of the loudest lobbies in town. Its reception area was called the "Global Village" and check-in desks were inspired by various cultures.

Neon lights were mixed with antique lamps while guests mingled at statement fixtures, such as a 7m-long Arabascato marble table.

But this version as people knew it is no more. The hotel is now rebranded the 634-room JW Marriott Hotel Singapore South Beach, reflecting its new corporate operator Marriott International. It is the world's largest hotel chain, with 30 hotel brands - including The Ritz-Carlton and W Hotels - under its umbrella.

Some changes from the \$20-million renovation have been rolled out at the property, which reopened on Thursday.

The riot of colours and textures in the lobby has been toned down to a sleeker, muted look. The check-in counters have been standardised to simple tables with plain white stools. The feature wall behind these counters is decorated in a staid, brown-and-white quatrefoil motif.

As befitting a luxury hotel chain, there is also a new high-end spa.

Hotel rooms are spread out over two buildings, the East and South towers. The 10-treatment room Spa by JW goes into the second floor of the East Tower and will open in the second quarter of next year.

The repositioning of the hotel is to "maximise returns on the property", says Mr Kwek Leng Beng, 75, hotelier and executive chairman of Hong Leong Group and City Developments Limited (CDL).

Before JW Marriott took over, the hotel was self-managed by South Beach Consortium, made up of CDL, a Singapore-listed international real estate operating company, and Malaysian property developer IOI Group.

The consortium built South Beach, a mixed-use development that also has an office tower, four heritage buildings, a retail area and residences. The hotel was part of the mix.

After nine months managing the hotel on its own, the consortium decided to get an operator to run it.

Mr Kwek says: "Outsourcing (operations) to a third party promotes transparency. It also allows us to concentrate our resources on core areas and drive optimal results for all shareholders."

In June, he inked a deal with Marriott International to rebrand The South Beach hotel. He chose the company to run the property as it has been doing a good job with JW Marriott Hong Kong, in which CDL has a controlling interest.

He says: "Marriott enables us to leverage on its powerful international distribution network and tap a huge pipeline of customers. This should maximise returns on our South Beach property."

He is not sentimental about the edits. Instead, he sees them as the brand's way of working with the space given.

As for the spa addition, he says: "We should have thought of it first."

Ms Christy Donato, vice-president of global brand management for JW Marriott Hotels and Resorts, says: "With (French designer) Philippe Starck designing the property, it already came with a distinct point of view. But we elevated it by marrying the JW focus on service and programming, such as the spa."

Despite the global economic slowdown and slower growth rate of tourist arrivals here, she is not worried about filling rooms as the group appeals to luxury travellers, a growing demographic. She says: "The luxury travel segment has grown by 50 per cent over the last five years - that's twice as much as

any other type of travel."

Mr Kwek is confident the Marriott brand will draw guests.

The Marriott loyalty programme has more than 56 million members in its Marriott Rewards and The Ritz-Carlton Rewards schemes.

In September, the group also made a US\$13-billion (S\$18.7-billion) acquisition of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, another mega hotel chain with its own loyalty scheme.

Because of Marriott's reach, Mr Kwek has entrusted another boutique hotel to its management. Called The Singapore Edition, the 190-room property will open in 2019 in Orchard Boulevard and Cuscaden Road.

For the South Beach hotel, JW Marriott is also developing nine food-and-beverage outlets. These are not limited to the hotel's premises, but spread across the South Beach development.

So far, five restaurants are open. They include Beach Road Kitchen, a restaurant with live chef stations located on Level 1 in a separate block from the hotel rooms; and Court Martial Bar, which serves speciality cocktails and is housed in one of the conservation buildings.

In the hotel proper are gastropub Media Bar, gin-cocktail bar Tonic and Akira Back, a modern Japanese restaurant that infuses Korean elements into the food.

JW Marriott also manages three of South Beach's conservation buildings, including the former Non-Commissioned Officers Club building. It was supposed to be a private members-only club, but will now have restaurants and bars inside that are open to the public.

South Korea-born chef Akira Back, 42, was drawn to open his eponymous restaurant in the South Beach hotel because of its off-the-wall vibe.

He owns a few restaurants across Asia, including an outlet in JW Marriott New Delhi.

He says: "I want people to come to my restaurant and get comfortable, and mingle with new faces across the long tables."

natahaz@sph.com.sg

• Promotional room rates for JW Marriott Hotel Singapore South Beach are \$335 until March 31.



A new dining Avenue

A cafe run by Italy's oldest family-owned coffee roasters, famous New York mille crepe-maker Lady M and whisky bar Quaich Bar are among the new tenants at South Beach Avenue, a new stretch of shops near Esplanade MRT station.

Eight new eateries and bars have opened in the area flanked by Beach Road and Nicoll Highway. The Bras Basah Road exit of Esplanade MRT station takes most people there by public transport, but business in the dining avenue is still relatively quiet.

The restaurants in operation include Caffe Vergnano 1882 Singapore, a global chain of cafes run by Italian coffee experts who also sell coffee machines; Fasta, a pasta joint where diners can create their own pasta bowls; and all-day cafe Fynn's.

Singapore's first whisky bar, Quaich Bar, whose first outlet opened in 2006 in Waterfront Plaza in Havelock Road, has set up its second outlet in South Beach.

Diners can look forward to more options next year. Newcomers include crepe cake specialist Lady M Confections and a steak restaurant called Rump.

South Beach Avenue is the retail component of the South Beach mixed development, with an office tower that is home to companies such as Facebook; four heritage buildings, including a former armoury; a hotel; and residences.

While some restaurant owners would like to see more footfall in the area, others are happy with the current traffic.

Ms Sam Chua, 28, co-founder of Black Cow, a modern shabu shabu



and sukiyaki restaurant and sake bar there, says her 48-seater eatery is busy during lunch.

This is her first time running a restaurant and she also works as a management consultant for a bank. Business in the first two months has been good and she anticipates breaking even in the restaurant's first year.

Some tenants are expecting more crowds now that the hotel in the area has come under a new operator. Formerly called The South Beach, it has been rebranded JW Marriott Hotel Singapore South Beach and has 634 rooms.

Ms Sam Lai, general manager of Caffe Vergnano 1882 Singapore

who is in her 30s, says the cafe's franchise owner, The Silo Alliance, decided to open in South Beach Avenue as it is part of a mixed-use development and it would get a wider demographic of customers.

She says: "When we first opened in September, we drew just a handful of people a day. Many don't know we are here."

"When they see some of the shops boarded up or under construction, they think the entire area is closed."

"But business has definitely picked up. And we'll see a better crowd when the hotel has more guests."

The underground connection to

the Esplanade MRT station has also helped to increase footfall and drawn some curious passers-by.

Ms Judy Tay, 48, an assistant office manager for a childcare group, chanced on South Beach Avenue on Thursday during her lunch break.

She had taken the train from her office in Mountbatten Square and had planned to eat in the area.

She says: "I didn't know this place existed. It has a nice ambience because the area is so open and there are lots of food options."

"It's also convenient to get to by MRT, so I will come back to have dinner or even hold work meetings here."

South Beach Avenue is a new stretch of retail and food-and-beverage outlets near the Esplanade MRT station.
ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

Restaurants to try

Black Cow, B1-20
Open: Noon to 3pm and 6 to 10.30pm, Mondays to Saturdays. Closed on Sundays
What: A modern Japanese shabu shabu and sukiyaki restaurant and sake bar specialising in prime cuts of pork and beef. Specialities include wagyu foie gras don (\$45, includes a salad and a dessert).

Fynn's, B1-21
Open: 8am to 10pm (weekdays), 11am to 10pm (Saturdays), 11am to 4pm (Sundays)
What: Open since Dec 1, this cafe serves casual fare all day. Favourites include grilled chicken fried wild rice with edamame, snow peas, egg and pickled vegetables (\$19.50) and Vanilla Hot Cakes with coconut butter and berry compote (\$19).

Atmstel, B1-22
Open: In February
What: This casual Mediterranean outfit will have an open kitchen, a pizza bakery and gourmet produce and wine.

Fasta, B1-23
Open: 11am to 8pm (Mondays to Saturdays). Closed on Sundays
What: Affordable, gourmet pasta is on the menu here. Choose between warm bowls such as Shio Ba Mee (\$9.50), which has pasta and roasted pork belly; or cold bowls such as Unbelievable (\$8.50), which mixes pasta, avocado and chocolate. Bowls can also be customised by choosing from different pastas, sides and sauces. Prices start at \$8.50.



Black Cow's wagyu foie gras don. PHOTO: BLACK COW

Rump, B1-18
Open: In February
What: Have a steak and a cocktail for \$40 to \$50 at this affordable steakhouse. Cuts come from Australia, America and Japan. Rump's signature gunpowder rub is a mix of 12 herbs and spices that gives the meat a shiny, black coat after it is grilled.

Caffe Vergnano 1882 Singapore, B1-17
Open: 8am to 9pm (weekdays), 10am to 6pm (weekends)
What: A cafe run by Italy's oldest family-owned coffee roasters, with coffee beans sourced from around the world and slow-roasted. Prices start at \$3.50 for an espresso.
On the first three Sundays of every month, there are workshops such as latte art and manual brewing methods (\$150 a person).