

Equatorial Guinea's Luxurious Grand Hotel

Olawale Ajimotokan discovers the charm of the Grand Hotel Djibloho and speaks with the hotel's General Manager Vincenzo Presti while in the Central African country...

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In the middle of the African forest in Equatorial Guinea is the luminous Grand Hotel Djibloho. After guiding THISDAY on an elaborate facility tour of its wings and business processes, the hotel's General Manager, Vincenzo Presti, asked the reporter to find a word that will appropriately describe the hotel that opened its doors to business in April 2015. "Breathtaking!" was the response. Honestly, a first timer will develop a spontaneous affection for the hotel, the kind of joy a mother will have for her new born baby. Such is its charm that guests cannot but marvel at the sheer architectural appeal of the hotel that rises up to seven floors, the moment they step foot in its wide and comfortable reception area.



At the interview just before the tour, the Italian confidently beat his chest and placed Grand Hotel Djibloho in the 7-star category, affirming that the hotel is peerless by African benchmark.

"I can tell you that this hotel is more than a five-star, it is a five-star deluxe," Presti declared in a measured cadence. "I will not hesitate to class it as a seven star-hotel. I have been in the hospitality field for 35 years, with experience that cuts across Europe, Africa and the Middle East. I have been travelling almost all over the world. Take my word, this type of hotel is not easy to find worldwide- not only in Africa- but worldwide. Yes. It is fantastic."

Located in Oyala, the future administrative capital of Equatorial Guinea, Grand Hotel Djibloho was conceived by President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo as the first urban residence in the area, serving as a world-class destination for leisure, tourism and business.

The edifice, about 20 kilometres from the new airport at Mongomeyen, bears the signature of Italy based construction firm, Piccini.

It sits on five hectares of land lavishly carved from the pristine equatorial forest. The nearby Mbini River provides a panoramic view.

The rooms vary from Presidential Suites, VIP Suites to Superior Rooms. There are 452 rooms with all the facilities guests will like to find in a big hotel. The superior rooms, totaling 350, are about 50 square metres wide. The VIP suites measure 100 square metres and 2,000 metres for the presidential suite. There are also 50 villas, each having four rooms, to create a resort and private ambience inside the complex.

The hotel's claim to upscale and private lifestyle is strongly reinforced by the leisure facilities put in place for the convenience of guests. It comes swinging with an 18-hole championship golf course that is designed around the hotel complex plus a helipad.

There are five bars- El Mirador, the Safari Bar, the Ozean Pool Bar and the Spa Health Lounge. The fifth is Hoyo 19, the golf course themed relaxation tavern.

It also boasts of several restaurants that serve Pan-African and continental cuisines. They include the L'Incanto, an Italian restaurant on the sixth floor, where dinners after eating famous food can enjoy breath-taking sights of the golf course and the immediate surroundings from the foyer.

Outside that are three swimming poolsthe outdoor swimming pool, an in-door swimming pool directly attached to the gym and a six-foot deep presidential swimming pool on the seventh floor.

Among other leisure facilities include a night club, a spa of 2,000 square metres, massage and steam with sauna and three jacuzzi plus a commercial area that has 20 shops.

There is also a medical centre equipped with facilities for eye and plastic surgery. The hotel also has an international conference centre that boasts of state of the art equipment for experiential event solutions.

The centre has an underground banquet hall which can also be converted as a space for exhibition and political meeting for up to 1,000 people sitting and 2,000 when standing. It can in addition host musical concerts. The main auditorium, with its signature dome top, can contain up to 1,200 people. There are also another nine rooms for meeting for people numbering 20 to 600 persons.

The hotel has 250 local and 70 expatriate workers from Ukraine, Cameroon, France, Mali, Egypt, Morocco, Spain, Italy, Russia and the United Kingdom.

Presti, who is from Luxury Hotels and Management Company, said that to realise their business objectives, they had to train the local workers from the scratch on hospitality.

"At the beginning, we created a group of about 12 expatriates and started finding here people that will like to work in this place. We started our training right from the bottom with people who did not know what hospitality is all about, we created for each department a sort of training which was going on from morning to night, a non stop training. This is what we have been doing

From the 14th of April till now," he said.

For a luxury hotel whose name does not ring a bell, Grand Hotel Djibloho was expected to consider the association option with famous brands like Sheraton, Radisson Blu, Marriot, Ibis and Hilton among others, as a deft marketing strategy.

Although he agreed that a big brand helps in sales, Presti noted that brand association is not important as people are visiting Equatorial Guinea for other reasons, while the popular hotel brands only sell to their own network.

“Yes, I fully agree on that (brand association). A big brand can help in sales but in this case I think a country like Equatorial Guinea is still opening to tourism. It is not so important to have a brand that sells because the brand that sells, sell to their own network and people from any country are not coming to Equatorial Guinea just because they are attracted by Sheraton, Four Seasons or whatever, but they are coming here for other reasons at the moment. But when the country is open to tourism, may be a big brand can help”.

Though workers in the oil and associated industry and some visitors have been patronising the hotel, Presti noted that for the hotel to transit from a business hotel to a leisure destination, people should free to come to the country and the restrictive procedures which make getting the visa difficult relaxed so that visitors can have their visas stamped at the airport.

The Italian got into hospitality profession by chance after he acquired his degree in Economics as a 25 year old. But he loved the profession and has over the past three and half decades gained industrial experience in almost all the fields of hospitality.

He started working as a receptionist in a big hotel and later went to all the stages and all departments of hotel administration. He undertook training in housekeeping department in England, in food and beverages in Germany and in a commercial department in Italy where he rose to be the Managing Director of a hotel chain, the Dominion Hotel Group in Italy in 1997.

The company made a big presence in Europe particularly in the East countries and Africa. At the end of 2005, Dominion Group was representing 15 different countries with 39 hotels.

Later, Presti opened another company in Italy, ‘My Hotels’ which existed for three years before he sold to a private investor, another company called Ora Hotels, which in Italian means ‘Now Hotels’.

He has been working for Luxury Hotels and Management Company since 2012 from where he was assigned to his current job. His first stint in Africa was in Malindi, Kenya in 1995. He has also managed hotels in Zanzibar, Tanzania as well as in Madagascar and Mozambique while his company undertook one of the biggest development in Egypt, in Sharm El-Shiekh, on the Red Sea.

For somebody who was born in Sicily when it was still under the administration of Tunis, he says he feels African and genuinely professes his love for the continent when asked about his perception of Africa and Equatorial Guinea.

“Well, I like Africa and have worked there. Unfortunately I have not been to Nigeria, the biggest African country, though I have been reading about the country. Before coming to Equatorial Guinea, I could not believe the extraordinary things they did in the last 10 years.

They are a small but rich country with a very little population. They also have good infrastructure and I am yet to see their kind of roads in other countries.

There are five airports for a country of less than one million people. But with these infrastructure, they need to open up to foreign investments because this country is really a very important African Country,.’