



# Experience is Everything

As the world of hospitality is continuously changing, Debut Development Group is a developer, operator and financier who understands these changes, reacts to them, and creates bold, culturally relevant, hospitality experiences to satisfy the travellers of today. Here, RLI sits down with Michael Wilkings, Founder and Chairman of the company to discuss what the plans are for the future for this global powerhouse.



**GRAND HYATT RESORT AND RESIDENCES**  
Grand Cayman

**D**ebut Development Group and its predecessor companies, which have all been founded by Wilkings, have been deeply involved in leisure and hospitality since the early 1980s.

In recent years the company has focused on full-service hotel and resort developments, but in the past they have been responsible for the designing, developing, equipping, opening and operations of over 200 leisure and entertainment projects on five continents. These projects have included many restaurants, family entertainment centres, location-based entertainment, bars, clubs and mixed-use developments.

Pre-Covid-19, the business had graduated to working in the upper echelons of the hotel industry when they incubated and are now co-developing the 375-key, five-star Grand Hyatt Resort and Residences project on Grand Cayman in the Cayman Islands.

"Together with some amazing partners, we secured an incredible seven-acre site on Seven Mile Beach and assembled a project development team of world-renowned consultants to create what will be the best resort in the Caribbean, and maybe beyond, of this I have no doubt," explains Michael Wilkings,

Founder and Chairman of Debut Development Group.

"This phenomenal project has eight F&B outlets, one of the largest spas in the Caribbean, three pools, 30,000sq ft of conference space, and the very latest in-room technology and building management systems."

Given the current market conditions, Debut, like everyone in this climate, have had to either alter or re-evaluate their key objectives moving forward. The Grand Hyatt project itself started construction last December, but no sooner had work started before they were forced to call a halt due to the government quarantine.

"In my view the Covid-19 panic is less of a clear and present danger to our industry than the not-yet-fully recognised credit crisis we are already in. The hotel, resort, retail, LBE, etc. world cannot function without active and receptive credit markets, which now hardly exist, with most liquid capital on the sidelines waiting for confidence in presently gyrating valuations," Wilkings says.

On a more positive note, the business has multiple projects lined up across different continents on the horizon. They have been asked to join a regional government task force in Osaka,

Japan to consider the future of tourism in the Kansai region, which could even lead to them re-establishing an office in the country.

They are also in the early stages of planning a leisure and residential development in California on a 100-acre site at the confluence of three major highways. Wilkings feels that given the seismic changes underway in the retail world that this project will break the mould of retail-anchored projects and pivot to adventure sports as the anchor theme and attraction, with an extensive residential development component, together with destination F&B, a hotel with conference facilities, some limited relevant retail and limited office space.

"In St. Martin, we are currently incubating a luxury resort and residential development, and in Mexico we are working with a well-known brand that has not yet penetrated that massive market. Finally, we are working with an exciting new night time entertainment and dining concept that will debut in Dubai once the crises subsides, with the intention to bring the concept to New York and possibly Las Vegas."

When looking for a new project, Debut is on the lookout for something a bit out of the ordinary, something that provides an



**ALLURE NIGHTCLUB**  
Yas Island, Abu Dhabi

intellectual challenge, not just more of the same. Wilkings has always been drawn to new places, new concepts and new challenges and this is reflected in the properties and projects the group take on, whether it is opening the first Western-style nightclub in China to persuading the government in Abu Dhabi to issue the first, and only, pork kitchen licence for Italian restaurant Cipriani.

To ensure its destinations remain exciting and attractive, Wilkings believes that hospitality can never stand still, so the choice and selection of the senior management team is crucial and the utilising of technology is equally important in maintaining innovative destinations.

"It's all about the people in the team, they are paramount. I have worked with some truly amazing individuals over a long career, and some I hired 40 years ago are still my best friends, and we still work together when the opportunity presents itself," explains Wilkings.

"Nobody can foresee the future, but I remain optimistic. The biggest challenges in the near term will be lack of credit, even more cautious equity and regaining the general public's trust, which I hope will happen sooner than we think," Wilkings concludes.



**GRAND HYATT RESORT LOBBY**  
Grand Cayman



**CIPRIANI DINING & ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX**  
Yas Island, Abu Dhabi



**MARGARITAVILLE BEACH RESORT**  
Grand Cayman