

PROPERTY

Behind the scenes OF KEMPINSKI'S KL BOW



Christian Razukas

CONTRIBUTOR/KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

“I need and want to stay in niches, work with unique developers and create moments that are memorable,” says Michael Hensler, the Beijing-based Chief Operating Officer Asia for Kempinski Hotels. “We don’t have a tailor-made approach. We ask, ‘What is it that you want to achieve? How can we stand out? How can we be different?’”

Hensler, who oversees 36 hotels, has visited Kuala Lumpur frequently for the last two and a half years, working with local developer KSK Land to launch Kempinski’s first hotel in the Malaysian capital. It’s the planned anchor of the 5.4 billion ringgit (US\$1.36 billion) 8 Conlay development in KL’s Golden Triangle, and is also slated to feature two towers of YOO8 serviced apartments managed by Kempinski.

We spoke with Hensler, who has opened Kempinskis in Kuwait and Dubai, to chat about the secrets of developing world-class, five-star experiences for the brand. Here’s what we learned.

First secret: Be unique

A world-class hotel must stand out, Hensler said. “The luxury traveller is not looking for a home away from home; he is looking for the basic comforts he has at home, but then he’s looking for priceless moments and local experiences.”

Twenty to 30 percent of Kempinski’s KL experience will have a local feel. Hensler and KSK Land regularly meet to hammer out specifics, whether it is devising how guests will enter the lobby or adapting Kempinski’s famed “Lady in Red” hotel ambassador to the city.

“It doesn’t need to be complex. It doesn’t need to be expensive. It needs to be fun. It needs to be local. It needs to be an experience,” Hensler said. “It needs to be recognized by the local crowd that they proudly show what they have. It’s also for a visitor from outside who says, ‘I had an experience.’ I take a photo. I call my friends and tell them I was at that hotel, and it was stunning.”

Kempinski’s reputation for unique experiences was a plus for KSK Land, which has also built high-rise residential and mixed-use commercial developments in the Klang Valley and Penang.

“With a lot of five-star hotels, when you enter the hotel, you’re not sure what city you’re in,” said Joanne Kua Ying Fei, KSK Land’s Managing Director. “Every single Kempinski hotel is



different. The combination of the owner’s DNA, the Kempinski DNA and [Philippe Starck’s acclaimed interior designers at] YOO being in KL from a design perspective means if you try to put this hotel in another city, it wouldn’t fit.”

Second secret: Rethink form

Top-notch infrastructure and easy access are essential so guests can interact unexpectedly. “How can the hotel add value to shared spaces? You don’t put the restaurant of the hotel in the hotel, because people don’t need to go to the hotel to have good F&B,” Hensler said, referring to food and beverage. “In Dubai, you need to, because it’s the only place you have an alcohol license. But here, in Singapore or Hong Kong, you’d rather go to standalone places. So how can we outfarm or create experiences that are not necessarily connected to a five-star hotel but are managed by a five star hotel?”

As an example, he said long, communal dining tables were not needed. “You have [to have a] restaurant where you have table sizes, table shapes, table forms where you can easily say, ‘Hey, let’s get



Photos courtesy of 8 Conlay

together. Let’s collaborate,” he said. “I can support this, with the way I serve drinks, with the way I serve food, with how I design the restaurant, so it’s open and I can see and be seen —but there’s still a chance if we want to talk.”

Secret three: Teamwork

Kempinski owns four of 75 hotels in its global portfolio, so warm relations with local owners like KSK Land for 8 Conlay are important.

“We integrate, but we are not the only player,” Hensler said. “I’m not so arrogant that I say when it comes to F&B, I know it all. Let’s work together — explore, create, innovate — and make sure that we create places that people want to go. The stimulating part is a bold vision [that] somebody means business, somebody seriously wants to be different, someone seriously thinks with a nonconventional approach.”

From 8 Conlay, Fei agreed. “I didn’t want to build a hotel and to have a hotelier tell me these are my [standard operating procedures] and that’s it,” she said. “With Kempinski, it is a partnership.”

Hensler is upbeat about the 8 Conlay pairing.

“Where does innovation come from in hotels? The last was the minibar and when they folded the toilet paper in a triangle,” he said. “Try selling innovation in Beijing. I wish you good luck [...] Yet again, people [in KL] are willing to do business — are ready to fail — and this spirit is really great.”

Secret four: It’s in the details

“Clean is clean, but it’s not sexy,” Hensler said, when talking about expectations for the thousand-or-so YOO8 serviced apartments to be managed by Kempinski at 8 Conlay. “It’s about giving you safety and security and cleanliness in one part, and then I think luxury to have choices,” he said, describing Kempinski’s planned offerings as a huge portfolio of things that you can do, but do not have to do.

That’s key for KSK Land, Fei says. “In the KL context, there are a lot of luxury apartments, but not all of them are maintained well — and when apartments or residences are not maintained, the value goes down. Having a branded residence with Kempinski puts that mark, because their reputation is on the line.”