

spa business

INTERVIEW

Sharilyn Abbajay

Marriott's new vice-president for global spa & retail

Top of the world

Starwood's Iridium Spa debuts at St Regis Lhasa, Tibet

Robert De Niro

has his shibui spa got star quality?



TOP OF THE WORLD

One of the world's highest cities, with a name which means holy land in Tibetan, Lhasa is the perfect site for the jewel of Starwood's spa portfolio. Although the company has five in-house spa brands (see SB10/3 p24), this one is considered the most special. Iridium Spa has been created specifically to appeal to St Regis customers, who are known to be wealthy, well-travelled and for enjoying the finest things in life.

With its view of the Mila and Tanggula Mountains, Iridium can lay claim to being the world's highest spa. At 3,680m (12,000ft) above sea level it is literally in the clouds, giving it a mystical feel. The upside of this birds' eye location is that the views are stunning, the downside is that oxygen levels can be low in winter, so guests are encouraged to increase their cardio activity before a visit.

In the last decade, Lhasa has been made more accessible by the completion of the world's most elevated railroad, which traverses three mountain ranges and is so scenic that many of the stations are designated as sightseeing stops. Tourism to Tibet has been building steadily: some six million visitors were predicted for 2010, mostly from the US, Germany and Japan, which has generated prosperity. With the Iridium Spa, Starwood is aiming for the local market, wealthy Chinese and Tibetans and connoisseurs of world travel.

The brand development was led by Mia Kyracos, Starwood's director of global spa brands and programming (see SB10/3 p00), with input from a cross-functional team comprised of St Regis' global brand and design teams, development support from Jeremy

Named after a material as desirable as platinum, but harder to find, Iridium Spa is Starwood's new in-house five-star spa brand. The flagship site has only just opened its doors in Tibet

McCarthy, Starwood's director of global spa development and operations, and a global network of spa consultants – most notably Maggie Gunning and her associates at Spa Synergy. The company, still operating as Spa Synergy despite being acquired by AW Lake last May, worked on the concept so it was sympathetic to the location – consulting architects and interior designers – and also liaised with Starwood's head office to develop the Iridium Spa brand globally.

BRAND VALUES

Kyracos says the spa brand's development was informed by the St Regis heritage. "Iridium was born from the DNA of our brand, originating with the famed Iridium Room [a prestigious ballroom] at the St Regis New York in 1938," she says. "The word iridium comes with a rich history and is also one of the world's most precious and rarest elements on earth, akin to platinum but far less abundant. Like its meaning, Iridium Spa is rare and refined."

No expense has been spared with the spa and there are opulent touches, including a gold-lined swimming pool, using 7,450 pieces of gold, and an all-suite format, doing away with communal changing areas. In fact, the whole project has been a hefty investment: RMB750m (US\$113.6m, €82.5m, £70.5m) was spent on the resort, with RMB11.5m (US\$1.7m, €1.2m, £1m) allocated to the spa. According to Kyracos, as this is the first luxury hotel resort in Tibet – not to mention the global launch pad for its newest spa concept – it is a very significant project.

Rather than booking treatments, Iridium Spa gives the option of booking blocks of time intended to cover the treatment as well as pre/post treatment activities. "The aim is to offer an experience which is tailored and discreet," says Gunning. "From arrival to departure, Iridium Spa provides guests with the rarest of luxuries: time." At the time of going to press, prices were still being finalised. The therapist puts together a tailored programme for the guest, based

■ Iridium in Lhasa is the world's highest spa, but transporting goods to the site for construction was a complicated process





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on their needs and goals. As much as possible, one therapist will stay with the guest throughout his/her time at the spa and perform all the treatments. All therapists are being trained in the spa's signature Tibetan and Iridium treatments, as well as in facials, basic manicure and pedicure and traditional Chinese/Tibetan hand and foot treatments.

"As part of the arrival ritual, we present the guest with a traditional Tibetan jewellery box for them to store their watch and other jewellery. This is a symbol of intention for them to forget about time, relax and enjoy the time they have booked for their treatment," says Gunning. When they leave, guests are given a satchel of tea, from the tea ritual, as a memento.

Central to the spa brand is the all-suite format. At Lhasa site, there are four single suites and two couples suites, each with its own toilet, vanity area, experience shower, sitting and consultation area, treat-

■ Iridium Spa at St Regis Lhasa boasts an opulent pool lined with 7,450 pieces of gold, as well as an all suite format

ment bed and even a hydrothermal facility, such as a sauna or spa bath. Other facilities include a yoga studio and meditation garden. There are separate entrances and exits,

as people are expected to arrive and leave with different mindsets.

REFLECTING THE LOCATION

Tying each of the sites to its location is an important element of the Iridium Spa brand, through signature programmes and also by incorporating local ingredients and remedies. Because of the altitude, treatments at this inaugural spa have been geared towards helping guests relax and breathe more easily. Sleeping at night can be a challenge due to the lack of oxygen, so an aromatherapy treatment has been created to aid this.

For the second stage of training, the spa will focus on more traditional Tibetan-influenced treatments, using local ingredients and products. Aromatherapy Associates were chosen as the international



► brand, while AW Lake has researched Tibetan medicine, history and culture to create the products for the signature treatments.

Therapists will be trained in a native massage known as ku nye. Derived from Tibetan medicine, it helps cleanse the body of toxins, increase energy, calm nerves and reduce stress. When performing ku nye for the first time, therapists will carry out a consultation to determine the guest's dominant humour (element): wind, bile or phlegm. The two-hour treatment uses herbal oils and pastes corresponding to the dominant humour.

Gunning says varying treatments at future spas will bring each destination to life: "Each property can develop its own signature treatment, based on the showcased culture/destination. St Regis hopes this will enable distinctive, hand-crafted experiences."

Launching a premium brand in such a remote location hasn't come without challenges. "It was not easy to transport goods during construction as they had to come a long way by road," says Gunning. Yet access for potential guests is straightforward, as flights run daily to Lhasa from major cities in China and the road into Lhasa is excellent. Another difficulty is having "to endure low levels of oxygen during winter time; although in the summer it is extremely pleasant, with trees and plants giving off higher levels of oxygen."

Finding staff has also proved to be challenging. Although all the therapists had to be trained from scratch, the team tried to recruit individuals who have had traditions of healing, through massage and herbal therapies, passed down to them. As the spa will have many Chinese-speaking guests, a number of Chinese therapists have been hired and many of the others will be Tibetan. AW Lake provided a comprehensive training programme, including detailed customer service training to match the expected high-end clientele.

THE EXPECTATIONS

Starwood predicts that the spa's capture rate will be at least 25 per cent. "We would expect international guests to at least try the foot and leg massage treatments, especially if they've been walking all day sight-seeing," says Gunning. "We expect facials to be popular, as the skin can become very dry within just a couple of days here." Starwood expects 60 to 65 per cent of the spa revenue to come from hotel guests and

ST REGIS LHASA BY NUMBERS

- The resort has 122 rooms, 28 villas and 12 suites
- Rooms range from RMB1,650 (US\$250, €182, £155) to RMB50,150 (US\$7,600, €5,500, £4,700) per night
- Starwood is aiming for 40 per cent occupancy in the first year
- Other facilities include a tea room, three restaurants, a ballroom, meeting rooms and the spa
- The tiered spa memberships will range from RMB23,100 (US\$3,500, €2,550, £2,150) to RMB33,000 (US\$5,000, €3,650, £3,100) a year
- The spa will open with six full-time therapists, building up to 12 during peak times

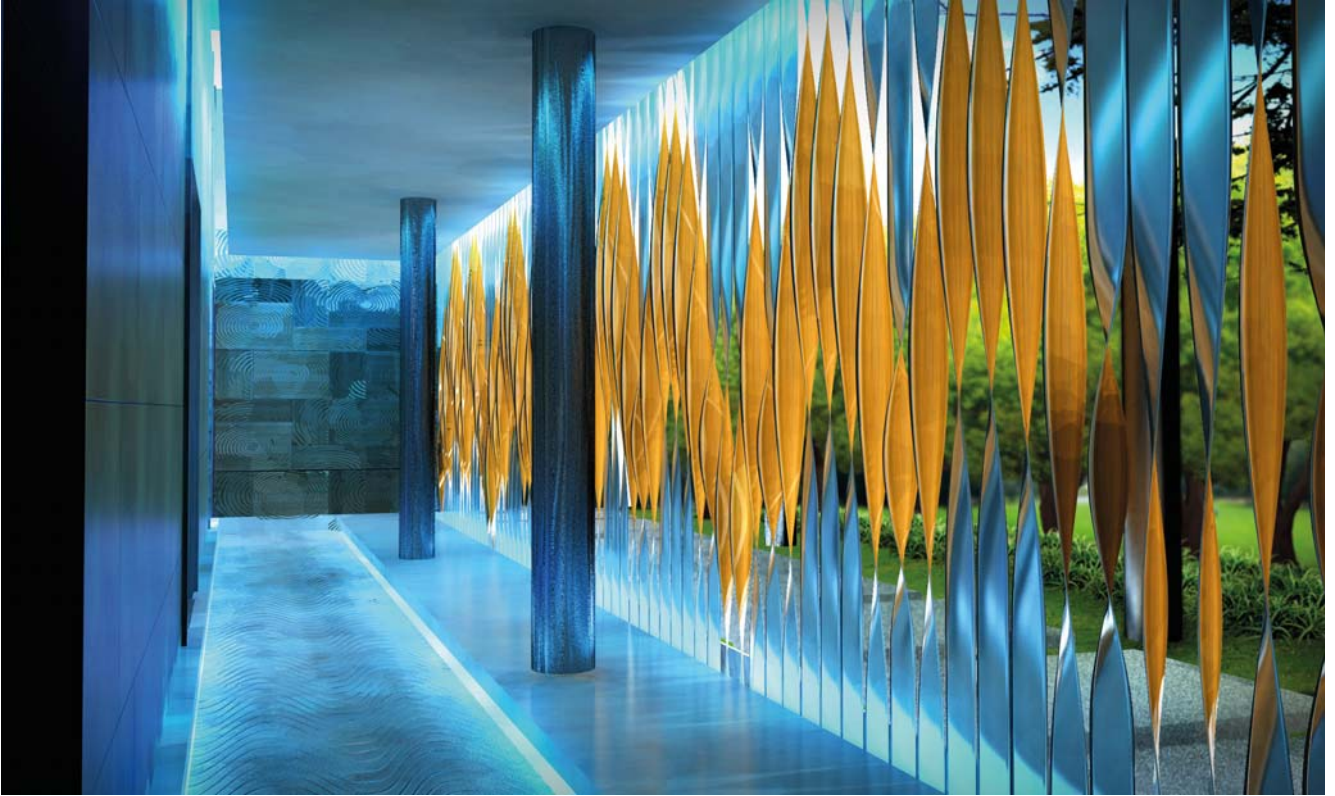
■ The huge lobby window at St Regis Lhasa beautifully showcases the spectacular night-time view of Postala Palace

35 to 40 per cent from locals, perhaps rising to as much as 90 per cent in the winter. Long term, Starwood is hoping to encourage more travel during winter, but locals will still be important and to reflect this, three membership packages have been created. These include benefits such as discounts at the spa and F&B, a complimentary one-night stay in the presidential suite and invitations to special events. In terms of KPIs, Starwood will be measuring revenue per available treatment hour; retail revenue as a percentage of treatment revenue; hotel capture rate percentage and therapist productivity percentage. As this is a new market no specific benchmarks can be shared yet.

The Iridium Spa brand is now available to roll out in other St Regis hotels, although owners can also opt for a Remède Spa by Steiner Leisure: St Regis' preferred third-party spa brand. The location and market is likely to determine which one hotel owners will choose. Although there are brand requirements for an Iridium Spa – a minimum 3,500sq ft (325sq m) footprint, all-suite areas, separate entry and exit – it is expected that each site will reflect its own location. Proprietors will be able to select their own skincare lines. All future Iridium Spas will be priced in the luxury tier, although costs will vary based on the demands of each market.

The next Iridium Spa is due to open in St Regis Florence, Italy, this year. Two more Iridium Spas are in discussion, but are still under wraps; these could open by the end of 2011. Two more properties have been confirmed for China – St Regis Tianjin and St Regis Yalong Bay – slated to open by 2012. Asia is Starwood's fastest growing market for its hotel and spa brands and EAME is another key growth area. A lot of work has been put into this brand, so there are high hopes for it: "In many ways we've saved the best for last," says Kyricos. "It's the sixth brand we've developed internally, so there's a logical benefit to years of experience. I feel there's a good marriage between St Regis and the concept we've created for Iridium Spa. They're highly synergistic and share the same core values, which has culminated in a beautiful end product." ●

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