

WHO'S WHO

Ramsey Mankarious, Sarmad Zok

Hired at the same time for the same job, they comprise the largest department at a 15-person company.



They have the same car, the same microwave oven, attended the same program at the same graduate school. They are even almost the same age.

It's no wonder Ramsey Mankarious and Sarmad Zok were handpicked by Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Bin AbdulAziz Al Saud for the same exact job.

Mankarious, who just turned 31, and his close friend Zok, 30, head up Kingdom Holdings' hotel development efforts in the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

Mankarious and Zok, both former HVS International employees, were hired by Prince Alwaleed to help aggressively develop hotels for his holding company in 1995. At the time, Mankarious was working as an associate director in HVS' London office. Zok had recently left HVS to work for London-based Forte Hotels as a hotel development man-

ager.

The two were contacted at the same time by JP Morgan, which was trying to help one of the Prince's advisors locate someone to help expand his hotel network throughout the region.

"Out of the blue I got a call from someone asking if I wanted to come work for the Prince," Mankarious says. "At the time, he had just bought 50 percent of Fairmont hotels and 25 percent of Four Seasons. The call was a pleasant surprise.

"Then I found out that there were only two interviewing for the job—me and Sarmad."

Zok and Mankarious got to know each other while they were both working for HVS. They had a lot in common and quickly became good friends. "Out of all the people to compete with, it had to be Sarmad?" says Mankarious, recalling the irony.

Sarmad Zok, Head of Hospitality for the Middle East, Asia, and Africa at Kingdom Holdings

Born: Lebanon, Beirut

Resides: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Education: B.S. in Hotel Management from the University of Surrey in England, graduate degree in property valuation and law from City University in London

Biggest Hotel Satisfaction: A good quality bed

Biggest Hotel Gripe: Slow service

Hobbies: Surfing, ski diving, wind surfing, and chess

Favorite Escape Destination: Maui

"It was a difficult situation to be in," agrees Zok.

The Prince flew both candidates to Saudi Arabia and put them up in a Sheraton hotel in Riyadh. When they arrived, there was a mix-up with the reservations and the hotel had no rooms available.

Ramsey Mankarious, Head of Hospitality for the Middle East, Asia, and Africa at Kingdom Holdings Hotels & Resorts

Born: Alexandria, Egypt

Resides: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Education: B.A. in Hotel Management from Michigan State University, graduate degree in property valuation and law from City University in London

Biggest Hotel Satisfaction: Efficient, friendly, and prompt service

Biggest Hotel Gripe: Hotel staffers with snobbish attitudes

Hobbies: My wife claims I have none and need to find some!

Favorite Escape Destination: As I spend a great deal of my time traveling, I like to escape to my living room.

Mankarious and Zok had to share a villa while waiting to be interviewed. The two spent the entire day together stuck inside the villa.

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Mankarious was finally called to interview with the Prince at 11 P.M.

At the beginning of the interview, the Prince asked Mankarious what he thought about Zok.

Mankarious was honest and said his friend was extremely talented. He took a leap of faith and suggested that they work together for Kingdom Holdings.

The Prince then called Zok into the room. The rest is history.

Today, Kingdom Holdings—with investments in hotels, as well as media companies, banks, retailers, and more—only has 15 employees. Mankarious and Zok form the biggest department and share a tiny office.

"If I reach out my hand, I can touch Sarmad," says Mankarious, laughing.

Sarmad says it was destiny that the two friends—both of whom were born in the Middle East—ended up working side-by-side, developing hotels and orchestrating deals on behalf of the Prince throughout the region they were already familiar with.

"If one of us does well, the other one also benefits," Sarmad says. "If one does bad, the other goes down too. We're like Siamese twins," he says.

Both men agree that if the Prince had only hired one person for the job, Kingdom Holdings may not have com-

pleted as many hotel transactions as it has over the past three years.

Some of the many deals the two men have helped orchestrate include the purchase of a 30 percent stake in MOVENPICK Hotels & Resorts in 1998, and the recent purchase of a 54 percent interest in Karos, a chain of 15 four-star hotels in Africa.

Kingdom now is in the process of selling seven of the hotels. The remaining eight will be converted to the MOVENPICK brand. "Now we can use the platform to develop more hotels in Africa," says Mankarious.

On top of these deals, Kingdom has 12 MOVENPICK hotels under construction in the Middle East, and 10 Four Seasons hotels under development. The first new Four Seasons will open this August in Cairo.

"If you didn't love this job, you'd go crazy," says Mankarious. "Sarmad and I are very aggressive and we have very strange working hours," he says, adding that they often need to call various time zones at 2 or 3 am in the morning.

"I don't usually go to bed until 3 A.M. But I don't get up at 7 either." ■

Robyn Taylor Parets