

Afghanistan Rolls Out the Welcome Mat

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Developers are rushing to provide luxury hotel accommodation for visitors to the capital.

Kabul is currently in the midst of a hotel construction boom, with many of the new or refurbished facilities planning to offer luxury accommodation for visitors to this devastated capital city.

One, the Kabul Hotel in the centre of town, even plans to include a presidential suite as part of a 25 million US dollar revamp.

The hotel, which will become the latest addition to the Aga Khan Development Network's, AKDN, worldwide "collection" of Serena hotels, is described as being an "Afghanised five-star" facility. Ideas include suites fitted out by artisans from different regions of the country, with the first phase of the project scheduled to open in August.

Meanwhile, plans are under way for construction of a 200-room Hyatt Regency hotel, scheduled to open by 2005. It will include conference rooms and a communications centre.

And rising fast over the central Shahri Now Park is the 10-storied, glass-mirrored "Kabul City Centre", which will include shops, serviced apartments and a ballroom as well as superior hotel rooms.

A little further out of town, the landmark Intercontinental Hotel, is also undergoing a major facelift with its swimming pool - a feature on many of the country's postcards - due to splash back into action next summer.

The work is being carried out by the Dubai-based Freecom Group which has signed a 15-year lease with the government to run the establishment.

Lailla Salari-Mercier, the hotel's resident manager, said that she could not comment on reports that the project will cost 10 million dollars, but said she was confident that the revitalised facility will compete successfully with its new competitors, in part because of its relatively quiet location.

That and its revamped "super-deluxe" Khyber Suite, located on the hotel's fifth floor and costing 470 dollars a night.

In a city where that nightly rate equals the annual wages of most residents, such projects have their critics.

Dr Bibi Haji, who practices medicine at a hospital near the Kabul Hotel, wonders, "Wouldn't it be better if the Aga Khan spent this money... on building a maternity hospital for women?"

A worker at the Telecommunications Ministry, who did not want to be named, complained, "What will be the advantage of such hotels?... Will the money go into a widow or orphan's pocket?"

Those involved with the hotel projects say that while the facilities are aimed at the elite, they will create benefits that will accrue to the entire city and the nation.

Aly Mawji, AKDN's resident representative in Kabul, said that its hotel should serve as "a symbol to the Afghan people and the international community that a private investor has the confidence in the development and stability of the country to undertake such a significant investment".

Besides the construction work, the hotels will provide jobs to local residents. Mawji hopes the new hotels will encourage visits by heads of state, top businessmen and wealthy expatriates, who in turn will help rebuild the country.

"Currently, one of their biggest deterrents is that there are no good places to stay," he said.

Abdul Qudas Safi, who is heading the Kabul City Centre project, argues that in trying to bring a touch of world-class luxury to the capital, "I am buying honour for Afghanistan in front of the foreigners."

But will there really be enough people with money in their pockets to keep so many upscale establishments afloat in the near future?

Dominic Medley, co-author of the Survival Guide to Kabul, said he's sure that the developers "must have done their research". Given the rates these hotels are expected to charge, most of their guests will probably be business people, Medley added.

Most of the accommodation currently listed in Medley's publication -mainly bed-and-breakfast guesthouses - charge between 30 and 150 dollars a night, and are primarily used by humanitarian aid workers.

The project that excites Medley the most is AKDN's plan to construct a pedestrianised piazza outside the Kabul Hotel. Such a development could foster the rebirth of the "cosmopolitan culture, the cafe culture of 30 years ago", he said.

Mohammad Yaqoob Nooristani, head of the hotels section of the Civil Aviation and Tourism Department, is enthusiastic about such luxury developments, and said they will help put Afghanistan back on the tourist map. Indeed, he wants to see more of them.

"We should extend the construction of such modern hotels even into the provinces in order to better welcome foreign guests because today's Afghanistan's not yesterday's," he said.

Mohammad Muneer Mehraban, Shahbuddin Tarakhel, Wahidullah Amani and Ahmed Khalid, all independent journalists in Kabul, contributed to this report together with staff reporter Farida Nekzad.

Location: [Afghanistan](#)

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