

Xavier Rugeroni is general manager of the Beach Plaza hotel and the brains behind its latest expansion.



CHRISTIAN SYLT

The only hotel in Monaco with a private beach isn't owned by state holding company SBM – it is in fact Le Méridien Beach Plaza. What's even more surprising is that despite its chain affiliation, like it's cross-town competitors, it's also owned by the state.

## The state's secret hotel

By Christian Sylt in Monaco

**S**taying in Monaco without visiting the beach is like visiting St Moritz without skiing. The Larvotto beaches always attract the masses during the summer months but the clever sunbathers head next door. Contrary to popular belief, there's only one hotel in Monaco with a private beach and it isn't a Société des Bains de Mer (SBM) branded property.

The hotel in question is the Beach Plaza, which started life 28 years ago as a Holiday Inn before being acquired by Forte and later Le Méridien. However, the Beach Plaza is actually owned by the state, although no one would guess since every expansion it

has made has put the property squarely in competition with SBM. But this has only taken the hotel from strength to strength.

After the Grand Hotel, the Beach Plaza is Monaco's second biggest hotel with 338 rooms, two restaurants and two bars. But it hasn't built its reputation on size alone since its sports and conference facilities also outclass its competitors'.

In 1997 the hotel launched its Sea Club conference centre, which at 3,000 square metres and with accommodation for up to 2,000 people, instantly became the biggest conference centre attached to a hotel in Monaco. The chief executive of Le Méridien, Jürgen Bartels, has even gone as far as to say that the Beach Plaza has 'the best conference centre in the world'. Three

years after the Sea Club conference centre was set up, the state-owned 15,000 square metre Grimaldi Forum opened its doors only a stone's throw away down the Avenue Princesse Grace but surprisingly it had a complementary effect. "We actually take some business away from the Forum because people come to us if they want to have a more personalised event during a conference," says Xavier Rugeroni, general manager of the Beach Plaza.

The Sea Club contains a fitness centre and indoor pool which when added to the ones outside, gives the hotel a grand total of four swimming pools as well as the Mediterranean on its doorstep. Once again this puts the Beach Plaza in competition with SBM's product, this time its Les Thermes Marins spa in the principality's centre. Rugeroni is resolute that the Sea Club complements SBM's offering, which he says has customers who are concerned about 'imagery and beauty', in comparison to the Beach Plaza's members who are 'more pure fitness orientated'. Princess Stephanie regularly visits the hotel simply to use the private beach.

The leisure amenities have attracted even more sports stars to the hotel. Monaco residents such as Boris Becker and Bjorn Borg have long been users of the hotel's facilities but now it accommodates one of the teams almost every time a football match is played in the Louis II stadium. Manchester United has stayed twice and Real Madrid three times according to Rugeroni. And the hotel has adjusted accordingly to cater for these customers.

"The basic issues are offering sports stars flexibility, guaranteed meeting space or floors for their rooms and late and early departures," says Rugeroni. And although the bread and butter of the hotel's business comes from conferences, Rugeroni says that the Beach Plaza has now gained its name as a sports and convention hotel as well.

The Beach Plaza is treading on SBM's toes in one other respect – not only is it currently undergoing a renovation of its lobby and restaurant but it is also adding a 32-guestroom extension. And with SBM's new resort hotel being built next to the Beach Plaza it is natural to assume there will be competition. But not in Rugeroni's eyes. He says that Monaco is short of 600 rooms for a 12-week period every year and since the new SBM hotel will only have 300 rooms, there will still be a shortfall.

In fact Rugeroni says that if there is a main event being held in Monaco with attendees who can't be accommodated in a single hotel, all of the general managers come together to decide on room rates. This prevents aggression building up between the hotels and allows them to have an even balance of customers.

"There is competition between the hotels in Monaco," says Rugeroni, "but it is to benefit the destination." For Le Méridien, the competition has certainly benefited the Beach Plaza. EB