

# WHEN NOT SO GLITTERY HOTELS CLAIM TO BE STAR-STUDDDED

■ Revised classification system expected to give top properties a truly prestigious position

## ON RECORD

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WHEN DEFINING the new hotel classification for Oman two years ago, we researched over 20 existing systems around the world not only to establish best practices and gather innovative ideas, but also for another reason.

As hotel experts we felt that the main problem lies in the upper quality levels where it is necessary to distinguish four from five-star hotels and to allow a category of top players to clearly differentiate itself.

Rather than creating additional tiers, we determined the difference between upper four-star and top five-star hotels from the guest's perspective: the differentiating factors almost exclusively lie in the areas of service and quality, especially in a region where physical attributes are much easier to provide than in the more expensive construction and labour markets.

The US systems reflect this by having star systems that define physical attributes and facilities, but 'diamonds' to denote quality, service and standards. Hence, it was decided to allocate a significant portion of the criteria to soft factors which are, of course, a lot more difficult to define and monitor.

For example, offering 24-hour room service is not a service, but a facility. The quality of that service is established by determining its speed of response, quality of the food, temperature, speed of removing used trays and the like.

Other important quality factors are staff training, performance records, management quality and the like because good service clearly depends on well-trained and performing staff in all areas of the hotel. Environmental awareness and the recognition of awards gained are also strong indicators in the softer criteria ranges.

Last month, the DTCM announced that a revised hotel classification is soon to be introduced for Dubai's hotels and hotel apartments. That is very good news for existing or developing hotel projects as it will



■ Shangri La's luxury Barr Al Jissa Resort & Spa in Oman: A new hotel classification system was introduced in Oman in 2006

provide clear guidelines, establish the requirements for the establishments and create healthy competition.

But most importantly it is good news for those that by definition are the target audience for hotel classification – the guests, visitors and tourists!

After all, that is what hotel classification is about: a reassuring promise to the end user/consumer that defined minimum standards are in place when offering a given product to the buyer. It is a mechanism

for quality assurance and consumer protection, but also for marketing and positioning the product.

This is particularly important in an industry where buying decisions are often made from far away without a chance to 'check out' the product in advance. Most travelers have experienced how different a hotel room can turn out to be compared to the expectations created when booking.

It is reassuring to see that DTCM intends to maintain five-star levels rather

than doing what other destinations have done: using symbols with little recognition value or create additional star categories that only mislead the consumer and agents.

Like them or not, the stars are fixed in the minds of international travelers – so rather than creating a six-star level, five-stars should be made very difficult to achieve to prevent every hotel from getting 'a free ride'. Thus, the top levels can achieve a truly prestigious reputation.

It is also encouraging that the revised

