

Entrepreneur launching Morocco hotel chain

By **Stephanie Paterik**
THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Seven time zones away on the continent of Africa, Scottsdale entrepreneur Christian Rivadalla is preparing to open his first hotel chain in Morocco next month.

Rivadalla, 40, made his money pioneering online hotel booking systems in the 1990s, when people had to call a hotel to

book a room. Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Best Western and others used his technology to streamline operations and catch customers on the Web.

He sold his company on Sept. 10, 2001, lucky timing considering that the industry would tank the next day, and retired early to a nice home in Scottsdale.

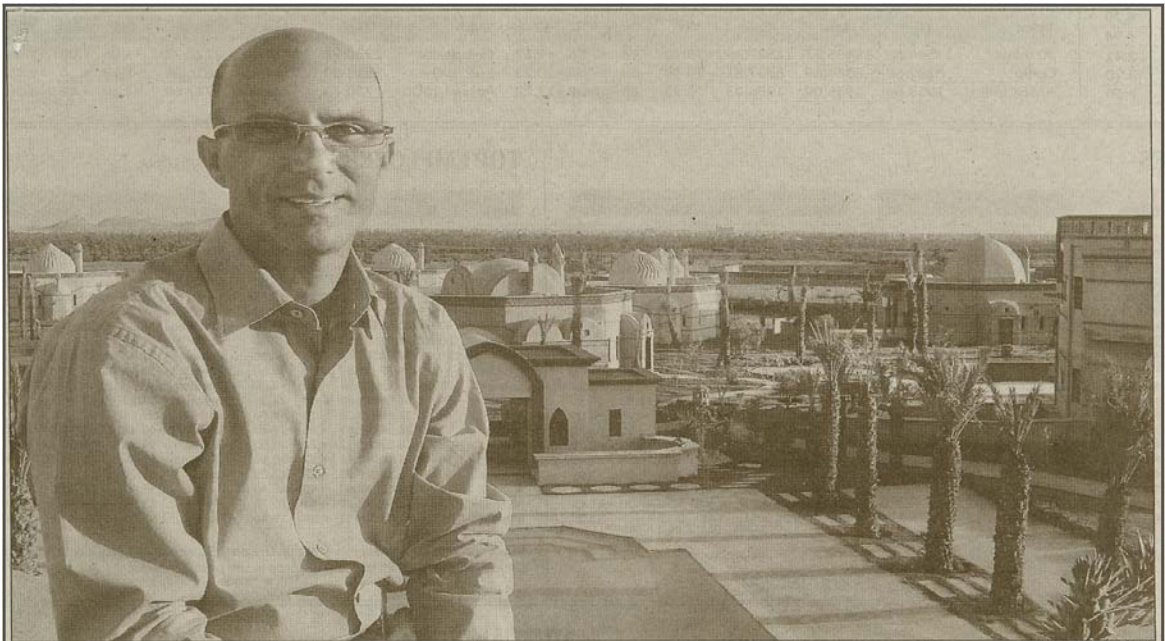
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Octogone Earth

- Soft opening is Oct. 1.
- Cost \$12 million to build.
- Located in Marrakech, Morocco.
- There are 52 rooms in 18 villas spread over 11 acres.
- Room rate is \$400-\$450 a night, \$2,700 for an eight-room villa.
- Features include a business center, woolen blankets and duvets, notebook computers, mobile phones, private butlers and chefs, and baby-sitting services.
- www.octogonehotels.com

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Scottsdale resident Christian Rivadalla, an aspiring hotel-chain owner, will see his dream start to come true soon with the opening in October of this property, Earth, in Marrakech, Morocco.

Entrepreneur launching hotel chain

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Eager to get back into the hotel industry, he's using his wealth to launch the first location in what he hopes will be an exclusive chain, Octogone Hotels in Morocco. The first \$12 million property, Earth, opens Oct. 1 in Marrakech.

"It's quite an undertaking to produce," Rivadalla said. "I don't speak any French or Arabic, which makes it very difficult to communicate in a Third World city called Marrakech."

Rivadalla has pushed back the hotel's opening date several times. He planned to open it in July, but when he arrived in Marrakech three months ago, the operations were not up to his standards. He's been there ever since, fine-tuning, Operations Manager Jennifer Rubin said.

"When you open your own business, you want it to be perfect," she said, adding that Rivadalla doesn't want to give guests less than what they pay for.

The biggest challenge for Rivadalla has been the language barrier. And interest rates ratcheted up construction costs.

He developed this property on his own; he said he would need investors to launch the rest.

"I have no partners," he said. "I could have gone faster with other people's money."

Seven more hotels are slated to open in Moroccan cities such as Casablanca, Rabat and Tangier, and the Sahara by the end of 2009.

Inspiration struck Rivadalla after several visits to a friend in Morocco. He loved the arid landscape and blend of French and Arabic cultures. But he also thought the hotel offerings were lacking, for foreigners in particular.

He decided to fill the niche by opening high-end boutique hotels throughout the region and marketing them to the rich and famous.

Earth includes 18 villas, little palaces in their own right, with a total of 52 rooms on 11 acres. Each villa is shaped like an octagon. The shape is integrated into artwork, and there will be amenities such as an eight-handed massage in keeping with the theme.

"The octagon (symbolizes) the perfect dream," Rivadalla said. "Everything (else) is square, and you can't live in a triangle."

Catering to international customers, the hotel will lend every guest a cellphone on arrival so they can make world-

wide calls and order room service. Rivadalla is developing Octogone coins that guests can give to cab drivers if they don't know how to get back to the property after a late night.

There will be three restaurants. One is Moroccan, another serves sushi, and the third will pay homage to Rivadalla's Cuban heritage. Think black-tie, 1950s.

He said he is negotiating with high-end designers to secure a closet full of clothes. That way, if a traveler's luggage is lost, he or she can choose a few outfits to get by with. Oh, and the minibar is free. "We're trying some trend-setting ways," Rivadalla said.

He anticipates guests will stay an average of three to nine days for luxury vacations, corporate functions and retreats. About 60 percent will come from France, 15 percent from England, 20 percent from Spain, Italy and Germany and the rest from the United States.

He hired a French general manager, along with a chef from Arizona.

Rubin visited the property in July, after construction was finished.

"When I got there, I didn't know what to expect, but it was absolutely amazing," she said. "It's almost like a picture out of *Aladdin*."



TRAVEL
Scottsdale resident building luxury hotels

Scottsdale's Christian Rivadalla, who made millions by creating Starwood's online booking system, gets ready to open his first Octogone luxury hotel in Morocco. He plans another for Scottsdale. **Business. D1**