

Hotelier with a passion for hospitality and a 2020 vision

JILLIAN
AMBROSE



Abigail Tan wants to double the UK outlets for the family hotel chain by the start of the next decade

In Asia, hospitality is in your blood," says Abigail Tan. This is literally the case for the youngest generation of Malaysia's famed real estate dynasty, and daughter of IGB Corporation's chief executive, Robert Tan. When it came time for her to take her place within the family firm of commercial, retail, residential and hospitality interests, hotels stood out for Tan from an early age.

"When I was young and we'd be on holiday you wouldn't find me on beach. I'd be in the back office of our hotel, bothering the people with housekeeping trolleys," she laughs.

"Even now the minute I arrive in a hotel, I just breathe it in. I love everything about it. Hospitality is something that I've always had a passion for," she says.

Now barely into her thirties, and tipped by *Forbes* magazine as one of its Asian Women to Watch, Tan heads the western expansion of St Giles Hotels, IGB's hotels division, as head of the group's UK and North America business, after starting at the family business as an apprentice in 2009.

St Giles holds the keys to more than 3,500 rooms in city centre locations across four continents. Tan's aim is to double this within the next four years, with a focus on growing the hotel group's presence in the UK and mainland Europe, regardless of the rising challenges in both.

"Our focus is heavily in the UK. My personal goal is for St Giles to reach 20 hotels by 2020. Right now we have

nine," Tan says.

It is a grey blustering day in central London, where St Giles opened its first London hotel in 1996. Tan has further plans for the capital, while earlier this year St Giles snapped up a site in Birmingham as part of the group's drive to expand its UK presence. She is also eyeing up potential projects in Reading, Glasgow and Dublin. Other cities currently under consideration outside the UK include Madrid, Barcelona, Rome, Milan and Berlin.

The next four years are not expected to be easy ones for the European hotel industry, however. In particular the European leisure sector is facing industry-wide challenges which in the UK are more acute after the economic upheaval in the wake of the Brexit referendum result and the collapse of sterling.

In a recent industry survey, Deloitte found that more than half of hotel investors consider Europe's geopolitical instability as their number one concern for 2017, followed by deflation and lack of economic growth on the Continent. Meanwhile only a quarter were worried about the UK's decision to leave the European Union.

Tan agrees, and is clear-eyed but undeterred. After the decline of sterling since the Brexit referendum she sees challenges particularly in terms of construction costs at the expanding St Giles Heathrow hotel and the company's new hotel in Birmingham, but is unwaveringly resolute that the plans can still move ahead in a tough environment.

"We look at as challenges and try to see positives. For example, the weakening pound will bring in foreign tourism. Will it affect our earnings? Yes. But there are still opportunities," she says. St Giles hotel staff, many of



whom are from mainland Europe and have little idea how the UK's decision to leave the EU will impact their jobs, are less confident.

"Our staff are worried," Tan says. "We don't know when things will change, or when new legislation will be put in place in terms of trade agreements and immigration. We try to reassure them as much as we can and be as knowledgeable as we can. But at the same time we have a job to do, which is to please the guest. There's not much else that we can do to affect the state of the economy or the industry.

"I learned a lot from the projects run by my father. We built one of the largest urban developments in the world through the worst recession in Malaysia. As a company we're quite liquid and we have supporters who believe in our track record. We're cautious but confident," Tan says.

A vital strategy in weathering the sluggish demand facing Europe's leisure sector will be inspiring customer loyalty as competition increases. Tan hopes to achieve by offering a consistent experience across the company's 3, 4 and 5-star hotels.

"Even if you're staying in a three-star hotel we want you to feel like you're staying in a hotel with a higher star-value. We want to make all our hotels feel like a 4 or 5-star but with 3-star value," she says.

Tan wants to price St Giles's rooms so that they are accessible to a broader range of potential guests. "Our hotel in central London is £105 a night, which is pretty good value for the location you're in. And that's because we don't want to price ourselves in line with the market. We want everyone to be able to experience the brand and experience the hotels," she says.

Tan is also drawing from her family foundations by creating a brand of service within St Giles which has Asian hospitality at its core. The brand is resolutely international and metropolitan but at the same time aims to be more personal.

"Travellers are more discerning. They're well travelled, they've been around the world and know what to expect at the world's best hotels. We're trying to exceed their expectations

and give them that level of Asian hospitality, here," she says.

St Giles now cross-trains staff in its global portfolio of hotels so that employees are as well-travelled as their guests, Tan says. "We sent one of our chefs here to Malaysia for three months to learn the Asian style of cooking, but also to experience the Asian way of running a kitchen. He's come back excited, with all these new ideas and experiences to draw from, all of which we've been able to include here to make the experience of our hotels more international," Tan says.

No matter how impressive the hotel experience, Tan says she is keenly aware that the chain's position in some of the world's major cities means the hotel experience is often secondary to the city itself.

The idea gave rise to St Giles's first major push into social media, which gave guests the chance to film the city they are visiting.

"We said, 'Go shoot the city, show us how you experience it and what's important to you,'" she says.

The result is a first for any hotel group and offers app-savvy guests an interactive experience of the city they are in. It is something Tan is eager to do more of as St Giles looks to grow its share of the UK market despite the economic jitters still likely to come.

"We have confidence in what can happen in Britain because this is still a great country. Britain is a major global player and it will recover; there will still be internal confidence in the UK and foreign investment," Tan says. "These are the cards we've been dealt so we play them as best as we can."





PAUL GROVER FOR THE TELEGRAPH

Abigail Tan is heading expansion in the West for her family's St Giles Hotel chain

