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INTERESTING STIRRINGS IN THE WEST AFRICAN HOTEL INDUSTRY

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There are some interesting stirrings in the West African hotel industry.

Whilst the Nigerian economy, which dominates the region (and the continent) continues to experience no or negative growth, and a consequent serious downturn in the hotel industry, new kid on the block Mangalis is making waves, with no fewer than three hotels opened in the last six months.

Mangalis, who most travellers will have never heard of, is a Barcelona-based, Senegal-origin, brand new hotel company, starting from scratch – the first since Mali-based Azalaï entered the scene over 20 years ago. All new builds, Mangalis opened the Yaas in Dakar, the Noom in Conakry and the Seen in Abidjan, in quick succession. No, I don't know where those names came from either (actually, Noom means sleep in Arabic!), but they're certainly memorable, and I guess that's the point!

Nor is there any coincidence that all these hotels are in Francophone Africa, where the company is focusing its development efforts – not to the exclusion of countries like Nigeria, where a hotel should open soon, but 8 out of 10 hotels that they plan to open between now and 2019, under construction or in the planning stage of development, are in French-speaking West Africa.

Noom is upscale, Seen midscale and Yaas is in the economy segment, so they are "covering the bases", whilst avoiding luxury, which can be the most difficult sector in which to develop and operate (but there are exciting rumours that Four Seasons are coming to West Africa!).

Olivier Jacquin, the CEO of Mangalis, is quoted as saying that "we aim to be among the largest African hospitality groups active in the continent while being the industry's undisputed benchmark in terms of products, innovation, quality of service and healthy growth". Not, of course, an unusual ambition, one which can probably be ascribed to every hotel chain working in Africa, but Mangalis (like Azalaï) are different, in that they are much more in control than the hotel chains which are expanding through management agreements or similar business models. Mangalis are owner-operators, and even when they work with partners, they provide what Jacquin describes as their "Plug and Play" solution: "The technical department at Mangalis can be in charge of [our partners] project management, deploying the knowledge acquired in the construction of our own hotels and leveraging on our reduced cost of construction achieved through corporate agreements".

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When introducing the Yaas brand, the company claimed that its modular construction model will reduce the building time to less than one year, enabling them to enter a market quickly, and take advantage of high demand before others enter those same markets. In Dakar, hotels such as the Sheraton Almadies and the InterContinental have been under development for what seems like ages and ages, but the Yaas hotel is up and running, and doing very well.

One reason for the focus on Francophone Africa is simply that the company feels comfortable there, and it is not a target for many of the Anglo investors, who are less comfortable. Not that it isn't happening for others – the Sheraton Grand Hotel in Conakry opened last year, developed by an Asian investor, and Radisson Blu opened in Abidjan, also last year.

The Sheraton Grand Conakry is a big hotel, with 269 rooms one of the largest in West Africa, and the first of that brand (i.e. Sheraton with the "Grand" tag) in Africa. The 187-room Noom Conakry is also quite large, and together the two new hotels bring over 450 rooms into a market that has no branded hotels – Novotel left the Grand Hotel de l'Independance a few years back. The only modern hotel of any size there is the Hotel Camayenne, which is unbranded. There are a few more hotels due to enter the market – Onomo, another African hotel chain, with hotels operating in 6 cities, are building a 155 room property, at the economy level, whilst Azalaï and Radisson Blu also have hotels planned, but not yet underway.

The same names keep cropping up, don't they? Whilst historically AccorHotels have dominated the Francophone West African hotel scene, particularly with their Novotel brand, but also with Pullman and Ibis, they are now facing stiff competition, mainly from home-grown hotel companies, all three of whom – Azalaï, Mangalis and Onomo – have adopted a different model, i.e. mainly building and operating hotels that they own themselves. That's not to play down in any way the development successes of Marriott, Radisson Blu et al, who are also opening hotels in Francophone West Africa. But the local players are really making the running, making it happen for travellers in West Africa.

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