

BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

From the Boston Business Journal:

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Raffles took a long, winding road to its 'first-in-U.S.' hotel in Boston

Jan 21, 2022, 5:00am EST **Updated: Jan 21, 2022, 10:39am EST**

When a Raffles hotel opens within the next year or so in Back Bay, it will be the first in the Americas for the franchise.

Raffles opened its first hotel in Singapore in 1887, and has 17 locations today, largely in Southeast Asia, along with Europe and the Middle East. In Boston, Raffles — which is owned by French hotel giant Accor S.A. — will be making its debut in a 35-story glass tower a block south of Copley Square.

The Raffles project got its start a decade ago. That was when a partnership between developer Jordan Warshaw of The Noannet Group and hotelier Gary Saunders of the Saunders Hotel Group bought the site of what was then the Boston Common Hotel and Conference Center. For more than five years, they worked through the city's permitting process.

Initially, the plan was for a 220-room independent hotel. But when seeking financing, Saunders and Warshaw were pushed in the



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Raffles Boston Back Bay Residences, will be part of the ultra luxury Raffles family of hotels, resorts and residences. Located in the heart of Boston's Back Bay neighborhood, the property will consist of 147 hotel rooms and 146 high end condominiums. The building will rise close to 400 feet or 33 floors with views of the Charles River, Back Bay skyline and Boston Harbor.

direction of finding a hotel brand, such as Marriott or Hilton, that could help with bankrolling the project.

Raffles came into the picture later, when the two were talking with other potential hotel brands.

Mark Purcell, the senior vice president of development for North and Central America for Accor, Raffles' parent company, says that Accor was looking to launch the Raffles brand in the United States when it looked at key indicators among various markets, like high average room rates, and a diverse demand from international travel, business and colleges.

Boston fit the bill. The Accor team saw Back Bay as a place where it wanted to be for luxury in Boston, Purcell said.

"They said, 'Holy cow, if we could get into the heart of one of America's most European-feeling cities, how great would that be?'" Warshaw said.

Ultimately, a consultant for Saunders and Warshaw came across Purcell's name in a hospitality magazine and put the three in touch.

Warshaw and Saunders loved the idea of working with Raffles as much as Raffles perked up at the potential of a key Boston property.

"When we met with Raffles for the first time, we realized that no two Raffles are the same whether it's a new-build or adaptive reuse," Saunders said. "We just loved hearing that."

"Their team and our team just hit it off in such a positive way, and we had a shared vision for what we wanted to bring to Boston," Purcell said.

The hotel's relatively small scale is intended to give it a personalized feel. In addition to 147 hotel rooms, the development will also include 146 residential units and six food and drink venues, along with 16 gathering spaces for guests and residents.

Opening a Raffles is challenging because of a relative lack of name awareness, Warshaw said, but also an opportunity to introduce the brand for the first time.

The Boston opening will also come amid a major expansion: within the next five years, Raffles plans to double its location count to 34, including in the United States.

The Boston Raffles will open among the top tier of the city's luxury hotels. The city doesn't have all of the biggest-name luxury hotel brands — there's no Peninsula, for example, as Beverly Hills, Chicago and New York can claim, or a Waldorf Astoria.

But it's one of only three cities — along with New York and San Francisco — to have a Taj, which earlier this year reopened on the Public Garden as The Newbury. New York and San Francisco are also the only two other cities to have two Four Seasons hotels.

Two other Boston hotels — Yotel, which opened in the Seaport in 2017, and citizenM, which opened at North Station in 2019 — were the second U.S. locations for European brands.

Branner Stewart, a senior research manager at the UMass Donahue Institute, described Raffles' pending arrival as a stark change from the Boston of a generation ago.

Back then, he said, someone would expect a major overseas luxury name to pick New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco or Miami. But Boston's stature as an international destination keeps rising, he said.

"And now," Stewart said of demand from luxury brands, "Boston is showing up constantly."

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