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## 4 Questions for Thorsten Kirschke, Carlson Hotels

11/1/2011 | by Len Vermillion



When Carlson Hotels announced its Ambition 2015 strategy, two main features of the concept were the revitalization of the Radisson brand and the emergence of the Radisson Blu brand—long popular in Europe and Asia—in the United States. This month, the first Radisson Blu opens in Chicago, marking a major milestone in the Ambition 2015 strategy. Carlson Hotel's Chief Operating Officer Thorsten Kirschke spoke with Lodging Editor Len Vermillion about the opening and the progress of Ambition 2015.

### 1. Len Vermillion: How is Ambition 2015 progressing and what does it mean to have the first Radisson Blu in the U.S. opening in Chicago?

**Thorsten Kirschke:** We are very pleased with the progress we have made to date. We are in the midst of our second year of our long-term strategic growth plan. A key focus of the strategy is to reposition the Radisson brand in North America so it aligns with the brand's global standards. More than \$500 million has already been committed to the Radisson strategy in North America and over 90 percent of our current franchisees in the U.S. have committed to product improvement plans to meet the new brand standards. Our largest milestone to date will come with the introduction of the upper-upscale Radisson Blu tier in the United States with the opening of the Radisson Blu Aqua Hotel, Chicago, on Nov. 1.

The hotel, located on 18 floors of the world-renowned 81-story Aqua Tower, features 334 guestrooms and suites, and more than 28,000 square feet of meeting space and ballroom with spectacular floor-to-ceiling views of Lake Michigan and the city skyline. The second Radisson Blu signed is currently under construction at the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minn. The \$137.5 million, 500-room property is the first hotel to connect via skyway directly to Mall of

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America and is expected to open in March 2013. We also have several other letters of intent completed for additional U.S. Radisson Blu developments in the U.S.

**2. LV: What is unique about the Radisson Blu Aqua from the standpoint of both design and service?**

**TK:** As a premier Radisson Blu, the hotel will introduce the most desirably innovative and adventurous hotel design in its class, creating a hotel for the market, pioneering memorable interiors with the latest technology and a range of highly individual, cost-effective room styles. The hotel's interior design was done by U.K.-based designer Jim Hamilton of Graven Images. Upholding innovative Radisson Blu standards, he sought to create a cohesive language with a design vocabulary that continues throughout the hotel's public areas and meeting facility and events interiors, as well as the hotel's contemporary Italian bar and restaurant, Filini.

A major aim for the design was to create an aesthetic and feel that represents the Radisson Blu vision and connects emotionally with guests by making public spaces feel more personal, thereby imbuing the hotel with a soul and character capable of speaking both a local and global language.

**3. LV: Are you happy with the results of Radisson Blu Aqua? As it prepares to open, what do you feel it brings to both Carlson as a company and Chicago as a destination?**

**TK:** I couldn't be any happier or more excited about the opening of the Radisson Blu Aqua Hotel, Chicago and the debut of Blu to the United States. This hotel's innovative design and features will elevate Radisson's profile in North America and create positive energy that will resonate across the entire brand, helping to position Radisson in North America as a powerful, globally consistent, first-class brand.

We were very fortunate to have our first Blu hotel in the country be part of an architectural gem, like Aqua, in one of the most vibrant cities in the world. An iconic, landmark building such as this is the perfect fit for building on the success of Radisson Blu in Europe where Radisson is one of the most vibrant, leading hotel brands. We are confident that the Radisson Blu Aqua Hotel will set a new experience in Chicago for urban hotel amenities, unparalleled service and exceptional design to become the preferred choice for hospitality in the city.

I am also proud to note that this large-scale project is slated to be absolutely opening on time and within budget.

**4. LV: Where else might we see Radisson Blu in the future? What type of markets will you target in the U.S.?**

**TK:** We continue to focus on Radisson Blu upper- upscale developments in prime locations and in major cities, airport gateways, and leisure destinations around the world. Radisson Blu hotels in North America will include company investment and management in the foreseeable future because we have a lot of investment going into the brand and we want to be sure we can control the return on that investment.

Beyond the U.S., we have been converting upper-upscale Radisson hotels in Asia Pacific to Radisson Blu. There are currently 222 Radisson Blu hotels worldwide. The Radisson brand was born in the U.S.A., educated in Europe, an experienced traveler of the world—and now, home again to reclaim its place among leading

hotels.

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