

## **New hotel offers rare sign of new construction in Haiti**



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The opening of the upscale Royal Oasis Hotel in Haiti on Wednesday ushered in a new phase in the country's post-earthquake reconstruction, while providing a sharp contrast to the plight of hundreds of thousands still homeless almost three years after the disaster.

The elite Oasis hotel in Petionville, a business and social hub in the hills south of Port-au-Prince, is part of the Occidental hotel chain and is the first in a string of international brand-name hotels opening in the coming months.

A Best Western Premier is scheduled to open its doors in January, and the newly reincarnated El Rancho is set to follow in February under the management of the Spanish group NH Hoteles.

A Marriott hotel, opening in partnership with telecom service provider Digicel, will have its official groundbreaking next week in downtown Port-au-Prince, and Comfort Inn is already in the process of taking over management of an existing hotel in the southern tourist city of Jacmel.

The Oasis boasts 128 rooms and suites, restaurants, retail shops and a conference center. An evening in the Royal Club Presidential Suite will set you back well over \$1,000, with butler service included.

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, still struggling to recover from a devastating earthquake in January 2010 that killed an estimated 250,000 people and left more than 1 million homeless.

Some 358,000 earthquake victims were still living in camps and makeshift settlements as of October 2012, according to the most recent survey by the International Organization for Migration.

The Oasis by Occidental is the first international hospitality brand to operate in the troubled country in years, a faint echo of Haiti's heyday in the 1950s and 1960s when the Caribbean island was a hip destination for international celebrities.

Haiti was previously home to a Club Med, a French resort chain that operated on a palm-lined strip of beach north of Port-au-Prince, and a Holiday Inn in the capital's teeming downtown.

## STRONG MESSAGE

The return of major hospitality brands sends a strong message, says Ulrick Emmanuel Noel, director of investment for the Ministry of Tourism.

"It shows that we're open to international partnerships ... (and) that we're preparing to be a serious international destination," Noel said. "Private investors are starting to trust the Haitian state."

According to the Ministry of Tourism, about half of the capital's roughly 1,600 hotel rooms were lost in the January 2010 earthquake. By mid-2013, metropolitan Port-au-Prince will have some 3,500 hotel rooms.

While the Oasis hotel project was six years in the making, it benefited directly from post-earthquake reconstruction funds. Investors group SCIOP S.A. was awarded \$7.5 million in financing by the World Bank's International Finance Corporation and more than \$2 million by the Clinton Bush Haiti Fund, headed by former U.S. presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. The Clinton Bush Haiti Fund recently announced that it would cease operations at the end of 2012.

The hotel opening comes at a time when the Caribbean country is struggling to recover from a difficult year that saw its fragile agricultural sector badly battered by more natural disasters, including Hurricane Sandy, which destroyed crops and sparked protests over the cost of living.

Following a recent visit, the International Monetary Fund released a statement on Monday warning that "heightened domestic political and social tensions – fueled by pervasive poverty and lack of progress in improving living standards – and natural disasters could impede the fragile recovery and constrain Haiti's growth prospects."