

# Maria Bou Eid

GM | Kerten Hospitality

## Building Meaningful Connections between Residents, Travellers, and Guests

The GM of Jeddah's lifestyle destination The House Hotel focuses on collaborations, the local community and the young generation

**M**aria Bou Eid is a hospitality professional who has held various roles in the industry for over 15 years, having worked with small, family companies as well as large hospitality chains, and has been a member of hotel groups in Lebanon, Qatar, and the GCC. Maria is now the General Manager of The House Hotel Jeddah CityYard for Kerten Hospitality, where she oversees this lifestyle destination in Jeddah, managing the staff on the ground, mentoring nurturing local talent, and bringing the community together.

Maria specialises in human capital development, and she is an avid supporter of programmes that provide value and impact to the ecosystem

within an ESG framework of inclusion, diversity, and entrepreneurial empowerment. Maria has previously completed three other pre-opening projects and admits to always wanting to leave her mark in every place she has worked and with every person she has worked with. She is also co-chair of the G100 group of women hospitality professionals united for diversity in hospitality.

### Joining Futurists

For Maria, joining the hospitality industry was a giant step, akin to the decision to join Kerten Hospitality's lifestyle destination in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – the House Hotel Jeddah City Yard. "This is a unique

*project on its own, focused on community, support for the locality, encouragement of entrepreneurship in the neighbourhood, and building meaningful connections between residents, travellers, and guests."*

She feels that joining the team of futuristic visionaries and having a front row seat to the industry's transformation in the Kingdom is one of the most rewarding experiences for the team on property. "Playing a role in contributing to the hospitality changes in the country and seeing the fruits come out is even more rewarding. It all starts with questioning the norms, the common, the known and getting out of your comfort zone," says Maria.



After joining Kerten, Maria felt inspired and eager to do something transformational and outcome-driven. She says, *"Being a Lebanese woman and working in an industry that is predominantly male in the leadership chair, you need strong role models. Though cannot name anyone in particular, I believe that every successful woman I read about or look up to adds a certain impact to my career and ambition."*

### Learning Valuable Lessons from Challenges

According to Maria, obstacles make individuals more nimble and more suited to navigating tumultuous terrain, training you to handle challenges pro-actively rather than reactively. She states, "Roadblocks could be the people we meet and operational situations we encounter." Maria's most useful takeaway from this experience has been the ability to anticipate events before they occur. She views questioning things and not accepting the well-trodden path of preparation as a fantastic characteristic, as is flexibility, a rapid mentality reset, and adaptation to other cultures, all of which assist in coping with a situation collaboratively.

"Also, functioning as a team and ensuring success collectively makes a huge difference in everything we do, she says and adds: "Understanding the local intricacies, culture, and establishing deep, meaningful connections with the community around us removes any roadblocks or challenges."

### The ESG Operator

Kerten Hospitality is an ESG-driven mixed-use lifestyle operator that

manages and operates hotels, branded residences, food and beverage outlets, fully-serviced workspaces, and collaborative business and social hubs that transform destinations through impactful collaborations that build ecosystems and curate community-centric destinations with a focus on locality by up skilling national talents and empowering them to participate in significant projects. Everything in the organisation has a purpose and has a backstory.

What the management does and applies here at The House Hotel Jeddah CityYard is mentorship, giving back to the communities in which it operates, inspiring teams, and having a ripple effect across multiple industries, with hospitality at the centre as the magnet that brings people together, creates memories, and has emotional and valuable outcomes.

Kerten Hospitality has an owner-centric and people-centered strategy for building strong collaborative networks with investors, art entities, human capital development teams, and so on. In a word, everything Kerten Hospitality does has a purpose, which distinguishes the organisation from its peers.

### Redefining the Industry with Community Support

Being an innovative hospitality destination simply means being unique. The whole Kerten Hospitality team offers ideas and assists in the creation of individualised experiences for its visitors. Being real in bringing together local and foreign visitors through pop-up and community events, art and culture seminars, and other activities is all part of the new era of hospitality that promotes a

higher quality of life in a location.

According to Maria, joining the executive team on their tours to various Tier 1 and Tier 2 locations around the Kingdom was a terrific school of experience, providing a glimpse of the industry's progress. Being on the road with the team, has taught Maria to be fearless in asking difficult questions and to always challenge the status quo. Item-questioning is the biggest industry contribution one can make that keeps them relevant.

Maria understands that being part of this network and hosting workshops and engagements, farmers' markets that support local businesses and establishing entrepreneurial networks with various interests is the key. *"Redefining this industry is about people and how to bring them together to get an authentic experience within their personal adventure they seek to explore," she says.*

She is quick to highlight the recently forged partnership with Jeddah's entrepreneurship Effat University where the business plan includes joint support for students' growth, up skilling, and facilitating their entry into the workforce.

### Responsibilities Commitment

Being a GM of a property like The House Hotel Jeddah CityYard, regardless of gender, responsibilities fall across an extended map of tasks, creativity, and common sense. It's like being the car's engine, wrench, clutch, and steering wheel. According to Maria, the full operation's support and quality control system is at the very own mechanism of the driver's voyage. She opines, *"We have a great*



*team that manages all tasks meticulously and beyond the call of duty."*

Maria's day starts with strong coffee and a team catch up; it's a must to plan for the unexpected. The team always strives to improve, and that is why communication is key, especially when one works in a diverse multinational environment.

Maria's favourite part is meeting guests in the lobby, which is more of a social hub where the staff arranges events and organises meetings. *"In the multi-purpose lobby and in our communal areas, I meet guests and hear their feedback, connect and engage in a more informal way, accepting both critical advice and appreciation for a job well done by the team."*

### Surrounded by a Positive and Motivated Team

From Maria's point of view, work-life balance is all about prioritising your personal and professional to-do lists. She sees that being surrounded by positive and motivated team members is enough to keep the green light on and be constantly on the move. She says, *"As for the employees, providing them with a friendly, understanding, empowering, appreciative, flexible, up skilling, and curative work environment is what they need."*

Maria mentions that if you give your team the space to spread their wings and allow them to understand and engage in what they are doing, they will fly high. Saying "thank you", "great job", "proud of you" are powerful ways to communicate. She believes in coaching and mentorship

rather than teaching and training, and you can see this at the front desk, in housekeeping, and at the back of the house.

### What is Success?

Success, Maria believes, is the ability to integrate passion into the surrounding environment and the reality on the ground while contributing to the growth of young leaders and the community where we are settled. She believes hospitality cannot be taught at school or mastered in vocational training as it requires love for human-centricity, dedication, and excitement. *"You become successful when you continuously look around at what conventional organisations are doing and you attempt different things on property. The lack of fear of the unknown has shaped me as a*



*professional—something I see in our Kerten Hospitality DNA as well."*

The greatest success, according to Maria, comes from recognising your employees and visitors, who have all been a part of your journey and for whom you have created personalised experiences and lasting memories. She shares that the Minister of Tourism (in KSA) has expressed his appreciation for the changing face of hospitality in a personal Tweet addressed to the team. She is happy about having on boarded young Saudi talents, and watching them flourish at their jobs is the finest compliment a GM can receive. She says, *"Equally important is finding your organisation's perfect fit that aligns with your moral compass and vision for the industry and the future."*

### **Supporting Women Empowerment**

Maria claims that Kerten Hospitality has been recognised for its diversity and inclusivity, which are on the agenda of the world's most purposeful leaders, with only a few sticking out in the throng. Its team is made up of 60% women, not because of their gender, but because of their skill sets and expertise. *"We let the next generation of leaders OWN and LEAD important projects. We co-chair a sustainability initiative for students that engage 40+ global hospitality schools. We support women's empowerment through entrepreneurship in different ways."*

Maria's plan is to continue working and growing with the driven team at Kerten Hospitality. She loves being part of the evolution and the values-

*share. "I seek to expand my mentorship capabilities and to work in the space of diversity and women's entrepreneurship empowerment. It is rewarding to see results come to life in an organic way."*

*She concludes, "If you have the will, you will find the right way (in hospitality). An added bonus is always the entrepreneurial side of a person who can nourish and nurture a project to become a reality, that is bound to make a difference in this industry."*

