

# The Kor Club

Unapologetically obsessive. Relentlessly ambitious. Hotelier Brad Korzen is the consummate perfectionist. **ROBIN POGREBIN** checks in with the hotel impresario in Miami at his newest property, Tides South Beach.



THE TIDES

Miami's storied Tides hotel was recently renovated by 44-year-old hotelier Brad Korzen (left) and his Kor Group.

IT'S A SUNNY MORNING IN MIAMI AND EVERYTHING LOOKS POSTCARD perfect at the Tides South Beach on Ocean Drive. The sun bounces off white umbrellas on the terrace as a warm breeze floats through the glass entrance doors. Inside, guests sit in the dining room, its walls decorated with faux tortoise shells, and enjoy a leisurely breakfast of mini Belgian waffles or Maine lobster Benedict.

But Brad Korzen isn't satisfied.

The staff uniforms are insufficiently crisp and need better tailoring. The music in the lobby last night was too "clubby"; he wants more vocals

PHOTOGRAPHS BY David Nicolas

from now on. Some of the guest rooms have a space over the sofa where art should be—even if adding it might cost an extra \$18,000. And there are painted lines on the tiles at the bottom of the pool; those absolutely must go.

The Tides—a 1936 Art Deco hotel that Korzen, chief executive of the Los Angeles-based developer Kor Group, acquired in 2006—reopened last November after a complete renovation. Now it's January and Korzen is in town to inspect the finishing touches. Generally he is pleased with the overhaul: There's an upgraded pool area

given his slight build and boyishly handsome face—especially when you catch him in faded jeans and black Converse sneakers.

The question is whether a man so focused on particulars, who is essentially flying by the seat of his pants, can survive in a competitive industry and succeed at running a large, rapidly expanding operation. Kor Group, which also owns residential properties, now has 11 hotels and expects to have 15 by 2009 and 30 by 2014. Korzen is currently operating or developing Tides and Viceroy hotels in Los Angeles, Mexico, Anguilla, Aspen,

based in San Francisco, and André Balazs and Thompson Hotels, based in New York. Marriott and Ian Schrager also recently joined forces to form a boutique hotel chain that could prove competitive. But Korzen is already thinking beyond the boutique industry. He wants to compete with chains like the Four Seasons, Ritz-Carlton, and Mandarin Oriental. And he believes he can do this by combining top-quality design and unexpected service.

The design part he has largely handed off to his personal and professional partner, Kelly Wearstler, his wife of five years.



The hotel's signature motifs, from left: Tree trunks and zebra prints; a seashell lamp; a brass-and-alabaster chandelier; the lobby, with Wearstler's signature Hall Porter chairs.

## Korzen has largely handed over the design part to his wife, decorator extraordinaire Kelly Wearstler, whose style juxtaposes whimsy and luxury.

with cabanas and climbing vines; the new Coral Bar, which features antique mirrors, gold-leaf wallpaper, and a Persian red travertine bar; an open-air fitness center; and a new 2,000-square-foot, two-bedroom penthouse suite that has a private terrace with a shower and sunken tub.

**K**orzen, 44, is the kind of guy whose work is never quite finished. He involves himself in every aspect of his business, from deciding where to put his next beachfront property to whether he likes the mint-lavender scent of the pillow spray left on the hotel beds at turndown.

He is also learning as he goes, having segued into hotels from real estate with no hospitality training. And he doesn't quite look the part of the big hotel executive,

and Vancouver, British Columbia. He recently closed on a project in China Beach, Vietnam, for both a Viceroy and a Tides. Korzen sees his properties as hotels for the discriminating traveler, someone who likes a more personalized experience and values bold design. "I primarily want to build a great business model," Korzen says, "to be a choice brand."

So far his business model is working. The Kor Hotel Group has more than \$180 million in annual hotel sales and an average occupancy rate of 82 percent. "Kor is one of the stars in the boutique industry," says Thomas McConnell, the senior managing director of the hotel group at Cushman & Wakefield. "It's in the top five."

The other four, McConnell says, are Kimpton Hotels and Joie de Vivre, both

Wearstler, 39 and a judge on Bravo's *Top Design*, has her own design business and creates the interiors of many of Korzen's hotels. Her art objects—such as gilded flowers and marble books—are featured at Bergdorf Goodman.

**F**or the oceanfront Tides's 45 guest rooms, Wearstler chose a palette—pale tangerine and beige, which evokes seashells on a sandy beach. She also juxtaposed whimsy and luxury, using zebra-print rugs and tree-stump tables along with elegant lighting and fine linens. "She has a creative touch," Korzen says. "She's not minimalist, though a lot of design today is."

Minimalism is not what Korzen is after. He wants his hotels to feel sumptuous but not gaudy and to be eclectic, each one

distinct and memorable. Thus the brass palm trees and birch sculpture in the Tides dining room and the framed, beaded necklaces above the couch in the bedroom.

People should remember not only the look of his properties, Korzen believes, but also the feel. "He's really focused on how the staff recognizes the guests and the attention they give them," says Luis Fernandes, Kor's senior vice president of hotel operations, "as in, Do whatever is necessary to wow someone, to leave a lasting impression."

That means offering not just to unpack for guests but to press the outfit they plan to wear that night as well. At a meeting with his staff, Korzen hammers away at this point. "Is that happening for every guest?" he asks.

Shan Kanagasingham, the general manager, says it isn't.

"Why?" Korzen demands.

There's not enough staff yet, Kanagasingham explains; the hotel has only been open two months. Korzen is also anxious to get the fitness center up and running—"We should aim for the end of this week"—and stresses that the front doors should stay open in nice weather. Good service, Korzen says, is the hardest thing to come by consistently. "You've got to train people," he says. "You can't just place them in a hotel environment and expect them to kill themselves for the guests."

**D**uring my stay at the Tides, I was impressed by the service. The staff struck the right balance between solicitous and obsequious, bringing extra hangers for the closet at my request and remembering that I preferred to have *The New York Times*, rather than *The Miami Herald*, delivered to my door each morning. Though the Tides prides itself on providing each guest with a specific PA (personal assistant), a different person answered the line each time I pressed the designated button on the room phone. But they were all helpful nonetheless, quickly coming to replace the missing switch on one bedside lamp or to provide milk for my coffee.

If Korzen had any role model, he says, it was his father, who owns a chain of bowling alleys in Chicago. Korzen remembers his being constantly on the phone, checking up on the business. Korzen does the same. "At work that's one of the criticisms I hear—that I'm micromanaging," he says.

Korzen tries to maintain open lines of communication, to make sure his people keep telling him the truth. To encourage this

type of candor, he is planning to bring in a corporate coach. He even moved his desk from a private office on the perimeter to a cubicle smack in the center of the action. "My main goal is to be approachable," he says. "I just want to know what people are really thinking, even if I totally disagree."

At the same time Korzen is a private guy. To the extent that he has become a public figure—and he's increasingly visible, in part because of the high-profile, glamorous Wearstler—Korzen does not relish the

lately hate.") When he and Wearstler travel together, as they did recently to Bangkok, they bring the kids along. He takes them to school at least twice a week. Still, if there is anything Korzen would like to work on, it would be "being a better father," he says. "I have my BlackBerry weaknesses."

Korzen makes a point of getting to know the staff at all levels of his properties. During this visit to the Tides, he greets every bellhop and construction worker. He is casually friendly with his senior staff but at times brutally direct when asking, for example, why there are gaps at the bottom of the doors of the rooms off the elevator. "He's very demanding about doing things right and doing things well," Fernandes says. "He's very much a perfectionist. He wants to ensure that every detail is thought of."

A Chicago native, Korzen graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and went on to earn a law degree from the University of Miami. In the nineties he started renovating apartments in places like Florida and California. Then he bought the Avalon Hotel in Beverly Hills and got the hotel bug, despite having no experience in the industry. "I didn't know what I didn't know," he says.

Korzen did know that he wanted to emulate "old-school luxury" with his new properties while recognizing that such history can't really be replicated. "You're not going to create another Beverly Hills Hotel," he says. "But everything else is achievable."

Whether this instinctive, hands-on approach is ultimately enough to make Korzen rise above the pack remains to be seen. As with any rapid expansion, there is always the danger of diluting the brand. "It makes sense as long as the company doesn't get too big," says William C. Marks, a managing director and senior research analyst at JMP Securities who tracks the hotel and resorts industry.

At this point Korzen appears to be too fired up to slow down anytime soon. He relishes hurdles, such as transforming a cramped space off the lobby into an intimate space for a nightcap and, more generally, making a historic hotel like the Tides—with the accompanying preservation restrictions—feel fresh again. "I like taking potentially difficult locations and making them work," he says. "The blank canvas is pretty exciting." ■

Rooms at Tides South Beach hotel are \$695 to \$7,500 a night ([tidessouthbeach.com](http://tidessouthbeach.com)).

## KOR CONCERNS

Here, a thumbnail tutorial of Korzen's growing empire.

**VICEROY ANGUILLA** This first international Viceroy location, which spans 3,200 miles of beach, includes a palatial spa and offers windsurfing, sailing, and snorkeling. Opening this winter.

**VICEROY CHINA BEACH** Viceroy's first outpost in Asia, this 50-acre property on the southern coast of Vietnam will have a 120-room hotel as well as 50 residences, each 3,500 square feet. The spot provides easy access to such historic sites as the ancient city of Hue and the port of Hoi An. Opening in 2010.

**VICEROY MAYAKOBA** On Mexico's Riviera Maya, near the city of Playa del Carmen, the resort will feature 164 villas and residences, a Greg Norman golf course, and water taxi service to the beach along lagoon channels. Opening winter 2009.

**VICEROY SNOWMASS** Part of the new Base Village development in Snowmass, Colorado, the ski-in, ski-out 236-room lodge will offer, among other amenities, a 7,000-square-foot spa. Opening winter 2009.

**VICEROY ZIHUATANEJO** Designed by Jean-Michel Gathy, the architect who created many of the Aman resorts, this retreat will join the Tides Zihuatanejo in Playa La Ropa, on Mexico's Pacific coast. Opening in 2010. —ALISON OGDEN

role. "To be honest with you, it makes me a little uncomfortable," he says. "I'm not out there generating a lot of press for myself. I'm interested in growing our company."

**I**n his personal life Korzen tries to maintain a sense of normalcy and routine, getting home by 7 P.M. every day he's not traveling to have dinner with his wife and their young boys, Oliver, five, and Elliott, four. (A recent office move added ten minutes to his commute, of which Korzen says, "I abso-