



PIER 7's LUNAR ECLIPSE

A TIDAL WAVE POISED ON THE HORIZON

BY FIDA CHAABAN

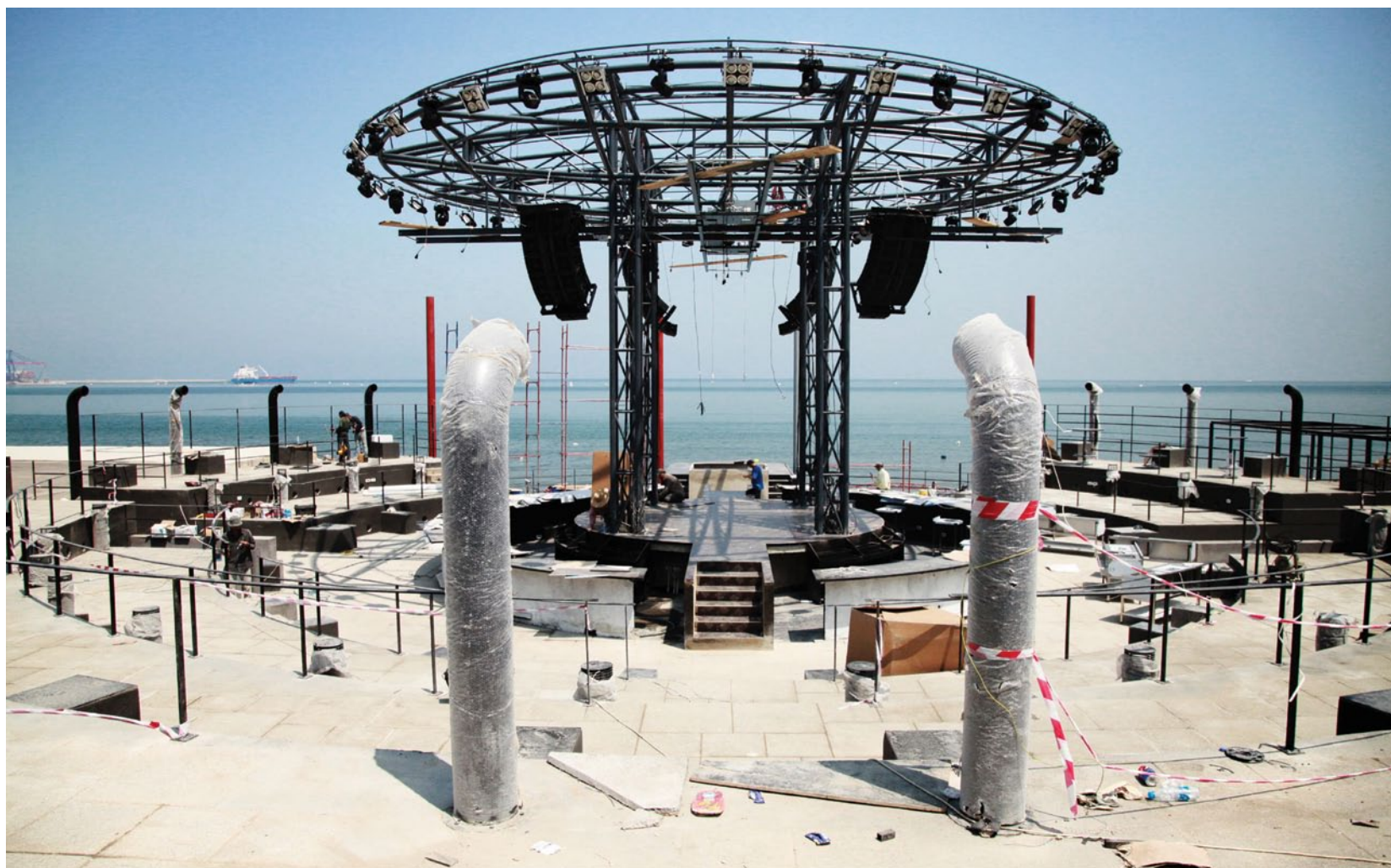
What do you need the number of those assholes for?" That was the first response I got to a mass BBM and SMS campaign I sent out to my contacts. The question I had asked: "Can someone please give me the cell number of Mazen El Zein, Crystal Group C.E.O?" The reason I needed the number for those assholes was because I wanted to talk to them directly about the biggest thing to hit Lebanese nightlife and hospitality in, well, forever! And no one seemed to know much about it. The Crystal Group has gotten a lot of flak these days, mostly because they're looking to recreate the concept of nightlife in Lebanon. From competitors to haters, they've got their share of critics. They don't have the friendliest reputation and a quick call to Mazen El

Zein showed me why. It went like this: "Hi Mazen, this is Fida Chaaban from RAGMAG magazine calling..." "I'M NOT RELEASING THE DATE OF THE LAUNCH!" Silence. Collect yourself, Fida. Deep Breath. Try again. "That's not why I'm calling." Silence. "Then why are you calling?" Good question. I wasn't sure why. I'd heard rumours of people in high places being imported into MENA for the mysterious Pier 7. I'd also heard that The Crystal Group was notoriously hard to deal with and that they had next to no relationship with the media. I'd heard so much that I wasn't sure what was true and what wasn't. That was why. I decided to give him the executive summary since one-liners work best in my experience.

I didn't flinch as I stated my intentions either, and if you've met or spoken to Mazen, you'll know this is no mean feat: "I want to know about the Crystal Group." That was the beginning. That was how I ended up at their offices. And that was shortly before the lunar eclipse. This was suddenly becoming very Sci-Fi and very Revelations and I was getting all crazy stringing together the concepts. One of the concepts that inspired the layout and architecture of Pier 7 was crop circles, along with architect Karim Nader of Blank Page taking Mazen's idea of reviving the Greek theatre and later Roman amphitheatre setup. "There really is no bad vantage point in Pier 7," said Celina Aoun, Head of Public Relations for Crystal Group. "You'll see when we get there." And see I did. ►



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON ZAMORA



WE'RE 5 SECRETIVE DAYS AWAY FROM THE LAUNCH OF THE \$3.5 MILLION CLUB

OPPOSITE PAGE + ABOVE:
PIER 7 IN THE MAKING.

The images you see are the making of Pier 7 and they are what I saw. Celina took me to the venue to see the progress, the current layout, and as I type this, we're 5 secretive days away from the launch of the \$3.5 million club. I am also 21 hours away from losing a bet with Mazen. "The first bet was just \$500, that we wouldn't open before July, the second bet was with a partner and I'm sure he's not going to pay since it's for \$15,000. He thinks we won't open before July 15th, and the third bet is with you, which I'm about to win," he says smiling coolly. This is in response to my incredulous face that the structure you see before you (images taken less than 3 hours ago), will be furnished by this time tomorrow. Papa's a gambling man I see and Celina laughs as Mazen reassures me that I'm going to lose our wager, "Against all odds, I will have this done."

As I eye the mercurial Mazen, I ask him if he's a nice person and he begins to really pay attention as he replies in an amused tone, "I'm a very nice person... with people I want to be nice to. Nice guys do tend to finish last, but there's always the exception to the rule." Another exception to the rule is their location. Situated in no man's land, across from CityMall Dora, the Crystal Group's latest venture is ballsy, to say the least. "It can't be easy access, you have to choose to go to Pier 7," he says in response to the rumblings that their location may be detrimental. The 2000 person capacity venue seats 400 and has received its fair share of press for layout alone. What the press is missing is that the devil is in the details and the Crystal Group has seen to it that every arena is absolutely the best. "Gemma Blower and a team from the UK are the in-house performing artists.

We have 10 acrobats, aerialists and dancers," explains Celina. "This is where they'll enter from", she says gesturing to the dodecagon hydraulic stage. The inset middle of the center of the club is a platform that begins below ground and it is from here that Gemma's dance company will make their entrances. The underground labyrinth is an impressive as what's upstairs, albeit in a different way. The Crystal Group has ensured that Pier 7 will be the first nightlife venue in Lebanon with valet boat reception and as impressive as that may seem, there are a lot of firsts at work here that one is hard pressed to choose what to talk about. With so much at stake, it's no wonder that everyone in the company talks about Pier 7 with a great deal of emotion. In fact, the word emotion itself floats around in conversation at the Crystal Group offices hourly. ►



‘IT CAN’T BE EASY ACCESS,
YOU HAVE TO CHOOSE TO
GO TO PIER 7’

OPPOSITE PAGE:
MAZEN EL ZEIN, CEO

"The business began as a family endeavour and our C.E.O Mazen wanted to take a more corporate direction. I have started the culture of Emotional Connectedness here at the Crystal Group for that reason," explains Abdul Baaghil, Managing Director of the Crystal Group. Abdul's background in hospitality, specifically the Ritz-Carlton, has brought much to the multinational company, namely translating their "pillars of values, mission and culture into reality. A theatrical experience that goes out to our vision, from the bottom of our organization to the very top." Why did he decide to join the Crystal group? "I was a Hotel Manager at the Ritz-Carlton. I felt like there was an opportunity in the Crystal group culture to leave a legacy," he explains citing Horst Schulze, former President and Chief Operating Officer of the Ritz-Carlton, as one of the most dynamic entrepreneurs in his scope.

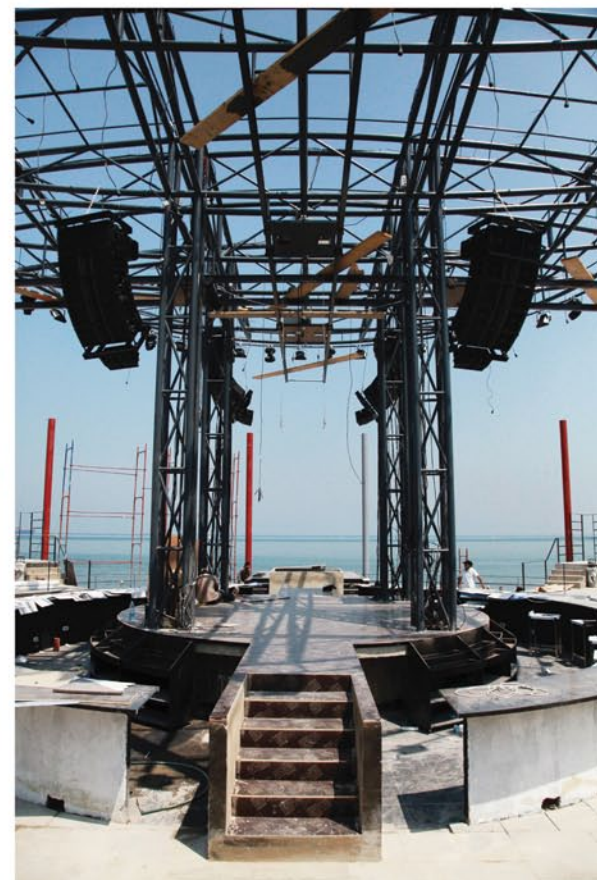
It's no wonder that the Crystal Group has reined in the best to implement their "experience". Schulze is known for revitalizing corporations to value their service agreement to the public. "The genuine service in Beirut is always built on pillars of pretence. It feels like its delivered, served, gone. There's a great deal of know-how here, a huge amount of potential, a lot of aspirations but what turns it on a negative aspect is that it's not a lasting memory. It's like a display window, you change it every 30 days. If you compare this to Hong Kong, you go back 5 years later and the service is still anticipated, it's on the clock," he says drawing comparisons between hospitality here and abroad. "The concept of Pier 7 is an experience, it's a character. It's an intelligent, emotional movement. It is Crystal Group with a culture and we're not in this for the 2 year cycle. There's vision and diversity, and Pier 7 seeks

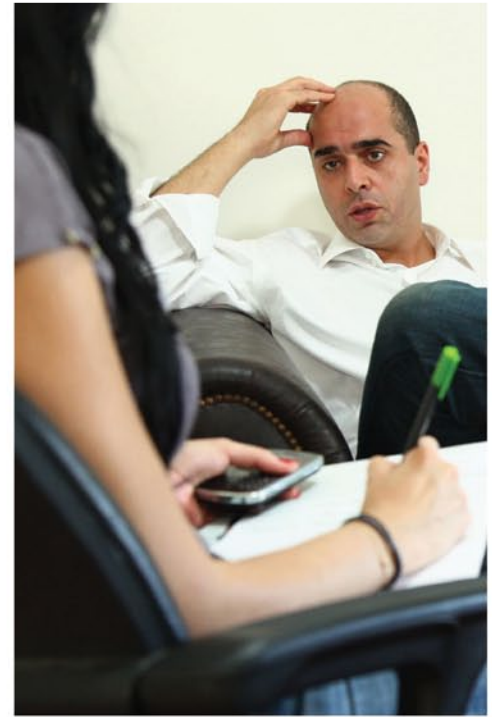
to become a regional and a global presence," says Abdul noting that he has visited over 80 countries and lived in 15. Despite all this, Abdul maintains that he is not "politically correct. I think it's positive though. You become stunted spiritually if you tie yourself to a grid. We're a team with a driving force and each individual is tapping their growth opportunities," and gaining international experience in the process since the bevy of talent contracted to create Pier 7 is lengthy and globally ranked. ►

'YOU BECOME
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GRID.'



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
ABDUL BAAGHIL, MANAGING DIRECTOR
CELINA AOUN (MIDDLE), HEAD OF PR
PIER 7 IN THE MAKING





LEFT:
PIER 7 RAW PLAN
ABOVE:
JAD MATTA, GENERAL MANAGER

The buck doesn't stop here, when they decided to create a full service menu, they decided on Chef Anthony Sousa Tam of Nobu fame and a 350m2 kitchen. Acting as the group's "modern Japanese food consultant", he was also behind the menu at Crystal Group's successful Alcazar in Gemmayzeh. Chef Sousa will be on hand for a full month in Beirut to oversee Pier 7's take off and closely monitor the consistency of the food quality and service. Their underground Liquid Kitchen at 200m2 and Cold Room ensure that their "cutting edge cocktail bar" and "signature cocktails with no competition" developed by Mixologist Italian Dario Nanni, won't go wrong. Addressing yet another detail is Glass Studio. The famous artisanal duo have a lengthy list of Michelin-starred restaurants under their belt and have developed an exclusive design specifically for Pier 7's service ware. The devil rears his head again as Celina explains that each private Pier 7 suite (7 in all, themed after the 7 sins), will have all the amenities, but most importantly, a private butler (with pager in hand) on site for the set of spoiled clientele.

These spoiled clientele are often the very same ones found on A Small World, dubbed "Facebook for millionaires", and Crystal Group will be the first organization in Lebanon to employ it as a social media tool. Ibrahim Hamieh, Marketing Coordinator, explains their new marketing strategy with a strong social media focus, "We're using Twitter, Facebook of course and LinkedIn as well. In terms of Facebook, we're redirecting the image. It's about personalized messages, ad campaigns on Facebook, trailers of Pier 7. Our long term strategy is to maximize fans. Social media is the most important marketing tool and with our new brand strategy on Twitter, our followers are increasing daily," he explains. And it's no wonder, the most widely anticipated launch of the summer, delays notwithstanding, is justified since their mixed media performances, by description alone are enough to warrant a trip to Pier 7. "A DJ alone for 5, 6 hours... been there done that. This is a performance, its art. What's being done [in Lebanon], with all due respect, is not art. I think the client would really appreciate seeing something of a

different calibre. Bringing a star takes nothing, it takes deep pockets. But bringing together an international team with a Lebanese heart? That doesn't exist," says Mazen. Until now, the combination of live acts, sound and light will be, according to descriptions, both vaudevillian and burlesque. It will be a sort of Cirque du Soleil meets Michael Jackson's This Is It. And it will have to be seen to be believed.

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‘HIGH RISK IS HIGH PROFIT’

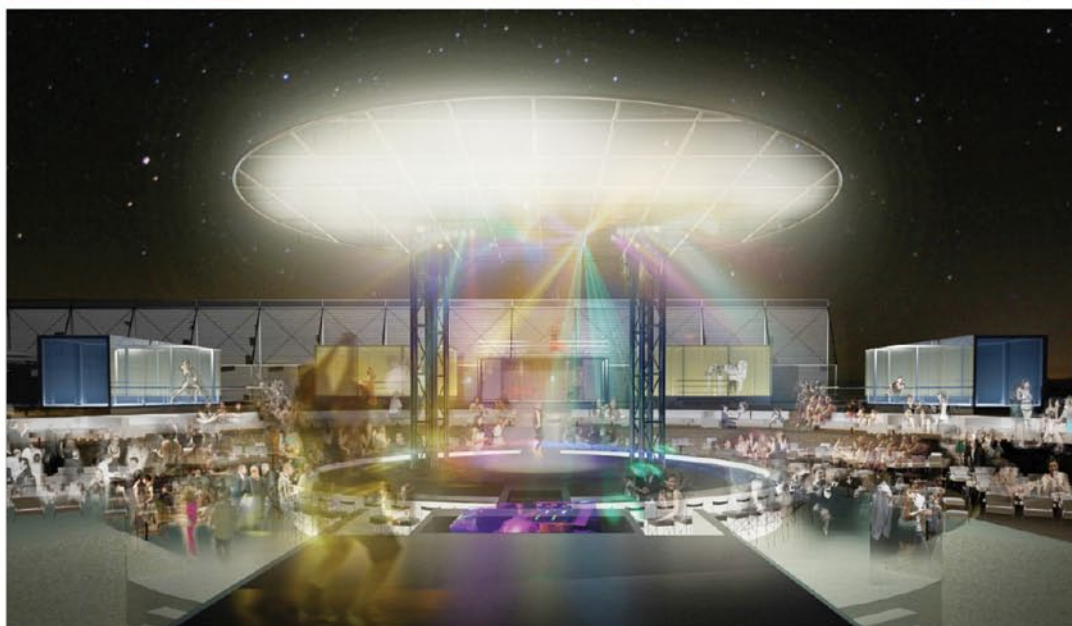
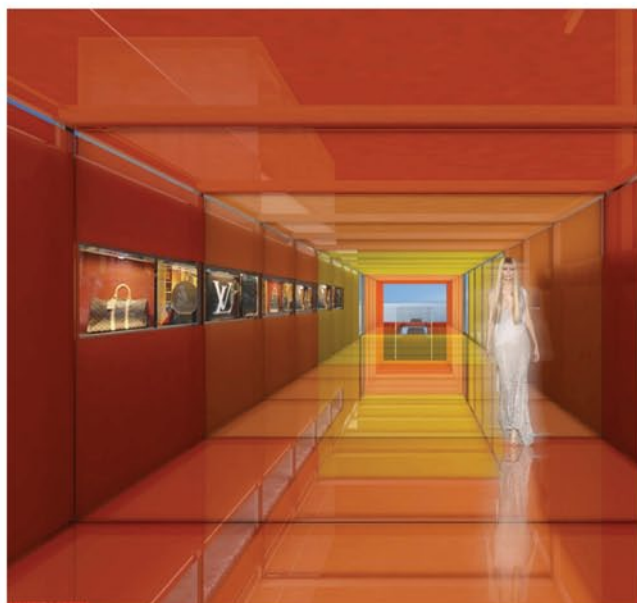
“We wanted to do something out of the box. This project has been ongoing for years but due to difficulties with the government and the port, it was delayed,” says Jad Matta, General Manager. “We wanted to tackle the best of everything,” emphatically stressing that “it’s easy to be successful, but maintaining that success is the hard part.” And the risk factor involved in such a huge project? “High risk is high profit. The suffering tourism numbers, you know the population triples each summer, that will make a difference, knowing the regional situation,” admits

Jad, but is adamant that they are on track both for crowd and style. “The face of Pier 7 is George Clooney. He’s mature, intelligent, sexy. The bit and pieces of everything make a perfect world, you need to look at the experience connecting all these dots,” elaborating on the ideal clientele meshed with an unparalleled venue. “After the great success of C Bar for 3 years, we had our entry ticket to Dubai. We’ve matured and evolved, C Bar’s 200 people is now People’s 1200 people,” detailing the popular U.A.E. club.

What is immediately clear is that the positioning of Pier 7 is such that you can see the sunset. While this is significant, what is even more so is that they stand to change the way Lebanese understand nightlife. Dancing under the moon in an ancient amphitheatre may even eclipse the sun altogether.

There are 5 days left and as Jad said, to fully know the strength of the pending wave, “We’ll just have to wait and see.” ■

IT WILL BE A SORT OF CIRQUE DU SOLEIL MEETS
MICHAEL JACKSON’S THIS IS IT. AND IT WILL HAVE TO BE
SEEN TO BE BELIEVED.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
PIER 7 ENTRANCE LOBBY
IBRAHIM HAMIEH, MARKETING ADVISOR
PIER 7 3D RENDERING

the
Crystal
group