

Q&A WITH  
**HOTELIER  
BILL  
HEINECKE**

THINKING BIG: TALKING WITH THE  
AMERICAN-BORN ENTREPRENEUR ABOUT HIS  
EVER-EXPANDING HOSPITALITY EMPIRE

AN INTERVIEW BY: **RON GLUCKMAN**

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**WILLIAM ELLWOOD HEINECKE** is one of Asia's most remarkable entrepreneurs. An American who grew up in Thailand (and a Thai citizen), he started cleaning offices and selling advertising at a Bangkok newspaper as a teen; he was a millionaire by the time he was 21. Last year, Forbes anointed him a billionaire on its Rich List.

At a time when contemporaries contemplate retirement—he's 65 this year — Heinecke remains intensely involved in all aspects of Minor International Public Company Limited (MINT), which employs more than 45,000 people in resorts, retail and restaurants (1400 outlets in 20 countries). He launched

his first hotel in Pattaya in 1978 and now has 108 properties across Asia Pacific, the Middle East and Africa. His upscale Anantara brand is among the fastest-growing and most successful Asian-based chains.

Heinecke lives life to the fullest, racing cars, flying planes and diving with sharks. But he also believes in giving back. He's written books for entrepreneurs and is an ardent philanthropist. All employees participate in an annual day of charity. Nowhere has the impact been greater than with Thailand's beloved elephant. Two of his properties — the famed Four Seasons Tented Camp and adjacent

Anantara in the Golden Triangle share a massive elephant sanctuary. Each year, he hosts the King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament, which raises funds for and awareness of elephant protection.

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**Hotelier International: When it comes to giving advice to aspiring entrepreneurs, you could write books — and have! But can you offer a few key suggestions?**

**Bill Heinecke:** Ultimately, it's quite a simple formula: you need to seek out an opportunity or gap in the market, work hard, and take some calculated risks. Nothing will be given to young entrepreneurs on a silver platter. It's a competitive world, so you have to think on your feet and act fast when the time is right.

**HI: In building your hotel empire, what has been the hardest part?**

**BH:** Perhaps the hardest is finding the right people to join the journey. Hard work, financial struggles, setbacks, regional or international crises are all part of doing business in today's world and can all be overcome if you have the right people. We hear a lot about the 'war for talent', and it's true; more and more, this is what keeps me awake at night. There is no easy answer to finding the right people. At Minor International, we place a lot of emphasis on sourcing the very best talent and then

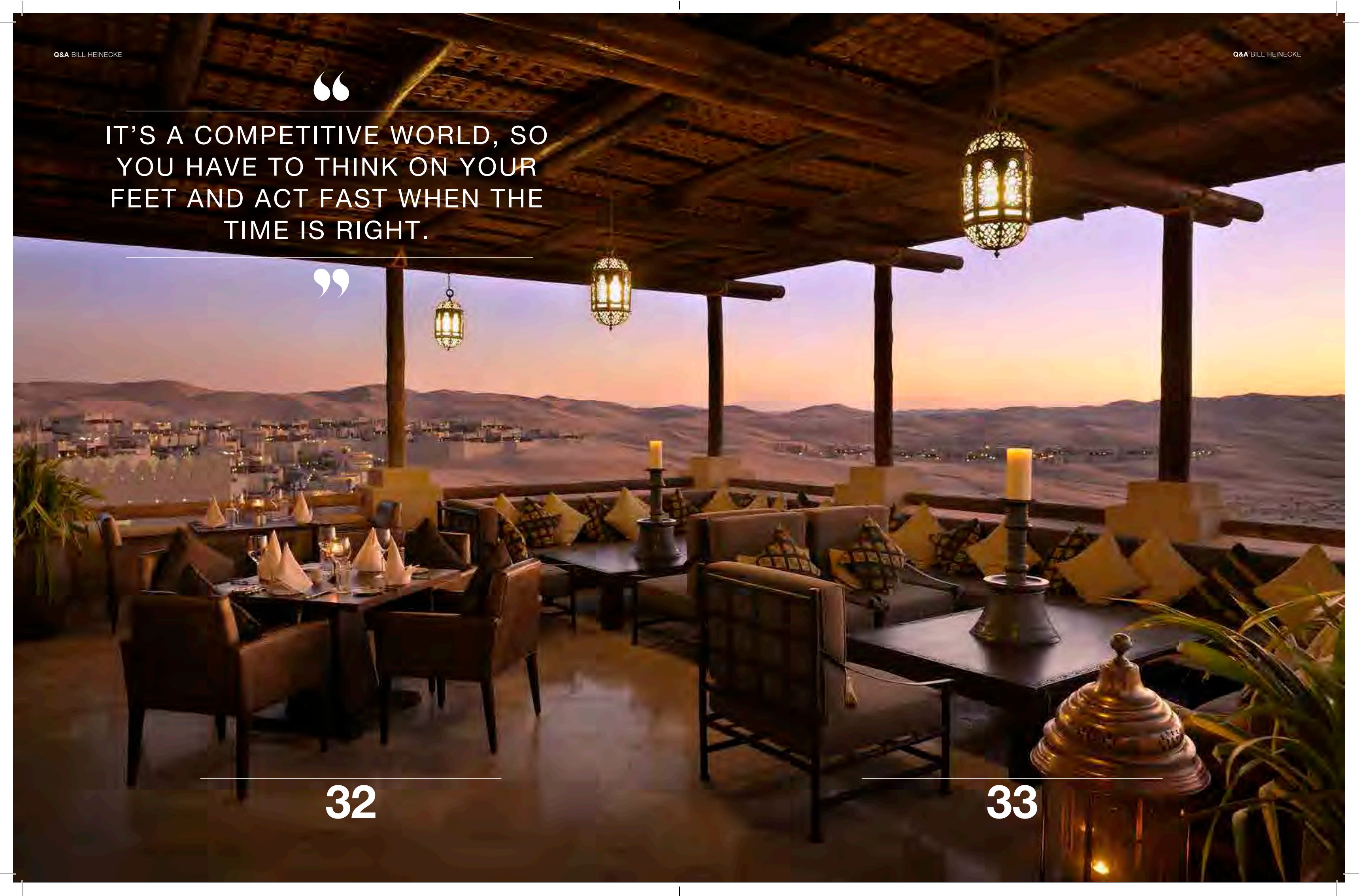
ensuring that we retain them. In addition, I firmly believe that passion is one of the most important things to look for in any candidate, as anyone who is passionate about what they do really helps to ensure a successful business environment. Many of the people on the core team across the food, retail and hotel teams have been with the company for a number of years, and they are all very passionate about the business, passionate about the teams and dedicated to ensuring value for all our shareholders.



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**HI: We know your resort business grows exponentially. Have there been any quantum leaps?**

**BH:** Launching our first major property overseas definitely took the company to new levels. Anantara Dhigu launched in the Maldives in 2006, and it was a key stepping-stone to rapid international development in the Middle East, Australia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and China. Today Minor Hotel Group has 108 hotels in 14 countries – and there are more to come. International expansion was also a very strategic move for the group in that our portfolio is now spread across a number of

countries, regions and indeed continents, which ensures that we can strike a healthy balance of opportunity and risk. Creating a well-balanced portfolio of brands has also been key in the development of MHG –Per AQUUM, Anantara, Elewana Collection, AVANI and Oaks provide a diverse hospitality offering, which is very appealing to today's investors and developers.

**HI: This may be like asking a parent to pick his favorite child, but which hotels stand out as personal favorites?**

**BH:** It is difficult, bordering on impossible to pick one single hotel. I appreciate different

hotels for different reasons at different times. Anantara Golden Triangle remains a very special property as it was one of our first hotels, and the location and elephant camp remain truly special. Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara in the Liwa desert outside of Abu Dhabi is one of the most beautiful hotels in the world. Anantara Kihavah Villas in the Maldives is surrounded by an incredible marine paradise that is truly nature's paradise. The Elewana Collection in Tanzania and Kenya provided me with one of my most memorable family holidays. The list goes on...



**HI: Do your hotels aim for a particular style?**

**BH:** We have 5 key hotel brands, so each one has a distinctive look and feel. With Anantara, the architecture is primarily inspired by the destination. Our hotels in Abu Dhabi are reflective of the rich Middle Eastern culture; our hotels here in Thailand are infused with the very best elements of the kingdom. This is part of the destination experience that is at the heart of the Anantara brand, and this resonates across city and resort hotels. It may not always be in the absolute architectural design, it may also be in the spa, or the restaurants.

**HI: As a philanthropist how did you become so involved with and supportive of elephants?**

**BH:** We launched the King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament at Anantara Hua Hin in 2001, and it just keeps growing. More than US\$750,000 has been raised over the years, and the funds have been used to improve the plight of the Asian Elephant in Thailand and beyond. I feel that this is a great charity and something that I am very keen to support and promote, not only for the elephants, but also for Thailand.

**Author Bio:** Ron Gluckman is a journalist who contributes to *Time*, *Travel & Leisure*, *Forbes*, *the Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Town and Country* and *Condé Nast Traveler*. A resident in Asia for more than 20 years, Ron is currently based in Bangkok, where he is an enthusiast of elephant polo and elephant-print shirts.



