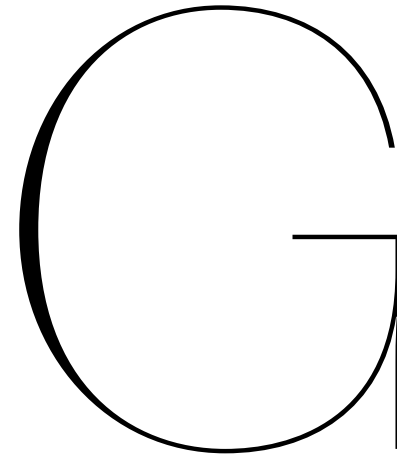


THE ART OF EXPERIENCE

What does experiential travel look like? STEPHANIE IP meets the founder of The Pavilions Hotels & Resorts in Niseko to find out

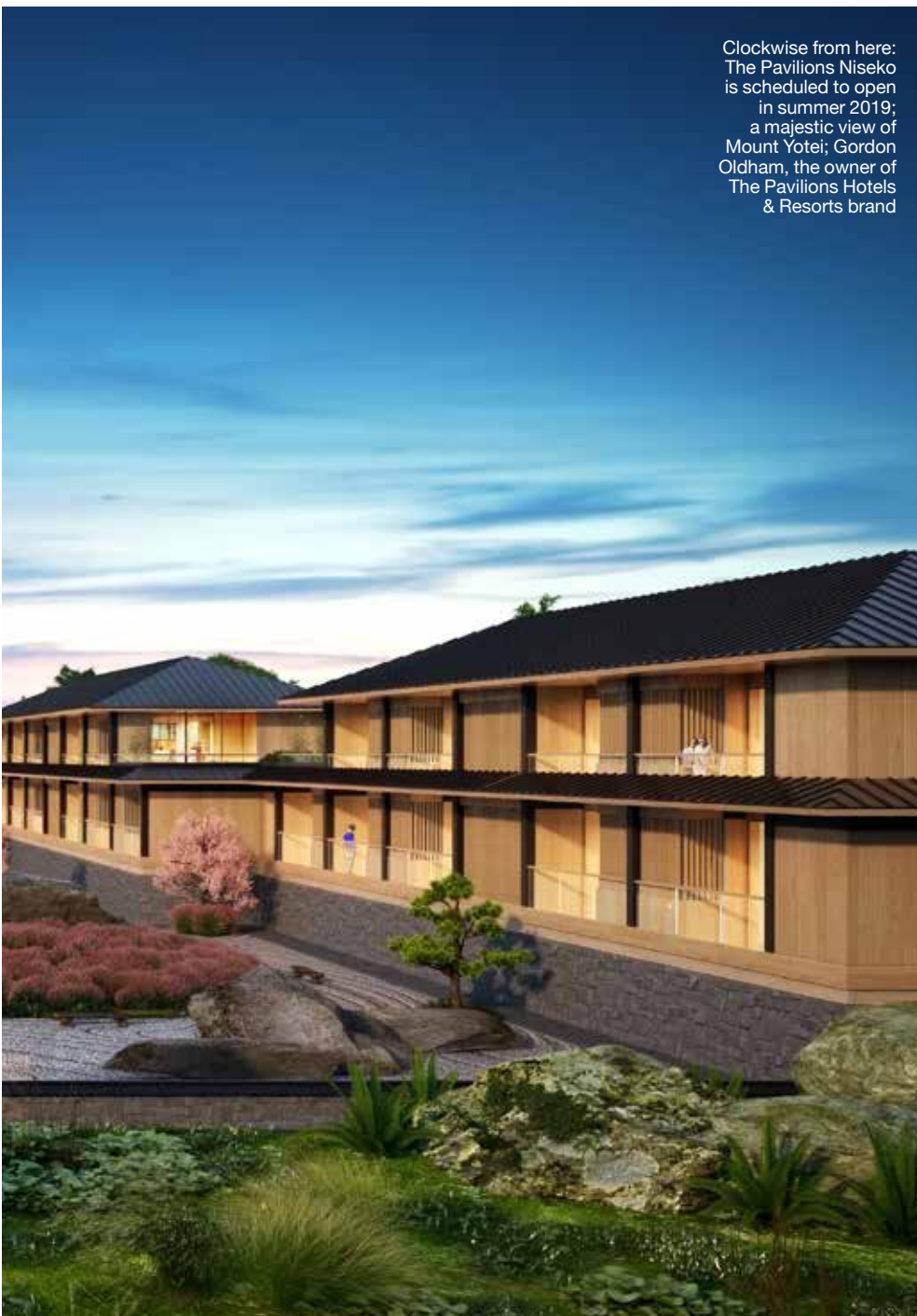


GORDON OLDHAM DOESN'T want anyone to think his brand is just another chain of hotels. The full-time Hong Kong-based lawyer is the owner of The Pavilions Hotels & Resorts brand, a rapidly expanding portfolio of properties in Bali, Phuket, Niseko and Lisbon. In fact, when Oldham flies a select few journalists to Niseko in March, we were put in another hotel entirely. The Ginto Residences had merely broken ground at that point and the property grounds were blanketed over with 10 feet of snow. So if we weren't there to explore the property, then what exactly were we to do? As it turns out, Oldham wanted us to experience the town his way.

Clockwise from here: The Pavilions Niseko is scheduled to open in summer 2019; a majestic view of Mount Yotei; Gordon Oldham, the owner of The Pavilions Hotels & Resorts brand

“Hotels already talk about experiential travel, but very few of them walk the walk and talk the talk,” he explains. “I would just like to concentrate in my own little way on making these hotels I’m involved in, and contributing more to the actual travel element and the stay in a particular city. Does that make sense?”

I nod, because it makes perfect sense. How often, really, do we travel to a new city with a goal of exploring the hotel? We travel to experience a new culture, do as the locals do and eat as the locals eat. The hotel is merely a means to an end, a shelter as the day concludes, so you can get up bright and early the next day to get out and explore some more.



location

This spread:
Niseko boasts a perfect
balance of lush nature
and traditional elements



In the late 1990s, Niseko was a haven for young Australian backpackers who were drawn to the remote mountainous town in northern Hokkaido, overlooking the majestic Mount Yotei, for its perfect powder snow and its pungent, steaming onsen baths. Soon after, the wealthy followed – families from Hong Kong, China, Singapore and Korea began making their way to Niseko in the winter for the snow, and often returned again in the summer for water sports, mountain biking, hiking, golfing and more.

With Oldham as our guide, we're treated to the best of Niseko: grilled umami-rich meat skewers at family-owned izakaya Bang-Bang; sophisticated lunches at the Somoza Gallery, where we dine amongst antiques and Japanese crafts in a 150-year-old komina; long soaks at Rankoshi, the oldest natural onsen in the area; and the most delicious whisky cocktails at Bar Gyu+, where the entrance is an actual refrigerator door carved into the side of the building.

"You don't go to Rome just for a hotel – you go to Rome to see everything that Rome has to offer," says Oldham. His hotel concept is not unlike that of Airbnb, which strives to strike a balance between accommodations and guided experiences. He has nothing but praise for the relative newcomer to the industry, which proves that travellers today aren't just into alternative accommodation, but the experiential element.

To a certain extent, Oldham wants to offer guests the same experience on the luxury level. We won't get to see the property with our own eyes until at least the summer of 2019, but he describes it as its own community. The parcel of land is located on a piece of woodlands in Hirafu, where The Pavilions has plans to build 40-room hotel The Pavilions Niseko as well as the 31 villas that comprise The Ginto Residences – the majority of which are already sold. Only a small percentage of the land will be built on;



location



This spread:
Wintertime in Niseko,
revealed here in all its
splendour, will get you
feeling warm and fuzzy



Oldham says he plans to keep much of the silver birch trees around it untouched and he excitedly tells us of his plans to build tree houses on the plot for a more nature-loving, adventurous stay. His vision is for a beautiful little community where the residences are to one side, the hotel is in the centre, and the village, retail and commercial options are to the other.

From a design point of view, The Pavilions Niseko will look nothing like the mélange of European- and American-inspired buildings and chalets that dominate the town. Because of Hokkaido's location and history of colonisation, Niseko doesn't have the same aesthetic that you'll see in other major Japanese cities. "Hokkaido is kind of lost on architectural causes," says Oldham. He hopes to incorporate culture into the construction and design of The Pavilions Niseko so the end result feels distinctly Japanese. The main architects on the

project are the acclaimed Hong Kong-based studios MAP Architecture and Alt 254; the former is in charge of designing the exterior of the hotel, while the latter will work on incorporating Japanese elements into the interior design.

"To me, Japan shouts temples and castles," says Oldham. "If it had been left entirely up to me, I think we'd have more castles and temples. But those who know best said, 'You know, it would look like something out of Disneyland.' So when you look at it, it'll be based on the original outline of a castle, of which a few walls remain, and when you go inside it looks like a Japanese temple."

Does Oldham think this combination of residences and experiences is the way tourism is headed in the future? "Don't know, don't care," he boldly professes. "If Henry Ford had asked his customers what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse." #