

Why Soft Brands and Independently Managed Hotels on Major Brand Reservation Systems Are Here to Stay

Over the past twenty years, the hospitality landscape has witnessed a seismic shift with the rise of “soft-branded hotels”—a category that continues to gain momentum. At Renard International, where we connect top talent with leading global hospitality organisations, we’ve seen firsthand how this trend has redefined operational models, design philosophies, and guest expectations.



If there’s one word that defines the soft brand movement, it’s “flexibility.” For owners and developers, soft brands offer room to innovate—blending the authenticity and character of an independent hotel with the marketing power, reservation systems, and operational support of a major hotel group. For guests, it means the comfort of a known brand and the added benefit of earning loyalty points—an incentive that today’s traveller values highly and which often drives their booking decisions. This dynamic has elevated Average Daily Rates (ADR), improved returns for stakeholders, and set a new standard: innovate or risk disaffiliation from the major brand.

An excellent example of this trend in action is Faro Blanco Resort & Yacht Club, now part of Hilton’s Curio Collection, Florida, this 124-room property underwent a \$14 million transformation under the guidance of the experienced developers at Prime Group (and is currently managed by Shaner Hotel Group). This project is a clear demonstration of how long-term vision, community engagement, and purposeful designed can future-proof a hotel investment.

In a recent conversation with Heather Strauss, Director of Hotel Asset Management at Prime Group, her corrections made it clear that the project's success was rooted not only in capital investment but also in philosophy. That may sound abstract, but in the world of hospitality development, philosophy is the foundation for every decision.

Philosophy is best summarised as “redeveloping with intent.” Rather than simply meeting the current standards expected by a brand like *Curio Collection* or the *Autograph Collection*, the goal is to exceed them—by choosing high-quality materials, anticipating evolving guest preferences, and designing spaces that will remain relevant and beautiful for years to come.

Faro Blanco, like similar properties, isn't just a resort—it's a lifestyle hub. With four outdoor pools, a full-service spa, wellness-centered room categories, and offerings from *Parrish*, it aims to provide a rich tapestry of experiences. You want a destination where guests never need to leave the property to feel fulfilled.

This is especially relevant in the MICE segment (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions), where experiential programming is now non-negotiable. In the era of hybrid work, corporate retreats and incentive travel have become essential for team cohesion—and Faro Blanco rises to meet that need with a diverse array of wellness experiences, engaging venues, and food and beverage offerings.

The decision to partner with Hilton's Curio Collection—or a similar soft brand like Marriott's Autograph Collection—should never be taken lightly. The strategy must be clear: by tapping into a global distribution power while leveraging shared amenities with other group hotels and achieve both operational efficiency and market segmentation.

The soft brand phenomenon is closely tied to the rise of mixed-use developments — where hotels coexist with residential, retail, and entertainment components. Branded residences, the logic of mixed-use permeates any design. A thoughtful arrival experience that subtly separates guests from the nearby highway through a seaside rotunda is a perfect example of how sensory design can impact perceived value.

At Renard International, we regularly advise hospitality leaders and investors on the recruitment and retention of professionals capable of managing these types of multifaceted assets. Mixed-use properties demand a different mindset — one that blends real estate knowledge with service delivery and guest experience management. That's where talent makes the difference.

Soft brands thrive because they offer a rare balance: individuality without isolation. They give hotel owners the creative freedom to reflect local culture while maintaining the backbone of a global chain's support structure. And as Prime Group's work with Faro Blanco shows, when soft brand conversions are approached with foresight, flexibility, and a genuine understanding of guest behavior, the returns can be long-lasting.

We recognise that every hotel story is ultimately a people story.

Behind every successful soft brand conversion is a team of visionaries, operators, and leaders who see beyond today's trends and design for the long game. As the hospitality world continues to evolve, we're proud to help build those teams and contribute to a more innovative and resilient future for our industry.