



# An entertaining journey

Casinos Austria International is a major global player in gaming: it has restructured itself to accommodate the way people want to spend their free time, and is about to launch Viage, a bold experiment that will excite the population of Belgium. John O'Hanlon reports

These days we are very used to seeing children who tower above their parents. Perhaps it's something in the water. Casinos Austria International is a case in point. Its parent company Casinos Austria AG (CASAG) was established in 1934 when it pioneered gaming in Austria. Today it operates 12 casinos in that country; however, over the years, CASAG had expanded beyond national boundaries and in 1977 it span off its international subsidiary Casinos Austria International (CAI), to consolidate these activities. CAI has since opened over 45 casinos in 35 countries and runs on-board gaming on some 10 cruise ships.

Between them, the two companies employ more than 8,000 people, but CAI, the only casino group with a presence on all five continents, is a lot larger than its parent, though the latter tops up its revenues through various online, mobile, scratchcard and video terminal gaming subsidiaries. CAI's core business will always be the casinos, says the group CEO Paul Herzfeld: "However, we have recently entered online and other types of gaming and we consider that in the mid-term this will become a significant contributor to our revenues and our bottom line. Gaming around the world is evolving and showing up in different forms, and we have to move with that."

The background to this is a change in the whole ethos and market positioning of the gaming industry. The Disney-style razzmatazz of Las Vegas and the exclusive

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membership-only model that evolved from strict regulation in Europe and elsewhere are very passé these days. A much more laid back approach to gaming is promising to draw in a far wider clientele and finally put paid to the negative connotations of gaming, which should after all be more about fun than compulsion.

CAI is in the process of setting up a completely new facility in Belgium that will combine gaming with entertainment, catering and event management, to attract a much broader range of clients than you normally see in a casino. Galerie Anspach is a mixed use development by Fortis Real Estate, in the Lower Town of Brussels. The development includes the Adagio (a prestigious long-stay hotel), a shopping gallery, and the Viage entertainment complex owned by CAI, all contained within a single city block that Fortis has rebuilt from the ground up, retaining only its protected façades.



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Viage, explains Andrew Webb, CEO of the Brussels subsidiary, is a brand name developed from *viaggio*, the Italian for 'journey'. "We will have a casino and entertainment facility on eight different levels; and we have developed zones within that, each with its unique look and feel, the theory being that we can send people on a voyage of discovery to find out what is going on in each area. People

tend to look for the place where they feel most comfortable and Viage gives them numerous different places to choose from." With 400 employees, it will be just about the biggest casino and entertainment complex in Europe.

Herzfeld is enthusiastic: "I think Viage will set new standards for casino entertainment in Europe, where I think there is nothing really comparable to this project. It is an entertainment product—not just a casino with a bit of entertainment added on the side. It is much more than just a casino and provides a lot of different ways of enjoying oneself in an evening."

The predominant non-gaming operations are a formal rooftop restaurant, a sports bar, various service bars and a 1,000-seat events centre and theatre that will house corporate events, live TV shows and big-name artists from around the world as well as regular dinner shows and big band dance evenings. Though Brussels is one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities it makes sense, says Webb, to position Viage as a national business. "It is easier to make loyal and regular customers out of people who live locally. Of course we will be targeting tourists and international



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Every business appears to be excellent, but by definition, only a few can ever achieve that status. Even better can sustain it. A business that is excellent today can be overtaken tomorrow if it does not commit to continuous improvement. As others improve, standing still means moving backwards.



business travellers primarily through the entertainment products we will be offering. But for return visitation we have to rely on the local population in Belgium."

So what makes Viage so special? "By integrating all the business centres into one overall brand we have made something quite different from what casino operators have done in the past," explains Webb. "The fact that the zones are layered over eight levels is quite unique: you normally wouldn't build a casino over more than one or two floors at the most."

You don't pay to get in, so it has none of the exclusivity of a gaming club. "If you want to see a show then you buy a ticket in the usual way, but no registration is needed to use the restaurants or the theatre, so families can go along, or people who wouldn't normally register at a casino," Webb says. "Some of the shows will definitely attract families, as will the restaurant. I am happy if you just come for a meal, or to see a show, or if you just come to the casino; I am







really happy if you want to try all of the above!"

Brussels already has places where you can go to gamble, but Viage is so unlike any of them that competition will be negligible. There are plenty of good places to eat too, Webb admits. "But we are positioned very differently. Viage will be the only total package entertainment destination in the country." The only real competition at present is CAI's

he feels. "It has meant that we have had to be very lean and focused on cost efficiency. When you set out that way you are in a really good position as the economy starts to recover and people start to spend again."

As far as CAI is concerned, Viage Brussels could herald new customer and family-friendly facilities all over the world, says Herzfeld. "In the USA we have seen non-

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own Grand Casino Brussels, a temporary operation that will transmute seamlessly into Viage when it is ready.

Grand Casino Brussels will close and Viage will open its doors for gaming on 26 February. The food and beverage outlets and the theatre will follow within weeks, and Webb is looking to a grand launch party in April. In terms of the global economy, this timing is not as bad as it may seem,

gaming revenues grow tremendously over the last few years. That won't happen the same way everywhere but we already have a resort at Cairns in Australia with significant revenues from the hotel and restaurant, so there is some experience in our group. It is never our philosophy to clone our projects, though. We tailor each facility to its location." – **Editorial research by Sam Howard**



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