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How a ‘Russian James Bond’ Conquered the World of Luxury Hotels

Vlad Doronin lives large as the owner of cultish hotel chain Aman, meditating on his private jet and taking art advice from Leonardo DiCaprio. Just don’t call him an oligarch.

By Candace Taylor [Follow](#) | *Photography by Jeremy Liebman for WSJ. Magazine*

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WHEN THE COMMANDING billionaire Vlad Doronin asks you to do something, he’s not really asking.

So when, during an interview at his Miami Beach mansion, the Soviet-born Doronin directs me to lie down on a table so he can demonstrate a scary-looking machine, I don’t even inquire what the device does. I just climb onto the table in my form-fitting dress and heels, and the owner of the ultra-luxury Aman hotel brand places a plastic wand on my abdomen. He flips a switch on the device, which turns out to be a pulsed electromagnetic field, or PEMF, machine intended to optimize the body’s natural healing system. I feel a vibration. “This is my secret,” explains the muscular 61-year-old in \$920 Hermès sneakers. Will it hurt? “No, because we’re in America!” he says with a booming laugh. Yikes.

Silver-haired with piercing blue eyes, Doronin has action-hero good looks and charm to go with his authoritative manner—qualities that have helped him construct more than 80 buildings in various countries, purchase one of the world’s most exclusive hotel chains and date supermodels including Naomi Campbell (his girlfriend from 2008 to 2013). Still, despite the soothing neutral tones of his marble-clad massage room, I wouldn’t say I’m relaxed. He is spiritual, but intense; courteous, but tough. As he demonstrates various wellness devices—next up is an LED mask that makes me look like Hannibal Lecter—it feels like he’s commanding me, and himself, to relax.

Relaxation is at the core of Switzerland-based Aman Group, which lures wealthy megafans known as Aman Junkies to its far-flung, pristine locations. Since buying the company with partners for \$358 million in 2014, Doronin has developed it into a global juggernaut he says is worth about \$4.5 billion, with condos, 36 hotels spanning two brands, and 38 projects in development. Under the leadership of Doronin’s romantic partner, 29-year-old former model Kristina Romanova, the brand also sells products including clothing, jewelry and skin care. At the 25,000-square-foot spa at Aman New York, where the staff will spoon-feed you honey after a Russian-style *banya* sauna treatment, you can buy an Aman-branded herbal supplement for \$137, or a \$255 baseball cap emblazoned with the company’s logo.



An LED mask, one of his many wellness devices.

Fixated on health and longevity, Doronin is in some ways the ur-Aman Junkie. He meditates daily and wears a string of meditation beads around his wrist, caressing them as he speaks. At times he has traveled with Tibetan monks, as well as a personal trainer, on his private jet.

Still, as a sharp-elbowed real-estate developer who made a fortune in 1990s Moscow, he is also an unlikely steward of a Zen hospitality brand. One of only a few Soviet-born leaders of major Western companies, Doronin for years benefited from his dashing, International-Man-of-Mystery persona. The architect Zaha Hadid dubbed him “the Russian James Bond.” Now the war in Ukraine has forced Doronin to confront anti-Russian sentiment and unwelcome questions about his ties to his homeland. This, along with myriad legal scuffles, is at odds with the beatific image that earned Aman a cult following after its founding by the Indonesian-born hotelier Adrian Zecha in the 1980s, sparking questions about whether Doronin can maintain the brand’s magnetic

allure.

“Where is the magic and the special thing that Vlad’s got that is going to keep people attached to the brand?” says Philippe Brown of the bespoke travel company Brown and Hudson, which books clients to go to Aman properties. “It’s a challenge going forward.”

While Zecha was revered as a tastemaker who drew creatives like Sean Penn to the jewel-like first Aman in Phuket, Thailand, Doronin is seen as a businessman focused on the bottom line. Zecha, a former journalist, was often called a visionary and was beloved for poetic gestures like winding orchids around suitcase handles. By contrast, Doronin flies under the radar when it comes to Aman and the projects he is building in Miami with his development company, OKO Group.

“Many developers, when they come here, make a big deal of how successful they are,” says Peter Zalewski of the Miami real-estate consultancy Condo Vultures. But Doronin rarely appears at industry events.

“This guy,” he says, “is like a ghost.”



Left: Julian Schnabel's "Ways to Strength and Beauty" (from "Ornamental Despair") (1980) and furniture designed by Schnabel. Right: Bongos from Doronin's travels.

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A SLEEK GRAY yacht is docked at Doronin's waterfront home on exclusive Star Island in Miami Beach. He also has homes in London, Ibiza and Manhattan, though he says these days, he lives primarily "on a plane." One of the only private homes Hadid ever designed—a spaceship-like house outside Moscow—was for him.

In the double-height living room of his Miami Beach estate—which he bought from basketball star Shaquille O'Neal for \$16 million in 2009—Doronin sits with his back to an Andy Warhol silkscreen of Mao Zedong. Displayed nearby are works by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Julian Schnabel, a friend.

Growing up in St. Petersburg, or Leningrad, as it was called then, he developed an appreciation of art through weekend trips to museums with his parents. "St. Petersburg—very cultural city," he says in heavily accented English. His description of life under Communism is somewhat rosy, suggesting a nostalgia for the homeland he hasn't visited in years: "It was a good life. They give you education, everybody was friendly."

He recalls home-cooked meals, doors left unlocked and lots of sports—during our interview, one of the only times I glimpse his smile is over a game of foosball. He beats me quickly and efficiently, explaining that he often plays with the two young daughters he shares with Romanova. He also has an older daughter from his first marriage to Ekaterina Doronin.

As he grew older, Doronin says he chafed at the U.S.S.R.'s restrictions and left the country in his 20s, losing his citizenship in the process; he now has a Swedish passport. He ended up in Switzerland working for the American commodities trader Marc Rich, who was living abroad after being charged with tax evasion and racketeering by U.S. officials. In 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Doronin started doing business in Moscow, launching a real-estate company, Capital Group, with partners in

While some Russian businessmen struggled to adapt to changing times, Doronin positioned himself as an executive who already understood modern capitalism, explains Darrell Stanaford, who led an American real-estate brokerage firm in Moscow in the 1990s. “He told a very good story,” Stanaford recalls. “He was trying to show that he was a very modern, cool guy, who knew everything and was one step ahead.”

Meanwhile, the polished Doronin joined Moscow’s *tusovka*, or social scene. In 2012 his then-girlfriend, British supermodel Campbell, threw him a lavish 50th birthday party in India. More than 200 guests, including Demi Moore and Kate Moss, were flown in for the festivities, which included a performance by Diana Ross.



Left: Damien Hirst’s “Passion” (2008). Right: A hookah collection.

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Russia soon became too small a pond. “He wanted to make his mark in the world,” says Alison Stone, a former regional spa director for Aman who worked closely with Doronin. “He wanted to conquer the world, and Russia didn’t have enough to hold him.”

Doronin first became familiar with Aman about 35 years ago while working in Asia, when he stayed at Amanpuri in Phuket. (Today, rooms there start at about \$1,000 a night.) He became hooked on the brand, which was developing a following among jet-setters and celebrities such as Princess Diana and David Bowie, who paid handsomely for its white-glove service and spectacular, off-the-beaten-path locations: a private island in the Philippines; 15th-century stone cottages in Montenegro.

In contrast to the Four Seasons or Ritz-Carlton, Aman was “an iconoclastic, more creative little brother,” recalls Melissa Biggs Bradley, founder of travel-planning company Indagare. “It had a

“When I bought the company, the company was losing money.” Moreover, there were virtually no Aman locations in urban settings, which he views as crucial to becoming a global brand.

After beating out other would-be buyers including Carlyle Group and LVMH, he purchased Aman with partner Omar Amanat in 2014. But Doronin and Amanat quickly became embroiled in a yearslong legal battle for control of the company. Zecha, meanwhile, claimed that he was intimidated into stepping down as CEO and prevented from entering his own office; Doronin has said Zecha resigned voluntarily.

Doronin consolidated control of the company in 2016, but was later sued by Nader Tavakoli, an adviser on the Aman acquisition, who claimed that Doronin tried to cut him out of the company and threatened bodily harm. The suit was eventually settled with no admission of wrongdoing.

“When Vlad wants something, he gets it,” says architect Jean-Michel Gathy, who has worked on a number of Aman projects and considers Doronin a friend. Doronin is “very opinionated as to what he wants,” Gathy says. “Some people find it difficult to take.”

WHEN ASKED about his decadeslong study of the martial art qigong, Doronin excitedly shows me the Maasai warriors’ spears on display inside a glass-topped coffee table. He points out a spear he broke into three pieces, after months of training with monks, by smashing it against his throat. When I point out how painful that sounds, he laughs proudly. “Yeah, but this is energy,” he says. “I believe in energy.”

“It’s a little dangerous,” he continues. “But you know, sometimes you take a risk. I take a lot of risks in business.”

Doronin has aggressively expanded Aman, opening urban hotels and residences in Tokyo and Manhattan with others in the works for Miami Beach, Beverly Hills, Mexico City and Bangkok. He also launched the (slightly) more affordable Janu brand under the Aman umbrella, which has a newly opened location in Tokyo and plans for 12 others.

“People tell me, ‘Oh, you’re expanding too fast,’ ” Doronin says. “But I actually understand what I bought.” He says he is “very picky” when it comes to Aman locations, design and partners.

He has also focused on increasing revenue and improving occupancy rates, firing a number of longtime general managers he felt weren’t performing, says Stone, who worked for Aman in Thailand. She found Doronin inspiring and effective, but “one of the hardest owners to please,” she says, recalling meetings where GMs shook with fear as Doronin quizzed them about their revenues. And if you were late? “If you were late—oh, my gosh, if you were late, he did not hold back.”

“I’m fair person, but I demand results,” Doronin says of his management style. The company has a valuation of about \$3 billion, he says—far more than the \$358 million he paid for it—and owns \$1.5

In Miami, meanwhile, Doronin's OKO boldly launched three new projects at the same time: condo towers Missoni Baia and Una Residences and the office building 830 Brickell. The Miami market can be punishing for new developers, Zalewski says. "To put up two condo towers simultaneously and an office tower in Miami—that's a lot of bravado, a lot of machismo."

The projects sold well in the hot Miami market that followed the onset of Covid, but delivering them has been more difficult. At Missoni in still-gritty Edgewater, construction is complete but the building has one of the highest percentages of resales in the Miami area, Zalewski says. Construction is delayed at Una, 830 Brickell and Aman Miami Beach.

Doronin attributes the delays to the pandemic and the buildings' complexity. "Unfortunately, I not build any of my buildings in Miami simple," he says. "I build them very architectural."



In addition to his Miami Beach mansion, Vlad Doronin also has homes in Ibiza, London, Manhattan and outside Moscow.

ON THE WALLS of the house hang Russian movie posters from the 1920s and '30s. Doronin says the actor Leonardo DiCaprio encouraged him to buy them, urging him to embrace his history.

"I still think the country is great," Doronin says of Russia. "They just need to be moving forward."

But these days he really hates being called Russian. And don't get him started on "oligarch."

Since Vladimir Putin's government invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Doronin has distanced himself from the land of his birth. He is no longer considering an Aman in Russia, and he hasn't traveled to the country for five years. While his family still owns the house Hadid designed, in early 2022 he published a statement that ensured he won't be able to return anytime soon: "I denounce the aggression of Russia on Ukraine and fervently wish for peace.... I have not conducted business in Russia in many years."

Still, frequent mentions of his origins appear in the press. In February 2022, anti-war protesters gathered in front of Aman New York. That same year, Aman's jet was grounded when the U.S.

relatives of Russian oligarch Suleiman Kerimov. Emperor Aviation couldn't be reached for comment. The sanctions were lifted in January, and the jet is now able to fly.



Vlad Doronin's 1965 Jaguar E-Type.

Finally, Charles McGonigal, a former FBI agent Aman had hired in 2022 as head of security, pleaded guilty last year to felonies in two separate cases, including violating U.S. sanctions by accepting secret payments from Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska, for which he was sentenced to prison. Doronin says McGonigal had come recommended by Brookfield Properties, which owns the retail portion of the Crown Building, where Aman New York is located. "We did our due diligence," he says, adding that McGonigal was let go in February 2023. A spokesperson for Brookfield Properties says the firm didn't recommend McGonigal.

In 2022, OKO Group's roughly \$76 million purchase of land in Aspen, Colorado, to develop into an Aman caused a public outcry. "The city should consider the damage to the reputation of the Aspen brand by allowing Vladislav Doronin, a billionaire who made his seed money under the corrupt regime of Russia's war-criminal president, Vladimir Putin, to swoop in and buy the project," wrote Basalt resident Bernard Grauer in a letter to the editor published by the *Aspen Times*.

A furious Doronin sued the paper for defamation, denying that his wealth stemmed from corrupt and criminal conduct; instead, he claimed, it was earned legitimately beginning years before Putin came to power. The suit accused the paper of "making misplaced Russophobic attacks against Mr. Doronin and falsely linking him to the regime of Vladimir Putin and the 'oligarchs.' "

When asked about the Aspen lawsuit, which has since been settled, Doronin loses some of his composure. “I just want to correct the facts,” he says. “And I don’t like somebody lying and calling me names. I have my name, given by my mother, and I don’t want somebody give me extra name, oligarch or whatever. And if they giving, they going to pay for it.”

He has since faced criticism for transferring a one-third ownership stake in Capital Group to his mother in Russia in April 2022, a day after he filed suit against the *Aspen Times*, despite his previous public statement that he had not conducted business in Russia in “many years.” He says the stake was a passive interest in the company, and that he transferred it to her because of changes in Russian law that prohibit foreigners from owning certain assets in the country.



One of only a few Soviet-born leaders of major Western companies, Vlad Doronin has benefited from his dashing, International-Man-of-Mystery persona.

Today, he’s frustrated by what he views as discrimination toward Russians in the current climate, especially since individuals are powerless against Putin’s regime. Having lived more than half his life outside the country, he says, he feels more at home in Europe and America than in the former Soviet Union. “I really am international guy,” he says. “Why I have to be called Russian, or Russian born?”

At this point, his publicist is quick to point out that he publicly disavowed the war in Ukraine. “I’m

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After all, Aman, he says, is a “peaceful brand.”



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