



Former Man U stars Ryan Giggs (in white) and Gary Neville at a press briefing yesterday outlining their business plans for Singapore. ST PHOTO: NIVASH JOYVIN

Singapore kick-off for Rowsley's Cafe Football

Firm's venture with Giggs and Neville to include Hotel Football

Wong Wei Han

The legion of Manchester United fans in Singapore may soon be able to visit a football-themed cafe here with the imprimatur of two club legends – Gary Neville and Ryan Giggs.

The cafe is set to be the first project in Asia arising from the business ventures between property firm Rowsley and the two former footballers.

A new Cafe Football – part of the football-themed hospitality franchises Rowsley acquired from the pair last year – is being planned for launch here next year, marking the chain's first foray outside Britain.

Also, talks are on to expand Hotel Football to Europe and Asia, after

the success of the flagship hotel – a stone's throw from United's home ground Old Trafford.

Mr Neville and Mr Giggs were in Singapore yesterday to outline the business plans at a media briefing.

Hotel Football and Cafe Football were originally joint ventures between local tycoon Peter Lim and the famous alumni of Man U's "Class of 92". Last year, Rowsley – also controlled by Mr Lim – acquired the businesses, but Mr Neville and Mr Giggs remain as minority shareholders and spokesmen.

"Hotel Football has over 80 per cent occupancy even during non-match days, outperforming our competitors across Manchester," Mr Neville said.

"We feel now is the right time to expand. We have an aggressive roll-out plan for Hotel Football, looking to (launch) over 5,000 rooms over the next five to 10 years. We already have discussions in India, China,

Thailand, and Malaysia, as well as other parts of the UK."

Other aspect of the businesses, the St Michael's and Northern Stock Exchange projects in Manchester City centre, are being geared up for development. These are also partnerships between Rowsley, Mr Neville and Mr Giggs.

St Michael's will be a mixed-use development with hotel, office, residential and retail units. Planning permission will be obtained within weeks, Mr Neville said, adding that the Northern Stock Exchange will be converted from a heritage building into a boutique hotel.

Mr Neville is not worried about the outlook for the projects, even as Brexit disrupts sterling's value and prompts some firms to leave Britain. "It's just a moment that we are going to have to live through... not something we can ill afford. It's like losing a football match – there's still the next one to play."

For Rowsley, the British investments have helped push revenue for the six months ended June 30 up 25 per cent to \$42.8 million. But the British footprint also brought higher expenses and currency loss, with Rowsley suffering a net loss of \$528,000 for the period.

Despite the loss, posted in July, Rowsley has stayed in expansionary mode, announcing last month the acquisition of hotel management firm Ariva.

And the seemingly on-hold Vantage Bay Healthcare City project is "very much alive", executive director Ho Kiam Kheong said, adding that Rowsley is finalising project details with its partner Thomson Iskandar.

Rowsley shares pared 2.4 per cent to 12.2 cents yesterday. It will announce its third-quarter results next week.

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