JETWING
IN THE THIRD GENERATION
ONE OF HOSPITALITY’S ICONS PREPARES TO STEP ASIDE

TOURISM IN JAFFNA
AN IN-DEPTH LOOK

NO ‘GREEN WASHING’ NECESSARY
SUSTAINABILITY DOESN’T HAVE TO BE A Cliché

TRENDS 2019
THE NEW SUPER FOOD,
SPACE RE-UTILISATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS
Welcome to Hospitality Insider’s List for 2019 of the seven key trends you shouldn’t miss.

32 NO ‘GREEN WASHING’ NECESSARY
With real, long-term economic benefits, sustainability doesn’t have to be a cliché. It simply makes good business sense.

70 2018, A YEAR IN REVIEW
The Asia-Pacific region continues to be the number one regional source of tourist traffic to Sri Lanka

81 FROM FIELD TO FINE DINING: HARVEST TABLE AT ANANTARA PEACE HAVEN
Experiencing authentic Sri Lankan life is high on the list of most visitors to this beautiful island, especially when it means sampling the country’s delicious cuisine.
RARE REDEFINED—CRACKING 800 TO MAKE THE FINEST OMELETTE IN TOWN
How does a restaurant increase its covers by 2,500 percent in under six months?

GALLE FACE HOTEL EMBRACES ITS HERITAGE ROOTS
The hotel’s new General Manager, Robert C. Hauck, believes that the hotel’s rich heritage is the answer to set Galle Face Hotel apart from the rest.

“That’s what the high-end traveller and even backpackers want – to explore history”

52 GITANJALI HAALAND
general manager at Ulagalla by Uga Escapes is aiming to make Ulagalla the best boutique hotel in Sri Lanka.

49 BENDING THE RULES AT ANANTARA PEACE HAVEN TANGALLE RESORT
The Resort quickly made a name for itself after opening three years ago.
THE GLASSWARE GUIDE

77

With the expertise of Shiyani Saranapala, we look at selecting styles to suit your establishment, how to store glasses properly and ask, is the champagne glass dead?

61 TOURISM IN JAFFNA AN IN—DEPTH LOOK
On the surface, tourism in Jaffna seems to be on the right track. Hospitality Insider spoke to hoteliers about the unique challenges they still face and their hopes for the future.

58 MARKETING PAYS DIVIDENDS: BUT GETTING IT RIGHT IS A CHALLENGE
Marketing is the engine room of companies that must connect and engage with a steady stream of new customers to stay in business.

83 LEVERAGING INFLUENCER MARKETING
Finding the right Social Media Influencer for your brand in a world where everyone prides themselves on "being an ‘influencer’ can be arduous.
The funny thing about family businesses is, at their core, the thread that holds them together can also be the cause of their unravelling. Dealing with infighting, dividing assets, creating space for the next generation and managing the collective wealth can all be potential quagmires. By the time the third generation readies to take on the mantle of leadership, their life experiences (and expectations) may be worlds apart from those of the founder.

At the same time, the fibres of familiarity, shared interests and healthy sibling rivalry can propel these companies to go on and achieve wonderful things, provided there is careful and considered planning in place. In this issue’s cover story (p.26), we’re talking to Hiran and Shiromal Cooray of Jetwing group about the balance between keeping their father’s vision alive and shaping the group for the future.

Looking to the future also underpins our feature on sustainability (p.32). Among the pressures of day-to-day management, it can be easy to push this down the to-do list, and tempting to make token efforts that effect minimal real change. Hospitality, as a sector, has a dramatic environmental impact, and both collectively and at property level, much can be done to reduce this. The good news is that sustainability doesn’t have to be a cliché anymore. With advances in technology and the hot gaze of guest attention on the issue, it simply makes business sense.

I hope this issue will inspire you to look with fresh eyes at the opportunities in your business for the future and to act boldly on them.

Rachael Cove

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Correction:
In the first issue, we inadvertently switched the descriptions for two of the books in the CEO Library section on p.17. The description for Superintelligence was shown under the title for Good to Great, and vice versa.
UCOL set to offer Sri Lanka’s first Swiss degree in hospitality and tourism

Universal College of Learning (UCOL) is teaming up with the Business and Hotel Management School (BHMS) in Switzerland to offer Sri Lanka’s first Swiss degree in hospitality and tourism.

UCOL, based in Wattala, is a co-educational hotel school registered with the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC) under the purview of the Ministry of Youth and Skills Development. The school has been offering diplomas in hospitality management since its inception four years ago and this will be its first Swiss-affiliated degree programme.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the degree programme was signed between Chief Executive Officer of UCOL Rilwan Razick and Head of Project Development Dr. Charles Hains, at the school’s third annual convocation held at BMICH on 20 February.

In addition, the school also signed an MOU with the ‘Tell Direct’ drug eradication project implemented in the Western Province under DIG Deshabandu Tennekoon to offer vocational training scholarships to rehabilitate youth. The 14-month vocational course will include 8 months of full-time practical training and on-the-job training at leading hotels.

Galle Face Hotel is gearing up for some big changes with the announcement of five new executives taking the helm at the island’s most iconic hotel in several key departments.

**Mubarak Gaffoor**, former Director of Group Sales and Marketing, has been appointed as the hotel’s new Resident Manager. ‘Muba’, as he is fondly known, has been a part of the hotel since 2014 when he joined as director of sales, revenue and ecommerce. With a strong background in sales, Gaffoor was based in the UK and worked at Hilton Worldwide and Corus Hotels before returning to Sri Lanka.

**Narelle McDougall** has been appointed as the new Head of Sales and Marketing for the hotel and Ceylon Hotel Corporation (CHC), and will overlook sales and marketing, revenue and reservations, catering sales, and public relations. McDougall previously worked at several leading brands including Anantara, InterContinental and Le Méridien, bringing a wealth of experience from Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and the Maldives.

Joining in 2016 as the Corporate Executive Chef at Galle Face Hotel to overlook kitchen operations at seven properties, **Chef Saman Jayawardene** moves up the ranks as the new Corporate Chef of Sri Lankan Cuisine for the Ceylon Hotel Group and EKHO Hotels. With 30 years of industry experience across Sri Lanka, India and the Maldives, Jayawardene received his introduction to cooking at the Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism & Hotel Management.

Hoping to take Galle Face Hotel’s culinary offerings to the next level, **Jay Kay Govind** takes over as the new Executive Chef at the hotel. With an elaborate career spanning over 25 years at JW Marriott, IHG, Hyatt, Banyan Tree and Anantara, Govind received his postgraduate diploma in culinary management from the Oberoi School of Hotel Management. He also played an integral part in the opening of several hotels as Executive Chef, including the first Grand Hyatt and Park Hyatt in India.

**Nalaka Dissanayake** comes onboard as Cluster Director of Human Resources, tasked with the responsibility of identifying and developing talent for both the hotel and Ceylon Hotel Group. Dissanayake gained his experience in renowned brands
including Radisson Blu, Millennium and Copthorne, Habtoor, and the Sri Lankan-based Uga Escapes. Dissanayake hopes to introduce training, development and internship programmes across the hotel and group.

Sharing his views on the new appointments, the hotel’s General Manager and Area Vice President, Robert C. Hauck said, “Although from different disciplines, our new team members are leaders in their fields and dedicated to success. I am personally excited to have them onboard and look forward to creating new experiences together in this incredible destination.”

Kishu Gomes appointed as the chairman of SLTPB and SLTDA

Renowned business personality Kishu Gomes took over as the Chairman of both the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotions Bureau (SLTPB) and Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) on February 6.

Gomes resigned as the Managing Director/CEO of Chevron Lubricants Lanka PLC, ending a 22-year career at the multinational company in May 2018. He has served as President of the American Chamber of Commerce and was the Senior Vice-Chairman of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, UK, local branch.

In late 2018, he headed the jury of the sixth annual Sri Lanka Tourism Awards, where he had the opportunity to meet and talk to several hoteliers and industry leaders. Gomes believes that this particular occasion would have played a key role in him being recommended to take up the tourism offices.

Gomes will oversee operations of the SLTPB and SLTDA, which will have its own independent Board of Directors. Industry players also hope that the appointment could also propel the delayed three-year tourism promotional campaign worth Rs3 billion and build on the momentum that Sri Lanka has received worldwide over the past five months.

Tabula Rasa Resort set to open in Habaraduwa in April

Tabula Rasa Resort, a 26-bedroom property designed and owned by Anouk Brouwer and Arnoud Oostenbroek, is set to officially open on 1 April 2019. The resort – the second in their portfolio – is located on a two-acre land surrounded by wilderness minutes away from the Habaraduwa beach and 15 minutes from Galle Fort.

The resort has five categories that can accommodate from two to four people and is complete with an infinity pool, spa, restaurant and bar. The pair hope that the resort will be the ideal setting for intimate weddings and honeymooners, in addition to guests who are looking for the right atmosphere for a tropical holiday.

Their first property, Tabula Rasa Villa is a four-bedroom villa that was restored by the pair in 2017.

Wattura Resort and Spa, a wellness luxury hotel, opens in Waikkal

Positioning itself as Sri Lanka’s first wellness and family-oriented luxury boutique hotel, Wattura Resort and Spa opened its doors to the public in December 2018. Named after the Sinhala word for water, Wattura is located between Waikkal beach and the Gin Oya Estuary, 45 minutes from the Bandaranaike International Airport. Offering accommodation in 27 villas and suites, Wattura places emphasis on providing bespoke experiences – with personal butlers and a variety of wellness treatments.

With an investment of Rs1 billion, Wattura is the first of three hotels to be launched under the luxury arm of Casa De Hotels and Resorts, a Dubai-based company. The other two projects will be in Cochin, India, and Palawan Island, Philippines. Wattura hopes to attract millennials and families from India, the US, and European countries.

NEW OPENINGS
Cinnamon Hotel and Resorts’ lean luxury brand – Cinnamon Red broke ground in Kandy on 27 January. The 210-bedroom hotel, Cinnamon Red Kandy is a joint venture between the leading hotel brand and investors Indra Traders. It will be developed at an investment of Rs6.5 billion. Introduced to the island in 2014, Cinnamon Red is a sought-after brand among business travellers and visitors who are looking for affordable accommodation with the right combination of necessities and luxury.

Indra Traders’ 60% investment on the joint venture includes the 130-perch land on the Katugastota Road in Kandy. Cinnamon Hotels and Resorts have also entered into a long-term agreement with Indra Traders as the hotel management partner. Set to be completed in two years, Cinnamon Red Kandy will be the first and only LEED Gold-certified hotel in Kandy. The certificate in Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design is an independent, non-profit, third-party rating system provided by the U.S Green Building Council (USGBC) that encourages hotels to develop environment-friendly practices.

Commenting on the new initiative, Chairman of John Keells Holdings, the parent company of Cinnamon Hotel and Resorts, Krishan Balendra, said that, with the hotel’s strategic location in proximity to the Kandy-Colombo highway, they are in a good position to cater to the demands of the new age traveller and millennials.

Colombo Court Hotel and Spa was awarded the 2018 Golden Circle Award by renowned online travel agent Agoda in February. The OTA annually recognises leading hotels that showcase excellent customer service and high-scoring customer reviews from the 22 million reviews on Agoda, and awards them Gold Circle Honours.

Celebrating its 10th year in operation, Agoda honoured 35 Sri Lankan hotels in 2019, and Colombo Court Hotel topped its list of winners for Colombo. Speaking about the award, the hotel’s General Manager Wojciech Raus said, “We take guest relations and customer service very seriously and ensure all travellers who arrive here are well taken care of. We focus on providing them with an outstanding experience along with great value for money.”

Phase Two of The One Transworks Square project, the JW Marriott Hotel & Residences, was launched on 22 February. The lower levels of the tower (L14-26) will hold the hotel, with 256 hotel rooms, while the upper levels (L27-70) will house 206 luxury residences.

JW Marriott, part of Marriott International, has over 80 properties across 30 countries. Their brand positioning is approachable luxury and simple elegance. The interior design of the tower takes inspiration from Sri Lankan design elements, including the colour sapphire and reflects JW Marriott’s brand values: Authentic, Crafted, and Intuitive.

Speaking at the press conference launching the tower, Chief Marketing Officer of The One Transworks Square Jaideep Wahi stated that investor appetite remained strong, with a mixture of local and foreigner buyers expressing interest.

The first tower, launched in 2018, is the Ritz-Carlton Tower, which will hold the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and the Ritz-Carlton Residences, managed by Marriott International. Marriott International’s first property in Sri Lanka was the Weligama Bay Marriott Resort & Spa.
**SRI LANKA SET TO TAKE PART IN EXPO 2020**

Sri Lanka is preparing to make its debut at the upcoming Expo 2020 in Dubai. The expo is the world’s largest exhibition that offers a platform for 190 countries to showcase their culture and innovation for a span of six months. The main site of Expo 2020 Dubai will be a 438-hectare area located midway between Dubai and Abu Dhabi. This universal platform will provide Sri Lanka with the opportunity to promote the island as a tourism destination, facilitate international trade and attract future investors to the country. The Sri Lankan pavilion will be named ‘Island of Ingenuity’ and will offer a range of services from merchandise trading to ICT services and tourism attractions. Sri Lanka also hopes to take this opportunity to showcase the country’s latest research and development in ingenious products and services, providing insights into the local heritage.

The expo is scheduled to start on 20 October 2020 and end on 10 April 2021. The event hopes to draw over 200 participants and 25 million visitors, out of which 30 percent are expected to be UAE nationals and 70 percent international visitors. This is the first time the World Expo will be held in the Middle East, North African, and South Asian region, and takes place once every five years. The previous Expo 2015 was held in Milan and Expo 2025 will be held in Osaka.

**APPOINTMENTS**

**Taj appoints Pankaj Sampat as Area Director for Sri Lanka, Maldives and Malaysia**

Taj Samudra bid farewell to Sarabjeet Singh, Area Director Sri Lanka, Maldives, and General Manager, and welcomed Pankaj Sampat on 8 February as the Area Director for Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Malaysia as well as the Head of Taj Asia Ltd (TAL) and Taj Safaris Ltd.

Prior to this appointment, Sampat served as the General Manager at Taj Santacru in, Mumbai. After joining The Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL) in 1993 at The Taj Mahal Palace, he has held multiple roles in food and beverage at several hotels including Taj Lands End, Taj Mahal Tower, and Vivanta by Taj.

IHCL and its subsidiaries has several brands under their portfolio including Taj – the company’s hallmark brand, Vivanta – its luxury arm of sophisticated hotels and Ginger – promoting lean luxury.

**Hayleys Group sells major share of Hunas Falls**

Hayleys Group sold its controlling 66.2 per cent share of Hunas Falls Hotels PLC for Rs. 696.3 million to Serenity Lake Leisure Ltd in January. The stakes were held by Carbotels Ltd., (50.22%) and Amaya Leisure PLC (15.98%).

Serenity Lake Leisure is linked to TAD Holdings Ltd., a company founded by Toshiaki Tanka, Atheeq Ansar, and Dhanuka Samarasinghe in 2016, which operates as the local partner for several ventures with Japanese investments.

The sale of 3.72388 million shares was completed at Rs. 187 per share.

In 2017, Hunas Falls was awarded the ‘Most Romantic Hotel in Sri Lanka’ at the South Asian Travel Awards.

**Gal Oya National Park named one of the 16 best places to visit this spring**

Gal Oya National Park in Sri Lanka’s eastern province has been chosen as one the ‘16 Most beautiful places to visit this spring’ on a Forbes article published in February. Some of the other contenders include Indonesia, Geneva, Istanbul, Zion National Park and Lisbon. Gal Oya National Park is the only destination representing South Asia and was nominated to the list by the Co-Founder and Brand Director of Regenerative Resorts Amanda Ho.

The national park is one of the few places in the island where visitors can observe wild elephants swimming in Sri Lanka’s largest man-made reservoir. The park also borders one of the last Vedda (Sri Lanka’s indigenous) communities in the country.
Helitours resumes flight to Palaly and Trincomalee

Helitours, the commercial air arm of the Sri Lanka Air Force, has resumed its scheduled flight to Jaffna and Trincomalee from 14 January 2019. The domestic flight operators suspended passenger flights in August 2018 after the aviation regulation recalled the certificate of airworthiness (CofA) issued to its Xian MA60 aircraft, pending technical compliance.

The scheduled flights will now operate three times a week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday from the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) flying via Trincomalee to Palaly Airport. Helitours will be using the MA60 – a military flight cleared for civilian transport that can accommodate up to 52 passengers at a time. Although a different terminal at BIA will be used for the domestic flight, Helitours advises passengers to arrive at the airport 1.5hrs early to minimise any inconvenience. As there are ongoing refurbishments at the Palaly Airport, there might be delays in take-off times on certain days.

The Argyle, a boutique hotel, opens in Hatton

The Argyle – Hatton’s first luxury boutique hotel – offering 38 rooms opened in January. Settled on three acres in the Kuda Oya tea estate, it was previously known as Argyle and covered 500 acres of cultivation in the twentieth century. The hotel pays tribute to the Scottish heritage of the estate and the rooms are named after significant figures of Scotland. The Argyle has a restaurant, bar, heated outdoor pool, gymnasium, spa and sauna.

The hotel targets discerning travellers from European countries, Australia and the Middle East.

Sri Lanka to grant free visas to tourists for six months from April

The Sri Lankan government has decided to grant free visas for tourists starting from 1 April 2019 for six months to encourage more visitors to the island during months of low arrival numbers.

Free visas will be extended to key markets including the United Kingdom, Europe Union countries, Australia, Canada, United States of America, Singapore, Malaysia, New Zealand and Asian Buddhist countries like Thailand.

The cabinet approval for this decision was granted after a proposal was made by John Amaratunga, Minister of Tourism Development, Wildlife, and Christian Religious Affairs. The proposal was initiated in order to promote the country among travellers for the upcoming Buddhist lunar festivals of Vesak and Poson.
Hotel school deal to ease staffing crisis
The Rotary Club and Korean NGO help low-income youngsters enter the hospitality industry

Sri Lanka is facing a growing shortage of suitably skilled hotel and hospitality staff. This is particularly the case in Negombo, the west-coast ‘gateway to Sri Lanka’, with more hotels and restaurants for its size than anywhere else in the island. But a recent agreement between the Rotary Club of Negombo, backed by Negombo Hoteliers Association (NHA), and an established local hotel and hospitality training school is poised to help ease the situation.

The agreement is primarily intended to help Sri Lanka’s low-income and underprivileged young demographic find careers in the hotel and hospitality industries that might otherwise not be available to them.

The school—the Korea Lanka School of Hospitality and Hotel Management (KLS) in Wattala, north of the capital Colombo—is run by Good Partners, an international NGO based in South Korea. Its six-month courses cover professional cookery, food and beverage, hotel housekeeping and front office by combining three months of classroom-based theory with three months of industrial training.

In a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with KLS, the Negombo Rotary Club will enlist the help of Sri Lanka’s 69 Rotary Clubs and 80 Rotaract Clubs to find 40 suitable applicants per course on an ongoing basis.

Outside the terms of the MOU, the Negombo Rotary Club will also help students find paid internships at hotels locally and throughout Sri Lanka when they graduate.

According to the MOU, the school “shall provide admission primarily for those candidates having financial difficulties and from relatively poor homes who could not otherwise have access to education in this field”.

It will also provide “free education, free practical uniforms, free meals while on academic sessions, and free hostel facilities and meals for male students coming from far distances”.

Freddie Croos is the president of the Rotary Club of Negombo, past president of the NHA and managing director of Paradise Beach Hotel in Negombo. After signing the MOU, he said that the mission of the school—“to promote economic empowerment for marginalized youth in Sri Lanka”—closely mirrors the aims of all Rotary clubs in Sri Lanka.

He is already negotiating to find internships for 80 graduates from the two previous courses, at least 20 of which will be in Negombo hotels and the rest at properties throughout the island.

He said: “This is an ideal opportunity for Rotary Clubs in Sri Lanka to fulfil their mission to support local communities while also helping ease the shortage of skilled staff at all levels in the hotel and hospitality industries.”

Meanwhile, Good Partners notes that its links with the Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management (SLITHM) provides professional training for Sri Lanka youth, while partnering with “major hotels in Sri Lanka to create employment opportunities”.

It says: “The school is grounded on the fundamental evidence that if young people have sufficient incomes and resources to sustain productive lives, they can generate an economic opportunity and contribute to the wider good and care for others.”

By Nick Hart

Sri Lankan hotels nominated in Travel + Leisure’s World’s Best Awards 2019
The following hotels in Sri Lanka have been nominated for Travel + Leisure’s annual World’s Best awards. The winners will be announced in August. Congratulations to all the nominees!

- **Amangalla**, Galle
- **Anantara Kalutara Resort**, Kalutara
- **Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort**, Tangalle
- **Avani Bentota Resort & Spa**, Bentota
- **Bar Reef Resort**, Kalapitiya
- **Fort Bazaar**, Galle
- **Galle Face Hotel**, Colombo
- **Maya**, Tangalle
- **Paradise Road The Villa Bentota**, Bentota
- **Shangri-La Hambatota Resort & Spa**, Ambalantota
- **The Fortress Resort & Spa**, Galle
- **Thotalagala**, Haputale
- **Taj Samudra**, Colombo
- **Ulagalla**, Anuradhapura

Did you know?
Fox Jaffna by Fox Resorts has two bunkers inside the main house, of which one is an art gallery
ARRIVALS

Year-to-date tourist arrivals up 4.6% overall; Chinese arrivals down 22% in Feb

The year 2019 is off to a positive start with tourist arrival numbers up 4.6 percent from the same period in 2018, data from SLTDA shows. In January 2019, 244,239 tourists arrived, up 2.2% year on year. In February, arrivals increased 7% to 252,033.

In February, India remained the largest source market, but numbers were marginally down by 1.9 percent on figures from February 2018. Tourists from China, usually the second-largest market, plunged by a huge 22 percent YoY to 28,039, at a time when many Chinese often take advantage of Chinese New Year holidays to travel. The UK was the second largest source market, with arrivals increasing 8.8 percent to 29,750.

Several source markets saw dramatic increases in February. Visitors from Australia were up 55 percent to 8,810, the United States was up 62 percent to 9,678 and Canada also up 62 percent to 6,469.

Regionally, Europe continues to dominate, with 54% of arrivals. The European winter makes January & February an attractive time to visit tropical climates. In 2018, tourist arrivals were up 10.3 percent YoY to 2.3 million. Arrivals in the first two months of 2019 have reached almost half a million, an increase of 4.6 percent from a year earlier, suggesting steady, but consistent growth.

"In January 2019, 244,239 tourists arrived, up 2.2% year on year. In February, arrivals increased 7% to 252,033"
- SLTDA data

Tourist arrivals by region

Africa - 0.5%
Middle East - 1.5%
The Americas - 7%
Europe - 54%
Asia & Pacific - 37%

Top ten source markets

13% India
12% United Kingdom
11% China
7% Germany
7% France
5% Russian Federation
4% USA
3% Australia
3% Canada
2% Italy
GM Library

This issue’s first two books are recommended by Kaleel Muzammil, GM of Residence by Uga Escapes

THE MONK WHO SOLD HIS FERRARI
[Robin Sharma]

What does success mean in the modern world? This is one of key questions any manager should ask themselves, and in this delightful book, Sharma explores key principles on personal development and life. Through the life of fictional character Julian Mantle, a prosperous lawyer who leaves his robes in search of the meaning of life, the author questions the concept of success in the modern world. From the importance of practising simplicity in daily life, whether it’s a marketing campaign or the use of effective communication, the book is bound to teach a thing or two.

LOSES MY VIRGINITY
[Richard Branson]

An enlightening read for any aspiring entrepreneur or business owner, Sir Richard Branson’s autobiography details his life’s journey as one of the most notable and adventurous businessmen in the world. From creating record labels and magazines, to a hotel brand, Branson’s thirst to experiment with new things has made him as one of the most admired risk-takers in the world. Among the many lessons that he has penned down in the book, one that has been proven to be true in his elaborate career is his focus and dedication to one project’s success before moving to the next.

AN EDIBLE HISTORY OF HUMANITY
[Tom Standage]

Perfect for anyone who loves to cook, or has an insatiable curiosity steak, Tom Standage’s book ‘An Edible History of Humanity’ recollects the integral role food has played throughout history. The author draws on archaeology, anthropology and economics to understand how food has birthed and shaped societies and empires for centuries. From the foundations of civilisation and the industrial revolution, to being used as a weapon to destabilise countries in the modern world, after reading this informative history of food, you’ll never look at a dish the same way again.

SEND US YOUR NEWS

Whether you work in a small independent hotel in the hills or a large hotel in the city, we want to showcase what your team has been up to. Every hotel has a story to share. Send us an email to hello@hospitalityinsider.lk and let us know!
Thailand extends visa-on-arrival fee waiver

Citizens of 20 countries will continue to enjoy a waiver on the visa-on-arrival fee until 30 April 2019, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) announced. The stimulus measure will help to attract foreign tourists during the kingdom’s peak travel season. The extension period covers notable events including Chinese New Year in February and the hugely popular Thai New Year (Songkran) in April.

Included in the waiver is Thailand’s number one source market, China. In 2018, visitor numbers from China surpassed the milestone of 10 million tourists, generating an estimated 509 billion Baht in revenue ($16 billion). Chinese tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka in 2018 reached 266,000.

The visa-on-arrival waiver means foreign visitors from the selected countries will not be required to pay the 2,000 Baht ($63) visa-on-arrival fee to tour Thailand for up to 15 days.

Global tourism arrivals hit 1.4 billion

Across the globe, international tourism arrival figures grew 6% to reach 1.4 billion in 2018, according to preliminary figures released by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

While growth slowed slightly from the 7% achieved in 2017, 6% still exceeds the predicted 4-5% rate for 2018. The Middle East and Africa performed strongly, with growth above the world average at 10% and 7%, respectively. Asia and the Pacific and Europe grew on a par with the world average, while the Americas reached only 3%.

In 2010, UNWTO published a long-term forecast predicting 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals by 2020. Stronger economic growth, advancements in technology, improved visa facilitation and more affordable air travel all factored into the forecast numbers being reached two years early, the UNWTO said in a statement.

For 2019, the UNWTO forecasts growth of 3-4%, more in line with historical trends. Key factors are continued connectivity and affordable air travel, as well as increasing outbound travel from emerging markets like India and Russia. On the other hand, the global economic slowdown, uncertainty related to Brexit, and geopolitical and trade tensions may drive a ‘wait and see’ attitude, the organization said.

UNWTO predicts that international tourist arrivals will reach 1.8 billion by 2030.

Booking.com, number one hotel booking channel for Asia

SiteMinder, a hotel industry guest acquisition platform, has unveiled its annual list of channels that brought the highest total booking revenue to hotels in Asia and other global destinations in 2018.

Booking.com and Expedia took the top two spots in nearly every market. However, the global lists are also peppered with diverse offerings and third-party channels. Euromonitor International reports that global online hotel sales have experienced 170% growth over the last decade, to reach over $264 billion.

SiteMinder’s platform processed over 87 million online bookings in 2018 – a rate of 166 per minute. The bookings totalled $28.7 billion in revenue for its 30,000 hotel customers globally.

Asia’s Top Five booking channels:
1. Booking.com
2. Agoda
3. Expedia
4. Hotelbeds (incl. GTA + Tourico)
5. Hotel websites (direct bookings)
UK Government takes action over misleading hotel booking sites

The UK’s Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has censured hotel booking sites following an investigation. Misleading discount claims and high-pressure tactics such as showing sold out hotels in search results were causes for concern.

Expedia, Booking.com, Agoda, Hotels.com, Ebookers and Trivago are among the sites hit by the action. Booking.com and Agoda are owned by Booking Holdings, while Expedia, Hotels.com and Trivago are owned by Expedia Group.

The affected sites have now voluntarily agreed to refrain from pressure selling, such as giving a false impression of a hotel’s popularity to rush customers into making a booking. Additionally, they will:

- Make it clear how hotels are ranked and if the ranking is affected by the amount of commission a hotel pays to the site.
- Be clear about discounts only to promote deals that are available at that time. For example, not comparing a higher weekend room rate with a lower week day rate.
- Show compulsory charges such as taxes, resort fees and booking fees in the headline price, not as hidden add-ons.

The CMA expects all companies in the sector to follow these rules and changes must be implemented by September 1. The firms mentioned above have already made formal commitments to abide.

While this ruling only applies to the UK, it will be interesting to see if other countries consider similar action.

Cambodia leads in Global Traveller’s Choice Awards

A hotel in Cambodia ranks highest in Asia in TripAdvisor’s annual Traveller’s Choice award for Top Hotels in the World. The number one spot went to Tulemar Bungalows & Villas in Costa Rica. Viroth’s Hotel, Cambodia was last year’s winner, but ranked at number 3 for 2019. The Golden Temple Retreat was deemed to be outstanding in Cambodia, listed at number 11. Also in the Asia region, Kenting Amanda Hotel, Taiwan, ranked number four and Hanoi La Siesta Hotel & Spa in Vietnam was recognised at number 10.

Traveller’s Choice Awards, Top Hotels:
1. Tulemar Bungalows & Villas, Costa Rica
2. Hotel Belvedere, Italy
3. Viroth’s Hotel, Cambodia
4. Kenting Amanda Hotel, Pingtung
5. Hotel Alpin Spa Tuxerhof, Austria
6. French Quarter Inn, South Carolina
7. The Resort at Pedregal, Mexico
8. Belmond Palacio Nazarenas, Peru
9. Kayakapi Premium Caves – Cappadocia, Turkey
10. Hanoi La Siesta Hotel & Spa, Vietnam

Visitor numbers from 2018 reached a record 31.2 million, according to preliminary data from the Japan National Tourism Organization. This is an 8.7% increase over 2017, which saw 28.7 million visitors.

Growth in visitor arrivals over the last four years has been impressive. The year 2014 saw 13.4 million visitors, which more than doubled by 2017. Over the four-year period (2014-2018), visitor arrivals increased by a significant 132%. The top 5 source markets for Japan are China (8.4 million), South Korea (7.5 million), Taiwan (4.8 million), Hong Kong (2.2 million) and the US (1.5 million).
NEW OPENINGS

LUX Opens Second Resort in the Maldives, aims to disrupt

LUX North Male Atoll opened on 1 February 2019, aiming to disrupt the Maldivian hospitality market with ‘oversized penthouse residences’. Designed by Singaporean design house Miaja, the property is inspired by the curves, lines and finish of a luxury boat and its sails. Located on Olhahali, a six-hectare island, the 67 double-storey residences each feature a private pool and living areas of at least 350 sqm.

“We are so excited to open a truly different resort that dares to get away from what we call the ‘sea of sameness’ with a thoroughly original approach to a luxury Maldivian holiday,” Dominik Ruhl, Chief Operating Officer of The Lux Collective, said in a statement. This is the group’s second Maldives property, following Lux South Ari Atoll, which was awarded the Green Globe certification for sustainability in September 2018. The LUX Resorts & Hotels website lists properties in France, the UAE, Vietnam, China, and Italy opening by 2021. For fiscal year 2017-2018, the group recorded operating profits of MUR 660mn ($19 million), an increase of 2% over the previous year and 7% growth in EBITDA compared to the previous year to reach MUR 1.2 billion ($34 million).  

SUSTAINABILITY

CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT SEAGRASS LAUNCHES IN THE MALDIVES

Studies have found that one of the world’s most valuable ecosystems is being actively removed by resorts in the Maldives. Sea grass is vital to the health of the oceans, yet in a survey by Maldives Underwater Initiative (MUI), 50 percent of 49 resorts admitted to actively removing seagrass for aesthetic reasons, “and those are just the ones admitting to it” said Natasha Prokop, head marine biologist at MUI. Two years ago, Six Senses Laamu pledged to protect seagrass and General Manager Marteyne van Well has already seen the benefits of the initiative. “Whether it’s watching green sea turtles feed meters from their villas or snorkelling alongside eagle rays... feedback from guests show that seagrass and tourism can coexist – with overwhelming benefits to all parties.”

The social media campaign, #ProtectMaldivesSeagrass, was launched on 1 March by the Blue Marine Foundation and MUI. It aims to bring together resorts, scientists, content creators and international organisations in a partnership to advocate for protection of this important ecosystem. Resorts are asked to pledge to protect a minimum of 80% of the

INVESTMENT

IHG acquires Six Senses, luxury wellness brand

InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) adds to its luxury hotel brands with the acquisition of asset-light business Six Senses from Pegasus Capital Advisors. The luxury wellness brand has properties in 12 countries including resorts in the Seychelles and Maldives, a city escape in Singapore, and a 19th century wine estate in Portugal. In a statement, the company said the $300 million cash acquisition includes all of Six Senses’ brands and operating companies. It does not include any real estate assets. Within the next 10 years, IHG expects Six Senses’ growth to accelerate to 60+ properties, including what will be the brand’s first property in North America, bringing the brand to urban markets. Currently, Six Senses manages 16 properties, including Six Senses Krabey Island in Cambodia, which opened March 2019. Around 18 management contracts are signed into their pipeline and more than 50 deals are under active discussion. Core to Six Senses’ brand positioning is a focus on wellness and sustainability. Their spa operations, which include 37 spas and consultancy services, are included in the acquisition.

IHG has been expanding in the luxury sector and now boasts four luxury brands including InterContinental Hotels & Resorts, the recently repositioned Regent Hotels & Resorts, and Kimpton Hotels & Resorts, which the group acquired in 2015.
seagrass around their island for the benefit of the environment, tourism, fisheries, and the people who depend on them.

Caption: Seagrass is an important food source for Green turtles, classified as "Critically Endangered". Photo courtesy of Six Senses.

INVESTMENT

ACCORDHOTELS REBRANDS AND FOCUSES ON EXPERIENTIAL LOYALTY

AccorHotels, the Paris-based hospitality group whose brands include Raffles Hotels & Resorts, Sofitel and Ibis, will now be known as Accor. The group has also announced a new experiential loyalty programme called “Accor Live Limitless” (ALL).

As part of the ALL initiative, designed to give value to guests beyond the hotel stay, Accor announced several partnerships, including with the Paris Saint Germain football club. Interestingly, Marriott International has also recently announced a partnership with Manchester United, as part of their newly launched Marriott Bonvoy travel programme, giving potential for an ‘Accor’ vs. ‘Marriott’ game in the future.

Accor will invest Euro 225 million over the coming years to increase its presence in hospitality and entertainment services. Dropping ‘hotels’ from the Accord name also signals an intention to be known for more than just this part of their business. In 2018, Accor acquired Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts, which added 84 properties and more than 20,000 rooms to their inventory, including Mövenpick Hotel Colombo. At the end of 2018, the group had a hotel portfolio of 703,806 rooms (4,780 hotels) and a pipeline of 198,000 rooms (1,118 hotels), 49 percent of which are in the Asia-Pacific region.

DESIGN

Maldivian Private Island goes fully solar

After opening in December 2018, Kudadoo Maldives Private Island by Hurawalhi operations is now fully solar powered.

The Retreat, the central leisure complex developed by renowned architect Yuji Yamazaki, features a roof that incorporates an impressive 984 solar panels that can produce 575MWh of power annually, enough to power the private island and serve fifty residents and one hundred staff at any one time.

Crown & Champa Resorts, “CCR”, the group behind Maldivian and foreign partners. CCR now manages 10 star-class resorts and a city hotel in Male, Maldives.

PIPELINE

APAC: 1,000-plus hotels expected to open in 2019

Around 1,082 hotels are forecast to open across Asia Pacific in 2019, according to data from Lodging Econometrics (LE). The pipeline report for Q4 2018 shows a currently supply of over 4 million rooms across the region, with 205,000 forecast to open in 2019 and a further 225,000 predicted in 2020.

LE’s data shows 3,022 projects currently under construction in the region, with 631,972 rooms. An additional 770 projects are scheduled to start in the next 12 months, with 156,860 rooms. A further 767 projects are in the early planning stage, with 172,344 rooms. This brings the total pipeline to 4,550 projects, with 961,176 rooms.

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<th>Current supply of open hotels:</th>
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<td><strong>27,419</strong> Hotels</td>
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<th>The LE forecast for new hotel openings in 2019:</th>
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<th>New hotel openings anticipated in 2020:</th>
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<th><strong>Total pipeline:</strong> 4,550 Projects 961,176 Rooms</th>
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Kudadoo, was established in 2000 as the trade name for a group of resorts in the Maldives owned and operated by various Maldivian and foreign partners.

Crown & Champa Resorts, “CCR”, the group behind Maldivian and foreign partners. CCR now manages 10 star-class resorts and a city hotel in Male, Maldives.
Welcome to Hospitality Insider’s List for 2019. From the new super food, to space re-utilisation and technological advancements, here’s our pick of the seven key trends you shouldn’t miss.

**PLANT-BASED**

There is no denying the increase in popularity in plant-based diets over the last few years. The Economist has declared 2019 the ‘year of the vegan’ and reports that a quarter of 25-34 year-old Americans now identify as either vegetarian or vegan. Google Trends shows the popularity of ‘vegan’ in search terms has doubled in three years with United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, the leading locations for search queries.

Concerns over the meat industry’s impact on climate change and increasing publicity on the benefits of a plant-based diet on general health means that this is a trend that is here to stay. Hotels need to adapt and embrace those dietary preferences.

Sri Lankan cuisine, with its emphasis on fresh cooking, vegetable curries and coconut oil instead of dairy, is well-placed to meet these needs. Consider clear signage to show guests which dishes are vegetarian & vegan friendly; something that should be in place for other dietary requirements like gluten-free. Be sure to vary the options at different meals and don’t forget to include interesting options on the room service menu. With a little creativity, vegan and vegetarian cuisine can really shine.

Ulagalla by Uga Escapes is already embracing this trend. Increasing numbers of vegetarian guests have prompted them to develop a mud house where vegetarian food will be served, picked, and cooked outdoors fresh from their organic garden.

Seasonal, local produce is in the spotlight as plant-based diets gain popularity.

**CO-WORKING**

As more companies embrace the idea of flexible working policies and digital nomads become mainstream, hotels too are embracing the co-working space.

Hot on the heels of the experiential economy, these places offer a perfect place to familiarise the next generation of customers with your hotel’s offerings and brand. Often, if guests are working in a lobby or café space, they will be ordering food or drinks, and bringing in revenue for F&B at times of day when these spaces are typically underutilised.

Major brands embracing the trend include the Shangri-La, which launched a dedicated meeting space called Co-nnect at their Colombo hotel in 2018. Offering private offices, meeting spaces, work pods, and individual work stations, they also provide a menu at the café that is ‘specially crafted to facilitate meetings’.

With Sri Lanka attracting digital nomads who come for extended stays of a month or more, easy steps to tap into this market include ensuring good quality Wi-Fi in all public areas, plenty of conveniently located charging points, and a core menu of snacks, juice and coffee is on offer all day long.
MORINGA

Well-known in Sri Lanka, the humble drumstick plant is being touted internationally as the next big superfood. Now available around the world in powdered, capsule, leaf, oil and seed form, the health and wellness world is abuzz with its benefits.

Driven by the two huge markets of fitness and food posts, the hashtag ‘moringa’ has over 300,000 posts on Instagram.

Do you have moringa on your menu? Is it something that you can showcase to guests in your cooking classes? Executive Chef Wajira Gamage at Santani Wellness Resort has created a moringa soup that not only tastes delicious and is filled with health benefits, but it looks beautiful too.

Belmond sees 2019 as the year of transformative travel, ushering travellers to ‘seize the moment’ and go on life-affirming adventures.

TRANSFORMATIONAL TRAVEL

Transformational travel is something that has a profound impact on the traveller in a deep, permanent way. Sri Lanka has experiential tourism, but transformational tourism goes beyond this. Instead of giving visitors an experience, it changes their life. The term was first coined in 2016 by the founders of the Transformational Travel Council. Their mission? To use travel as a catalyst for creating deeper connections with the self and nature, and as a tool for fostering global citizenry.

The appetite amongst travellers for holidays that go beyond surface level self-improvement to something more meaningful is growing. A 2018 Skift survey found that 32 percent of consumers have had an experience while traveling that transformed them in a positive way. The transformation may come from gaining a difference perspective, learning something new, or deeply reflecting on life.

When visiting Bali, many tourists get involved in the local beliefs and practices of the place. This is driven by the locals who share their culture with the tourists. They encourage them to visit their villages, practice yoga, swim in the river, go to temples, and maybe even see a local healer.

Terahaku is a website that allows people to book lodging at temples and shrines across Japan. Launched in 2018, their popularity demonstrates how people are looking to get more from their stay than just a beautiful and relaxing experience. By only offering lodging at temples and shrines, the site offers users a truly authentic experience that is unique to the location and local community.
A buzzword for the last two years, many businesses still struggle to turn the idea of personalisation into something that provides real, tangible benefits. Accenture suggests focus is now evolving from personalisation into hyper-relevance, where “brands move beyond the trip into the travellers’ daily lives.” To get on board with this requires a great deal of consumer insight, but the good news is that the innovative technology required is becoming more accessible. The company’s research suggests three out of four travellers say they can feel a difference with companies that are moving towards hyper-relevance.

Travel companies that don’t get up to speed are at risk of being left behind. In a conversation with Swift, Jan Swartz of Princess Cruises explained how they are building more in-depth profiles of their cruise ship guests. Over the course of a voyage, more than 400 million points of data are gathered through the wearable Ocean Medallian program, allowing Princess to “enhance both the guest experience in real-time, as well as mine that information to do a better job designing our ship experience for the future.”

The insights afforded by technology and big data are extensive and can provide a competitive advantage when used correctly. But not every step towards personalisation needs to require a large investment in time or money.

Online pre-arrival surveys are easy to arrange with the link sent to guests via email. Questions such as dietary requirements, pillow preference, preferred choice of minibar snacks, reason for visit, and even preference for normal or decaf coffee in the room, means housekeeping can set up the space to the guests’ personal preference. At check-in, knowledgeable front office staff can confirm this information and open up conversations for targeted upselling. A handwritten note card welcoming each guest to their room is an age-old touch so often overlooked. The effort is minimal but the impact goes a lot further than a standardised printed letter. If guests have informed the hotel about visiting for a special occasion, note it and keep a record of preferences (in line with the highest standards of data protection), so this information can be leveraged for a more personal experience should they return.
LUXURY

Good news for those focussing on high-end spenders, the luxury travel market is set for continued growth. According to Amadeus’s report, Shaping the Future of Luxury Travel, the growth rate in outbound luxury travel over the next 10 years is projected to be 6.2%. This is almost a third higher than the 4.8% projected for overall travel. Geographically, growth in the Asia region for luxury travel will continue to be strong. India will also be an interesting country to watch as their middle class continues to expand and this is predicted to drive South Asia as the fastest growing market for luxury travel globally.

The meaning of luxury itself is evolving and simply investing in expensive fixtures and fittings may no longer meet the requirements of high-end travellers. Luxury travel has moved on from meaning expensive things towards the unique, exclusive, and experiential. Crystal chandeliers are less important than the ability for the guests to feel connected to the place they are visiting, still in a beautiful, comfortable and aspirational way, of course. Testament to this expected focus on luxury experiences is LVMH’s recent acquisition of high-end hotel, rail, and river cruise company Belmond for $2.6 billion. The company famous for luxury goods is now expanding from luxury things, to luxury experiences.

SMART HOTEL ROOMS

The smart home is now firmly in the realm of the real, with countless voice- and sensor-controlled devices monitoring and assisting people in their day-to-day lives. Is the smart hotel room soon to follow? Technology monitoring systems can check for issues like water wastage through a leaking toilet and changes to temperature that might, undetected, otherwise lead to a guest complaint. Moving beyond the operational, the installation of voice-activated smart systems, like those familiar to us from Amazon’s Alexa or Apple’s Siri, could streamline the guest in-room experience. Voice-controlled systems could do away with the need to have hotel information in a booklet in each room. Guests could ask out loud for directions to the swimming pool and be informed exactly of the route from their room while simultaneously being shown it on the TV screen. Room service could be ordered and confirmed without having to pick up a phone.

Just as in our personal homes, not everyone would find the idea of voice-activated technology attractive and privacy concerns would need to be considered sensitively and thoughtfully. For hotels, there is also a technical challenge of having technology that can understand a wide range of accents, and of completely wiping the data and preferences each time a guest checks out. Nevertheless, this is one trend we see gaining ground, particularly in luxury high-end rooms.
One of hospitality’s icons prepares to step aside

BY RACHAEL COVE

When a family business reaches the third generation, things can get complicated. For Sri Lankan hotel giant Jetwing group, this milestone is appearing on the horizon. With two of the founder Herbert Cooray’s four grandchildren already in the business, succession planning is in the air. The founder’s children, Shiromal and Hiran, who have been running the company so far are taking steps to make sure the business is future-proof.

“We are no longer young,” says Hiran, who was a fresh-faced graduate when he was appointed to the helm of the family-owned business. Hiran has just stepped aside as chairman of Jetwing Hotels, the company founded by his father and now owned by his sister Shiromal and him. After decades of building Jetwing Travels, the group’s inbound travel business, Shiromal was appointed chairman of Jetwing Hotels. Sitting at the airy rooftop bar at
Jetwing Colombo Seven, a group-controlled and managed hotel located just beyond the central business district, Hiran has a calm and kind demeanour and a smile that comes easily. He seems imbued with a gentle energy that could make any conversation topic engaging.

“We now have to take a step back and let other leaders in the organisation take over,” he says.

In the short term, he illustrates the decision for a clearer demarcation of roles between the different businesses. In the longer term, his stepping down from Jetwing Hotels reflects plans to gradually transition to a non-executive role at the family company.

The divergent strategy of maintaining founder Herbert Cooray’s hotels under Jetwing Hotel, where his daughter Shirmal is now chairman, and having Jetwing Symphony, the now listed company led by Hiran, isn’t well understood.

For faster growth by attracting new investors, the group’s new hotels are being developed by Jetwing Symphony, established in 2007. Currently, Symphony has 5 hotels and 327 rooms, and since its December 2017 IPO, is 18% publicly held. The Cooray family and other promoters own the rest of the shares. Hiran Cooray continues as chairman of Jetwing Symphony and The Lighthouse Hotel, both of which are listed.

Jetwing Hotels itself was established over 40 years ago, and now has 25 hotels and 13 villas, including six they manage but have no equity interest in.

Alongside the hotel businesses of John Keells Holdings and Aitken Spence Holdings, Jetwing is one of the largest in Sri Lanka.

If net assets were the measure, Jetwing Hotel’s Rs30 billion, reported in a March 2017 interview Hiran Cooray gave, makes it one of the largest. Listed Jetwing Symphony’s assets were Rs5 billion in the 2018 December quarter.

For comparison, listed Aitken Spence Hotel Holdings had net assets of Rs29.2 billion, John Keells Hotels Rs28.1 billion and Asian Hotels at Rs35.5 billion (both John Keells Holdings controlled), at December 2018.

Building new hotels is capital-intensive and investors must sustain losses during their early years due to taking time to attract enough tourists at first, non-cash charges like depreciation and the cost of debt.

Except for Jetwing Yala, which was close to breaking even during the nine months to December 2018, the other four hotels, Jetwing Symphony’s Kaduruketha, Colombo Seven, Lake and Surf, were all loss-making.

Hotel chains have devised franchising arrangements to ensure their brand delivers the maximum return by separating asset ownership from management and brand ownership. This industrial scale franchise model has been a remarkable triumph. Jetwing Hotels is using this model to maximise revenue by managing hotels that others own and limiting their own equity investment.
Several days later, sitting in the same rooftop bar at an adjacent table, Shiromal Cooray speaks with enthusiasm and candour about her new position. Although she officially took over the role of chairman of Jetwing Hotels in October 2018, the transition was not a black and white one as she’s been a Director for many years, but is now more responsible for the long-term strategy directly. The change also made strategic business sense, she points out. “We realised that we have two major ventures: the asset-owning company and the management company.”

“We separated the hotels our father built that he didn’t want to take public.”

For transparency, a clear role demarcation was the next step. With many hotels under Jetwing group, some of which are owned, others managed, Shiromal says there were challenges with handling the number of properties and balancing priorities that may be different from an asset vs management point of view.

“We realised that if we are to do justice to everything, then it would be better to change the roles.”

Thus, Shiromal, as chairman of Jetwing Hotels, will look after the management of all hotels, and Hiran, as chairman of Jetwing Symphony, will focus on the asset, how to improve those and expansion in Sri Lanka and overseas.

Companies that have accumulated significant assets must think about how that wealth can be preserved for generations, while continuing to grow it at a reasonable rate.

Family businesses have the unique challenge of having all the investment eggs in one basket. That’s fine as long as the founders and generations following are passionate and capable of growing the business. However, the question arises whether continuing with the family business is indeed the best way for intergenerational wealth transfer. Could the family be better off by selling the assets and allowing professional wealth managers to invest the return.

Two of the founder’s grandchildren are already in the Jetwing Hotels business. Hiran’s youngest son is in New Zealand and Shiromal’s son, Gihan, is an actor and singer in the US.

Shiromal herself didn’t join the company straight away, but worked in accountancy before taking over what was then a little travel agency in Negombo that Jetwing owned. While her son has no plans to join the business at the moment, reflecting on her own change in career path, Shiromal takes a never-say-never attitude.

The children, the third generation, aren’t being pressured to join the business, says Shiromal, but the preparations began nonetheless long ago for the possibility of all three of Hiran’s children and Shiromal’s son coming onboard. Shiromal and Hiran consulted a family business expert who advised about potential pitfalls and ramifications. Similar steps were taken by Herbert Cooray when Shiromal and Hiran joined the company: “He sent us on a training programme about family business so we understand what kinds of things could happen. My father had so much foresight,” she says.

Family businesses are often beset by squabbling and infighting, but pre-empting the possibilities seem to be working, as “it has helped us and we hope it will work in the future as well.”

Jetwing group is also diversifying to include a condo project in Talahena, Negombo, expected to commence construction soon. Will they consider other industries? “You never know!” says Shiromal with a smile. “You need to drive a business and be passionate about it. If somebody is passionate and capable, and has the same values, then we can easily enter other areas.”

“I’d want to move out while I’m still relevant and before my motivation fades,” says Hiran. His first love is cricket, and conversation with him is delightfully peppered with anecdotes about cricket legends and lessons. He uses the analogous case of Ian Chappell, a 1970’s Australian cricket captain, who retired when the Australian team was at the top of its game. Following in Ian’s example, Hiran says, “I want to go in my prime when I’m still contributing, not when my use-by date is past.”

Often, in family companies, the generation in control is reluctant to give the reins to the next, delegating responsibility but not stepping out of the light. This doesn’t
seem to be the future in store for the Cooray family’s third generation where succession planning is already on the cards. Hiran’s two oldest sons are already in the business: Hashan in Marketing and Dmitri in Operations.

Jetwing Symphony was created to take the business into the future. The reasons for its creation were both practical and sentimental. “A lot of people were proposing it,” says Hiran, “The company had grown and many people wanted to invest with us. We also realised that, to expand fast, our funding alone was inadequate.”

At the same time, distinction had to be made between the existing properties, created by Jetwing’s founder, Herbert Cooray, and the business assets of the future. “We will always hold on to the Herbert Cooray properties,” says Hiran, “whereas hotels we built under Jetwing Symphony will be investments. We won’t form any emotional attachment with them.”

Jetwing Symphony added three new hotels by 2017: the sustainably-conscious Jetwing Lake in Dambulla opened December 2016, luxury eco lodge on the east coast at Pottuvil Point Jetwing Surf in December 2017 and its first city hotel Jetwing Colombo Seven.

The company’s sixth property, a 26-suite hotel in Kandy called Jetwing Kandy Gallery, is expected to open in early 2020. Jetwing Symphony also owns a 19-acre plot of land in Uppaveli, north of Trincomalee, but are not rushing its development. “First we will complete Kandy, then we will decided if the time is right for Uppaveli,” says Hiran.

Hiran Cooray admits letting go of the day-to-day challenges of his former role will not be easy. “I’ve done this for 30 years. Slowly and surely, I will get my mind out of it – but it hasn’t happened yet!”

As well as asset development, he will now be spending time creating experiences, something he particularly enjoys. “Today, everybody talks about experiential travel. Our hotels are in different parts of the Island and we want to create more guest experiences – culture based, nature based, hotel based, you name it.” Shiromal agrees that immersive travel is the future and points out that Jetwing already offers many authentic Sri Lankan experiences. Each Jetwing hotel is designed to blend with the landscape and reflect the local culture, and is designed by architects they feel can give life to a particular setting.

Experiential offerings will be important for the upcoming Kandy Gallery hotel, which is pitched for those on slow travel, with stays of at least two nights. Kandy’s main temple may be a must-see for first-time visitors, but as a destination, Kandy has challenged the industry that’s keen to have tourists spend more than a night there.

Since founding in the early 1970s with a six-bedroom hotel on the Negombo coast called Blue Oceanic, Jetwing Hotels’ growth has been substantial. The time may be right to start exporting Jetwing’s Sri Lankan hospitality to international climates. “It’s in our plans,” says Hiran about expanding overseas, “but we haven’t actively explored it yet because we need a
couple of years to consolidate Symphony here. Once the hotels here are profitable, we will look at how we can grow overseas.”

In the nine months ending December 2018, Jetwing Symphony’s losses were Rs370 million, 7% higher than the same period a year ago. During those same nine months, earnings before interest and tax (EBIT) turned the corner from a negative Rs23 million to a positive Rs160 million.

International expansion would, Hiran admits with his good natured smile, be quite risky. In Sri Lanka, Jetwing is a household hospitality brand, and generates more than 20% of its revenue from the Sri Lankan tourists. “We are still a small company, so people may not trust us in the way that we are trusted and respected in Sri Lanka.” Going into new markets in South East Asia like Laos and Cambodia would bring with it challenges, both for Jetwing to understand their prospective markets and for those markets to understand what the Jetwing brand and concept is about.

Brand values Jetwing’s founder Herbert Cooray established are timeless at Jetwing group. A copy of his biography, A Man In His Time, is included in the hotel guest rooms at Jetwing Colombo Seven where Herbert Cooray’s residence once stood. His is a success story built on hardwork and generosity of spirit. “My dad was a rebel. He was a guy who was completely out of the box,” says Hiran. “When he started the business, our house and my mother’s jewellery was mortgaged. If the business failed, we would have been homeless.”

The values and guiding principles were instilled in both Hiran and Shiromal through constant application and practice by their father. At a time when all-inclusive hotels were the ‘in thing’ and tour operators were pushing Herbert Cooray to offer this option, he refused, because if guests would not need to leave the property, where would the benefit to the community be?

“That’s stuck in my mind,” Shiromal reminisces. “I used to sit with him at contracting meetings – the tour operators would be going at him saying ‘otherwise we’ll have to drop the hotel’, and he said ‘that’s ok, I still won’t do it’.”

The environment, community and honesty were at the heart of the business built by Herbert Cooray. For Shiromal, there is no conflict between the weight of the founder’s philosophy and values, and the strategy required to take Jetwing into the future. Did the company turn down opportunities that didn’t align with its values? “Maybe, but most did align,” she says. “Hiran and I have these unconscious biases, so we wouldn’t even look at something that doesn’t align with our values.”

The creation of listed Jetwing Symphony, where hotel assets are free from the weight of sentimentality, brings with it a different challenge of balancing the founder’s values with shareholder expectations. For shareholders, profit comes first. Companies may find their intentions for the betterment of the environment or community derailed by shareholders who prefer to have money returned to their pocket and not invested back into non-financial-outcomes.

“I think we have fairly like-minded shareholders,” Hiran Cooray says about Jetwing Symphony’s promoters, but quickly highlights the company’s profit...
focus. The balance of the three P’s – people, planet and profit – will inevitably shift towards the latter in a public company, more than with a family business like Jetwing Hotels. At the end of the day, says Hiran, “There is no ego here. It’s money in and money out. But we make sure that everybody else benefits too.”

So what’s in store for the future of Jetwing Group? International expansion is on the cards for Jetwing Symphony’s business, and closer to home, Jetwing Hotels, is on the lookout for more hotels to manage. “If a property fits with our philosophy and the owners understand our way of thinking, like impacting the community, we’d love to manage more,” says Shiromal.

Six of Jetwing Hotels’ properties will get a refresh later this year, re-positioned for the higher end. This will burnish their luxury image and move the brand further away from a perception as middle market; a tricky space where hotels often find it difficult to stand out. Vil Uyana is a case in point; “It’s a high end hotel and we are getting $300 per night,” says Shiromal, “Unfortunately, because it gets coupled with others, it’s lost.”

At the other end of the scale, Jetwing Hotels’ budget brand Hotel J is gaining traction. Since launching in 2013 in Negombo, two more properties have been added, in Unawatuna in 2017 and Ambalanda in 2018. With a mixture of dorms and private rooms, the high volume, limited service hotels target “younger, free spirited travellers” whose priorities are a clean and safe place to stay. “We were the first company to launch a budget hotel in Negombo,” says Hiran, “And we see that brand growing.”

Hotel J is independently run, but through its accessible positioning, visitors are getting exposed to the Jetwing brand and to Sri Lankan hospitality; the hope is that, in five or ten years, these same visitors will return to stay at one of the higher-end properties.

Hiran expects Jetwing’s values to lead international recognition as a trusted brand. “If people remember us as a responsible company by bringing rural youth into the hospitality industry, creating livelihoods and encouraging local farmers, we’ll be very happy.”

With the next generation joining the business, instilled with the values from the founder and supported by the long-serving management team, many of whom have been with the company for 30 years or more, this sounds like a very real possibility. For Hiran himself, he plans that the next five years will be spent full time at the business, and after that, “if I find my motivation fading”, it will be time to move on. Back to his first love of watching cricket.

JETWING BLUE
Where the story began. Herbert Cooray’s first hotel, Blue Oceanic Beach Hotel (now Jetwing Blue) in Negombo launched as a 6-bedroom property in 1972

ST ANDREWS
St. Andrew’s (Jetwing St. Andrews) in Nuwara Eliya, was Herbert Cooray’s fifth property, opened in 1987

LIGHTHOUSE
The Geoffrey Bawa designed Jetwing Lighthouse in Galle will be going through a major renovation later in 2019

VIL UYANA
Opened in 2006, Jetwing Vil Uyana is built on artificially created wetland, surrounding the villas with a private nature park

SURF
Jetwing Surf at Pottuvil Point, near Arugam Bay, is Jetwing Symphony’s most recent property. It opened in Dec 2017
NO ‘GREEN WASHING’ NECESSARY

With real, long-term economic benefits, sustainability doesn’t have to be a cliché. It simply makes good business sense

BY M. FERNANDO
Hoteliers are progressively under pressure to become more sustainable, offer impeccable service, and run ethical businesses as demanded by more environmentally conscious customers. The good news is that investing in being sustainable not only helps mitigate operational impacts, but also reaps continuing monetary benefits.

As awareness on environmental degradation and the need to reduce our global carbon footprint increases, more travelers are opting for hotels that reflect a commitment to sustainable practices. Staying at one of these hotels gives a guest that feeling of being able to contribute through making a conscientious choice and increases their perceived value of the hotel. The rise in access to immediate information, the social media movement, and mounting guest sophistication have influenced hoteliers to be more environmentally friendly, ethical, and transparent in their operations. From a marketing and financial point of view, hotels that don’t pivot towards sustainability are missing out on all the benefits.

So what exactly does it mean to be ‘eco-friendly’? We are past that time of merely being “friendly” towards the environment. Countless scientific studies have shown that we need to make changes to our way of life if we are to have a hope of continuing it. The Hospitality and Tourism Industry has a significant impact on the environment due to its rate of water consumption, the use of consumable goods and energy, and waste generation, all of which can impact a hotel’s reputation and bottom line.

Along with increased awareness on environmental issues, there has unfortunately also been a rise in generalised statements of how a company is supposedly ‘green’, with no real substance. The concept of ‘green washing’, a form of spin used to portray a company’s activities as environmentally friendly when they are not, is all too frequent in the hotel industry. Well-publicised global campaigns to “save the planet” really boils down to removing plastic straws in F&B outlets. These attempts are well-intentioned, but to actually cut emissions and minimise the negative environmental impact, there is more that can be done. There is no need for hotels to throw around words like ‘eco-’ and ‘sustainable’ for marketing alone, when implementing simple, authentic initiatives can bring real change and significant cost savings for the business in the long run.

Reduced inefficiencies, lowered costs, better risk management, improved staff engagement, and a competitive advantage are some of the long-term, tangible benefits to being sustainable. It doesn’t have to be daunting, it simply makes business sense for hoteliers to implement these initiatives to increase profitability and provide better guest experiences.

So where can hotels start to make an immediate impact on the bottom line?
Sri Lanka has been fortunate to possess an abundance of water due to its ancient hydraulic systems and vast natural resources. However, overconsumption, wastage, pollution, and degradation of resources mean this is changing, exacerbated by a lack of long-term plans to conserve water. Hotels have a compelling incentive to conserve water, and not just on moral grounds—it costs more to use and dispose of waste water.

A water management plan to track water consumption is a good first step to establish your baseline. The installation of low-flow taps with adjustable flow restrictors that can reduce water consumption by over 50%; dual-flushing toilets that can save up to 60% of water per flush; and low-flow shower heads that consume almost half the rate of conventional ones at around 9.45 liters a minute, are all relatively low-cost installations. In 2013, the Holiday Inn in Flinders, Australia, recouped its AUD $22,000 ($19,500) investment in low-flow technology after 18 months, and cut water usage by 50%.

According to the 2018 International Tourism Partnership’s Report on Water Stewardship for Hotel Companies, hotels have a responsibility and interest in managing water sustainably. They can start by setting targets for water consumption reduction and better management. Simply raising (and maintaining) employee and guest awareness on water consumption can also improve water conservation.

A rain water harvesting system can be a practical option in Sri Lanka. Strategic roof designs or gutter placement can supply water for irrigation around the premises. Rainwater and grey water recycling can bring significant efficiency and cost savings at a moderate capital cost and quick payback period (less than a year in some cases). Strategies like these have already been implemented in some hotels in Sri Lanka. Jetwing St. Andrews saves 1.3 million liters of freshwater per annum by reusing over 75% of the water consumed after treatment in its Waste Water Treatment Plant.

Simple, no-cost changes like turning lights, fans, A/Cs, and sockets off when not in use, transitioning to LED (Light Emitting Diode) bulbs and investing in more energy efficient equipment, are all actions that will result in energy and cost savings. Managing energy is an important step in becoming more sustainable, and one where real financial benefits result from relatively simple actions.

Jetwing Beach Negombo achieved an annual saving of over Rs1 million and 62,816 kWh of energy by switching to LED lights, and saved a further Rs165,602 by
using a key card system for room lights (a saving of 9,373 kWhs of energy).

The transition away from fossil fuels towards renewable sources of energy will become mandatory if our consumption-based lifestyle is to continue. The Jetwing Group has experimented with sustainable use of biomass, with impressive results. They have installed biomass boilers using cinnamon wood at eight of their hotels with plans to implement them in all hotels by the end of 2019. Previously, cinnamon wood was a waste product without a market. Now Jetwing buys half of the 55 metric tonnes produced annually. The boiler at Jetwing Lake alone saves almost Rs6 million each year and has cut the use of 97,500 liters of diesel annually.

Solar is another energy source perfectly suited to Sri Lanka’s sunny climate. When Ulagalla by Uga Escapes first opened in 2010, it had the largest solar installation in South Asia. Once costly, the technology has become affordable and payback periods can be as little as 5 years. With a lifetime of typically 15-20 years, new contracting options with utility companies are making this low maintenance energy source even more attractive. The Jetwing Lake Hotel has a 300 kW double-facing solar installation that generates 35% of the hotel’s total electricity requirement, a saving of almost Rs7 million annually. It produces on average 1,300 kWh per day, saving 260 metric tons of carbon dioxide each year.

In 2016, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company embarked on a three-year program centered on reducing energy consumption. This program led to a reduction of over 13% from the baseline year, which decreased overall energy spend. The three-year energy cost savings were over $11 million. The Langham Hospitality Group, through its New Zealand hotel ‘The Cordis, Auckland’ has been tracking its carbon emissions since 2006. The hotel saved 25 million megajoules (MJ) in energy consumption through on-going energy monitoring and retrofitting projects, and minimized 332,000kg of landfilled waste through recycling. According to the Group’s 2017 Sustainability Report, these initiatives added up to nearly NZ$ 700,000 in financial savings that year.
According to Green Hotelier, a hotel’s laundry room is one of the most environmentally impactful areas of its operations, notorious for the use of excessive water, energy, chemicals/detergents, and improper disposal of waste water.

Most guests do not care about having squeaky-clean sheets and towels every day of their stay. As long as they are clean when they arrive, more often than not, guests would opt to have their room laundry done after their departure and seldom during their stay.

"The Swissotel Chicago introduced a ‘Make a Green Room Choice’ initiative in 2014, which gave guests the option of customizing the housekeeping service"
58% of Condé Nast Traveler readers surveyed said they choose a hotel based on whether the hotel gives back to local people and the planet.

Efficient waste management can save a hotel money, from raw materials suppliers to third-party disposal systems. Food waste is the largest contributor to landfills, at 21%. Raising employee and guest awareness on the impact of food waste, increasing composting, and recycling food waste as animal feed, are options to reduce this. When food waste decomposes, the biogas released into the atmosphere is primarily methane (a greenhouse gas), which is almost 30 times as potent as carbon dioxide. Installing a biogas digester and using the gas as fuel has the triple benefit of reducing reliance on LPG, reducing landfill waste and releasing CO2, not methane, back into the atmosphere. The digesters require a certain level of heat to be maintained, making them perfect for a tropical country. It's also cost effective. The biogas digester at Jetwing Lake gives an annual saving of Rs1 million and the staff kitchens are entirely run on bio gas. The digester takes in 4,500kg of food waste to produce 1,370m3 of biogas per month.

Hotels that have gardens can make a choice to maximise effective use of the space. The Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort in Fiji, for instance, grows much of its food onsite. Their organic garden grows fruits, vegetables and herbs, and any food that cannot be grown onsite is sourced from local organic farmers, with only sustainably-caught fish served on the menu. There is also a flower nursery on the property, which provides the flowers used for decoration around the resort.

Do not underestimate the power of collaborative efforts. While Sri Lankans tend to be naturally hospitable, there are also many instances where organisations or individuals are hesitant to work together despite being in the same industry, due to an unwillingness to fraternise with competition for fear of their ideas being copied. This attitude needs to change if the Hospitality and Tourism Industry is to achieve milestones to practice better sustainability. Sharing knowledge is mutually beneficial, as getting more people involved can spark innovation, avoid repeating past mistakes, and not have to reinvent the wheel.
We’ve all seen those heart-wrenching images of plastics affecting our marine ecosystems. The issue of plastic waste stems from irresponsible consumption and disposal on land, which makes its way down water systems. Stopping the use of single-use plastics (bags, straws, cutlery etc.), opting for alternative materials, and recycling are some of the simplest actions one can engage in to reduce overall plastic waste.

The Mango House in Galle Fort aims to be totally plastic-free. Eco-friendly packaging is used for packed lunches where everything, down to ice tea in jam jars, is bio-degradable or reusable. As co-founders of the Greener Galle initiative, the owners are proactive in arranging recycling as a collective for properties in the Fort area. Guests are informed about the initiatives through information cards in the rooms and on the website.

Jumeirah Vittaveli, a resort in the Maldives uses an in-house water bottling plant as part of an on-going commitment to reduce the hotel’s carbon footprint. By producing glass bottles instead of shipping in bottled water, the resort saves approximately 70,000 plastic bottles per year. It also cuts greenhouse gas emissions associated with importing these goods.

Jetwing has also embraced the transition to glass bottles from plastic. Its Jetwing Lake hotel has its own in-house water bottling plant in a converted shipping container, itself rescued from

**PLASTIC FACTS**

1. More than 5 trillion pieces of plastic are already floating in our oceans.
2. Worldwide, 73 percent of beach litter is plastic.
3. Around the world, nearly a million plastic beverage bottles are sold every minute.
4. More than 40 percent of plastic is used just once, then tossed.
5. Half the plastic ever made was produced in the past 15 years.
packaging and containers is truly recycled. One might ask, how much of this plastic do we use collectively, the advice is to recycle. But reducing emissions from transporting plastic bottles, and then collect them for cleaning and refilling. Where plastic can’t be cut out altogether, the advice is to recycle. But one might ask, how much of this plastic packaging and containers is truly recycled? Recycling procedures vary amongst countries and even between different cities depending on the availability of facilities. All plastic containers are labeled with a Resin Identification Code (RIC) that tells you which grade of plastic you’re dealing with, and how well it can be recycled. It is always good to have open communication with your local recyclers/Municipal Council or body responsible for waste disposal to understand what can be recycled. A conversation with your suppliers to raise awareness on the production and supply of specific types of plastic for your hotel’s use will create opportunities for improved management.

Think carefully about what you are providing to guests. Do your drinks need to be served with a straw? Are individually packaged toiletries required or are ceramic containers a more elegant option? As the tide moves strongly against single use plastics, what kind of emotion are you invoking in your guests by forcing them to use a single-use plastic bottle for water in their rooms?

Sustainability through improvements to process management can be a simple choice made every day and integrated into the business operations across the value chain. Hotels can exercise their purchasing power by opting to buy only from suppliers that meet a minimum standard (eg. those who use reusable plastic crates to bring produce, biodegradable packaging, avoid plastic containers, supply in bulk).

It’s also important to communicate your sustainability initiatives to your guests - tell them about your journey, and share your story! Posters, flyers, booklets (go digital to reduce paper waste, or print on recycled paper), advertise on the hotel’s TV screens, website, and social media, and share information about your programs with guests through employees who interact with them. This will enhance guest experiences, make them more likely to share the stories of your efforts, return to stay, and even recommend the hotel to others.

All too often, many sustainability programs that start out strong lose momentum over time. This is because employees are not as involved or are simply unaware of why the hotel is engaging in green initiatives, which can even affect guest interactions. Continuous training can help combat this by bringing employees onboard the sustainability journey. Making employees feel like they are a part of the change and allowing them to take initiative on new practices and projects can make a difference. This involvement will contribute to employees retaining interest over time, and feeling more connected with the company culture, which will result in a lower turnover rate and associated labour costs.

**GREENER AND MORE RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL IS THE FUTURE.**

Being a part of this change will give your hotel an advantage over hotels that are resisting the transition. With benefits like lower costs, competitive edge, customer loyalty, and brand awareness, hotels that commit to real actions can quickly make a name for themselves. Whatever initiatives your hotel decides to embark on, always ensure that they do not compromise on service quality, health, or safety. Data-driven companies will have more to work with. Sharing information and stories, statistics and data will benefit the entire industry and set benchmarks and standards that everyone can strive to achieve and surpass. This will continue to drive innovation and positive change, which is what the Hospitality and Tourism Industry in Sri Lanka needs.

Travelers are increasingly seeking deeper meaning in vacation experiences, and hotels that cater to these growing green demands with sustainability at the forefront of their business models stand a better chance of outshining competition. The whole purpose of going on a vacation should be just that, with guests not having to worry or feel bad about their impact on the environment. If the hotel has not only already thought about it, but taken a further step to do it for them, that’s great customer service!

Despite being a small island nation, we have been bestowed with many natural resources. The Hospitality and Tourism Sector not only has a responsibility to conserve our resources, but it is fundamentally dependent on them to retain its business. While going green does require initial investments, some of which can be costly, look to the long term for return on investment. With significant financial savings and positive impacts on your bottom line, sustainability is a no-brainer.
The core ingredients that fuel Rare are Executive Chef Ganesh Raj’s hands-on approach and General Manager Kaleel Muzammi’s drive to innovate.

by Sherwani Synon • photography by Sanoj Rodrigo
RARE REDEFINED — CRACKING 800 EGGS TO MAKE THE FINEST OMELETTE IN TOWN

How does a restaurant increase its covers by 2,500 percent in under six months? A new executive chef, new menu and new target audience have opened up Rare, the once fine dining only restaurant in Colombo, and made its dull breakfast menu the new toast of the town.
In April 2018, three years since Rare’s birth at Residence by Uga Escapes – an 11-suite boutique hotel in Colombo’s city centre – hotel management decided to transform Rare from an in-house restaurant to an independent brand. In May, General Manager Kaleel Muzammil set up an interview with a friend he had known for decades. Over a weekend, the management hired Chef Ganesh Raj, who had spent the last 20 years mastering his craft abroad to spearhead this new vision at home. Their first challenge was to transform the breakfast menu to the best and most affordable in Colombo. After four months of extensive groundwork and over 800 eggs later, Rare went from serving only 15 covers a month at breakfast to 300.

So why does a restaurant that has successfully championed the concept of fusion Sri Lankan cuisine for the past three years decide to transform their image?

“We want to move away from being seen as a fine dining restaurant and position ourselves as a sophisticated bistro,” says Muzammil, an experienced hotelier with a strong background in food and beverage. “We feel this is the way forward.” A firm believer in constantly evolving, the desire to cater to a wider clientele drove the change in direction.

Initially, Rare made a name for itself by introducing Sri Lankan fusion to Colombo’s fast-changing food arena. With dishes such as mutton soup with pumpkin curry infused with Ceylon arrack, toddy marinade barramundi and a personal favourite, seeni sambol and sprats ice cream, Rare has long been one of the top picks for lunch and dinner. Quality consistency in food and service has given the restaurant a loyal clientele that generates 65% of the hotel’s overall revenue. As of February 2019, with 4.5 stars and the badge of ‘Certificate of Excellence for 2017-2018,’ Rare lists as 23rd out of 583 restaurants on TripAdvisor in Colombo.

A favourite of Colombo’s high-end diners including some of the top c-suites, guests are required to place a reservation at Rare for dinner from Thursday to Sunday and for lunch on weekdays. In spite of the restaurant’s growth in popularity over the years, it has always felt a bit closed off to the average diner, who may want to enjoy a monthly meal at such a renowned restaurant but feel too intimidated. Now the team, led by Muzammil and Raj, are determined to shift this image to make Rare accessible to more people while still maintaining its formal atmosphere for dinner. “We’ve been here for three years, it’s a difficult market, especially working with the top tier market of Colombo. If we weren’t doing it right, we wouldn’t have been here this long,” says Muzammil.

Decorated in earthy shades and furnished with leather chairs, Rare had always exuded the ambience of a private supper club. But now, the table cloths have been folded away, uncovering the wooden tables. The waiting staff have swapped their formal black uniforms for more tropical, weather-friendly white linen. A more relaxed vibe welcomes people of all ages, particularly young adults and millennials who are active par-
The Seafood Tomato Rice served during lunch makes for a delicious combination of flavours, aroma and colours.
participants in Colombo’s culinary scene. The decision to refocus the restaurant was based on much research into market and brand positioning. “If you don’t know who your market is and if you don’t evolve, you’re going to lose out on the clients you’ve made,” says Muzammil. It’s important to be aware of your target clientele’s disposable income, particularly in Colombo where numerous restaurants are competing for the select group of high-end customers. At the core of their transformation, Rare hopes to preserve their food philosophy of serving Sri Lankan fusion food and complement it with a casual yet sophisticated ambience. After successfully transforming breakfast, they aim to launch new menus for lunch and dinner.

Prior to becoming General Manager at Residence by Uga Escapes in 2015, Muzammil was involved in the food and beverage department at hotels including Marriott Marble Arch in London, The Fortress in Koggala, Al Bander Hotel and Resort in Bahrain, and Shangri-La Villingili Resort and Spa in the Maldives. Despite his easy-going, jolly demeanour, Muzammil is a self-confessed ‘numbers guy’ and is always up-to-date with Colombo’s culinary trends. He credits Dinesh De Zoysa, a Director of Uga Escapes, as his food and beverage guru, who constantly motivates him to evolve and is the reason behind his continued tenure at the hotel.

Raj started his career at Colombo’s first ever fine dining restaurant – Don Stanley’s – and trained under

KALEEL MUZAMMIL

DESIGNATION: GENERAL MANAGER OF RESIDENCE BY UGA ESCAPES

BREAKFAST DISH YOU’RE MOST PROUD OF: RARE ‘BENNI’ - CLASSIC, FLORENTINE

SECRET TO STAYING ON TOP OF YOUR GAME? I KEEP CLOSE TABS ON THE TOP CHEFS AND STAY IN TOUCH WITH FRIENDS IN THE INDUSTRY. WHEN I TRAVEL OVERSEAS, I MAKE IT A POINT TO DINE AT DIFFERENT RESTAURANTS

GANESH RAJ

DESIGNATION: EXECUTIVE CHEF

FOOD PHILOSOPHY: SIMPLE FOOD DONE THE RIGHT WAY USING CLEAN INGREDIENTS

HOW DO YOU ENSURE YOU GET THE BEST PRODUCE? WE HAVE 2-3 SUPPLIERS FOR EACH INGREDIENT TO MAKE SURE WE GET THE BEST PRODUCE AT ALL TIMES

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Raj started his career at Colombo’s first ever fine dining restaurant – Don Stanley’s – and trained under
the head chef for two years while also working as a cleaner. “I topped the class and that was a nice moment,” reminisces Raj with genuine pride. After eight years of hard work, he left the establishment as a Chef de Partie and joined Colombo InterContinental. Then he received the opportunity to work at Al Ghalia Hospitality in Bahrain, where he met Muzammil. The ensuing friendship developed into a natural business partnership. After a turbulent year with multiple executive chefs, the partnership has come as a breath of fresh air. “I know his food and I know that there’s a lot of love in that plate so I knew he would be a good fit for us”, says Muzammil.

Both Muzammil and Raj are keen on serving the right kind of food that will entice their new target market of young adults as well as satisfy their existing clients. Striking the right balance between the old and the new requires a delicate approach, driven by research on what is hot and available in Colombo. Says Muzammil, “When we do a concept change, I like to look at the bigger picture, not just the menu. I look at the ambience, uniform, and how dishes are described.” A transformation like this requires patience because getting “the taste, feel, and the structure of the dishes right takes around four to six months.”

Rare’s revised breakfast menu, featuring dishes such as Crispy eggs, Mannar crab, and Rare ‘Benni’ (eggs benedict), was launched in October 2018. The menu is Muzammil and Raj’s first joint project since the Executive Chef’s appointment. In five months, the restaurant’s breakfast sales have shot up 2,500 percent, confirming that their change in direction was a cracking success.

Raj is determined not to be stuck in ‘fine dining’ and wants to offer a wider selection of simple yet delicious items. His vision is for Rare to accommodate the fast-paced lifestyle of modern Colombo. “People don’t have time to enjoy food. We need to give them good quality, simple food, so that anybody can come and try it out.”

In order to consolidate the change in brand image, the restaurant has been renamed Rare Kitchen and Bar, separating its identity from Residence by Uga Escapes. It also maintains an active, independent presence on social media and the web. With over 2,000 followers and a mouthwatering Instagram feed, Rare Kitchen and Bar is speaking the foodie language of millennials and young adults.

As well as redesigning the lunch menu, the duo hopes to initiate several umbrella projects under the ‘Rare’ brand in the upcoming months. ‘Bring Rare Home’ - an outdoor catering concept - targets small private parties, where the chef comes in, designs a special menu for the event, and executes it with the help of his restaurant staff. ‘Simply Rare’, another idea in the pipeline, is for catering restaurant-quality dishes and platters for private events. They are also thinking about branching out into the food truck business, inspired by Raj’s time operating one in the Middle East.

Always looking out for ways to creatively up their game, Muzammil has introduced an improvement team to gather feedback from diners about the new menus. The team, consisting of waiters, supervisors, and captains, activates Muzammil’s philosophy that “Everybody’s input is valued, including the line staff because they know exactly what the client wants.” Before a new menu is introduced, they offer it to a few repeat clients whose opinion they trust and value in order to ensure that they are serving up a potential favourite. Aside from the extensive planning, Muzammil and Raj’s unique collaboration forms the core of the restaurant’s transformation process. “Muzammil follows a certain standard and quality. If a dish is not interesting, he always encourages me to do change it or reinvent it. I have to meet him at that level and then automatically my staff has to follow me,” says Raj. “We’ve had many arguments” says Muzammil “but we’re constantly pushing each other to do better.” Raj’s hands-on approach and eye for detail complements Muzammil’s commitment to innovate. Combining the right ingredients, the pair seems to have the perfect recipe to dish up Rare’s new identity as a sophisticated bistro.
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“We have a small secret” says Sajith Grero, Front Office Manager, “We’re trying to make this into an all-butler hotel.” An impressive undertaking for a property that has 152 rooms spread across 21 acres of a former coconut plantation, but perhaps not surprising. An unfailingly high standard of service is a hallmark of the Anantara brand, which launched in 2001.

Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort opened in December 2015. The first Anantara property in Sri Lanka, it is nestled along the southern coast line, with a secluded beach and stunning views from atop a rocky outcrop. Billed as a ‘secret hideaway for travellers with a sense of adventure’, the luxurious resort firmly targets high-end travellers.

Under the Minor Hotels group, the Anantara brand hails from Thailand. It was brought to Sri Lanka in partnership with Hemas Holdings PLC. They hold 51% of Peace Haven Tangalle, and 8% in the brand’s second Sri Lankan property, Anantara Kalutara Resort, which opened in September 2016.

“What I’ve learnt from the brand is to always be authentic and luxurious,” says Grero. Guests don’t just want luxury anymore, they want the experience as well. Creating experiences that are unique to the individual hotel locations is a signature of the brand. Guests can camp in the desert in Oman, cruise in a long-tail boat in Chiang Rai and experience paddy farming in rural Vietnam. At Peace Haven Tangalle, guests are welcomed by ravan players, the dramatic sound vibrating out from the lobby, along the entrance waterway to greet them as they arrive.

The resident naturalist is Anuradha Ediriweera, or Eddie, as he likes to be known. Previously from Ceylon Tea Trails, Eddie developed his passion for nature north. 

Bending the Rules
At Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort

A brand famed for its luxury and service, Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort quickly made a name for itself after opening three years ago. Hospitality Insider met with those on the frontlines of guest service to find out what makes their service so special.
and conservation from adventures with his university explorers club. With expert knowledge, he takes guests on nature and bird-watching walks around the property, as well as the ever-popular turtle watching. Long-term turtle research and conservation projects are in place, and guests are encouraged to make a $1 per night donation that the hotel will match.

“I think the experiential is a big driver in the industry going forward, because you need to make sure guests create great memories,” says Grero. “That’s why we are successful, because we tailor-make aspects and deliver the service in a luxurious way.”

Delivering tailor-made service requires a level of malleability that is not always instinctive in hotel management. At Peace Haven Tangalle, hard and fast rules about how, when, who and what are replaced with flexibility and personalisation. “Sometimes we bend the rules to make sure the guest is satisfied,” says Grero, “We provide heartfelt hospitality” and being free to make decisions is crucial for that.

At the front line of hotel guest relations is the role of Chief Concierge. At Peace Haven Tangalle, this is held by industry veteran and holder of Les Clefs d’Or Duminda Boteju.

The career path to becoming a chief concierge is not an easy one. Boteju started out as a bellboy during the Hilton Colombo’s pre-opening phase in 1987, and remembers the hard work involved, working long hours and carrying many bags. In recent times, the role has changed significantly with technology opening up a new world of information for the concierge and the guest alike. “I don’t think we can do this job without technology now,” he says, “We can only retain so much in our minds!”

He would still recommend “the best profession in the world” as a career, but only for those who are willing to approach it with the right attitude. Sharing his colleagues’ views, he believes working in the hotel industry “has to come from the heart”, but finding the right staff for the roles is becoming increasingly difficult. “Honestly, in the new generation, I don’t see it in them. They think they need a job for the salary and that’s all.”

Boteju’s passion for his role is immedi-
ately apparent with his warm smile, open demeanour and jovial personality. In 2015, he launched the Sri Lankan Concierge Association, which currently has seven members, two from Peace Haven Tangalle. If a concierge is looking to develop their career, they can attend meetings, be mentored and eventually be recommended to sit for the Les Clefs d’Or exam.

With staffing shortages reported across the industry, finding and retaining the right staff is a challenge many are facing. When new hotels open, they can look to recruit from the surrounding area, but this comes with greater demand on up-skilling than hiring experienced staff. Around 70% of staff at Peace Haven Tangalle are from the local area. Grero describes how, when the hotel launched, the first three months were focussed on teaching many of the new joiners English, rather than industry-specific skills. One of the exercises was to practice reading the paper in English; the first day, they are asked to describe the articles in Sinhala, the next day in English. “It was not easy” says Grero, “but if you want someone to improve, you have to invest time.”

Once the initial staff are recruited, common complaints are of employees jumping in ship for minor increments in salary, or bidding their time only until they have enough experience to secure work overseas. What can hotels do to retain the best talent? For Grero, after hiring right, the answer lies in training often and paying correctly.

Ongoing training is a core part of the front office staff experience at Peace Haven Tangalle, and one the management are proud of. Every day, in the 15-minute briefing, a senior manager or supervisor will perform a role-play dealing with a common situation, such as how to greet a guest or how to handle a guest complaint. At first glance, this may seem repetitive, but with infinite permutations on the way the conversations could go, it’s an effective way of preparing staff for any situation. The investment in training is also important from a moral point of view, engaging staff and instilling a sense that they’re valued.

One-on-one performance appraisals take place every three months and targets include mentions in a set number of TripAdvisor reviews, something that demands a personalised and memorable relation-ship be created with guests. If someone is failing to meet their targets, the focus is where their skills lie and whether there may be a different role they’d be better suited to. With 45 people under him, this is a substantial time commitment, but Grero is serious about making it: “If you really believe in something, you have to invest the time in people. When you do, they tend to grow more, become more serious about the job and love it more.”

At the end of the day, employees who are motivated and love their jobs are good for business. They provide a better level of service to guests, which means happier customers, and in return, higher service charge back to the employees. Service charge is a major motivation and “our employees know to work properly because we are not getting easy guests, and they are paying a lot of money”.

The attraction of roles abroad is often tied to the salary package that accompanies it. Here, the presence of international brands like Anantara may have a positive effect on the Sri Lankan industry. If they remunerate at a higher scale, they not only keep talent in the country, but also attract professionals back from overseas. “I think they pay more to ensure you stay here and give your all to your job,” Grero says. “To have a good brand, you need to have good people,” he adds, “After all, the people make the brand.”

CAREER PROFILE

Favourite part of your job?
Sharing my conservation knowledge with school children and the community.

What motivates you?
People should have a passion for what they are doing. My passion is conservation. Conserving all these things for future generations.

Any hobbies?
I’m working on a personal project to preserve historical books and palm leaf manuscripts from the local area; some of the inscriptions are 1,500 years old.

Anuradha Ediriweera (Eddie), Senior Naturalist
Gitanjali Haaland
is aiming to make Ulagalla the best boutique hotel in Sri Lanka.
TWO YEARS AGO, GITANJALI RETURNED FROM A DECADE OVERSEAS to take the helm at Ulagalla, Uga Escapes’s flagship property. After stints in Bhutan and the Maldives with luxury hotel group COMO Hotels & Resorts, she swapped a life of international travel and pre-openings for the quiet Anuradhapura countryside. Her experience of high-end spenders (and their high-end expectations) has fuelled her approach to the guest experience at Ulagalla with tremendous success. Recently, the hotel was named number 10 in Asia for service and number 17 for Luxury in the TripAdvisor 2019 Travelers Choice Awards. In both categories, Ulagalla took the top spot for Sri Lanka.

*Hospitality Insider* speaks to Gitanjanli about role models, rural challenges and her mindset for success.
You spent twelve years working overseas in several countries. Do you think having international exposure is important when coming into a senior management position?

A: Not necessarily. There are a lot of senior managers in Sri Lanka who haven’t worked overseas. But the knowledge and experience you bring back is valuable. Our (Sri Lankan) people are very laid back, but service standards have to be excellent wherever you are. My experience and training with handling very high spenders has groomed me to be who I am today. To understand the urgency when a guest needs something. While we may not be a business hotel, we still have to be on time and meet our guests’ expectations. You can’t have guests waiting 20 minutes for their baggage, no matter what type of hotel you are. I also want the service to be 100% personalised. Guests should feel like they are the only people in this hotel because they get so much attention, but not so much that it’s intrusive.

What are the challenges facing the tourism industry in Sri Lanka?

A: The challenges now are with getting the right manpower. The majority of our guests are not Sri Lankan so the challenge is both to get trained, experienced people, and English-speaking staff. Our staff members get a minimum of six hours of skills training every month. It’s a key KPI that is monitored and the department heads are responsible to ensure it’s met.

We like to hire locally, over 50% of our staff is from the local community. This means sometimes we get people who can’t speak one word of English. We tried for a year to find a suitable English teacher but couldn’t, so we adapted to the challenge by starting English classes in-house. 42 members of staff signed up for lessons and we split them into two groups. The chef teaches one group and I teach the other. We do many...
role plays relating to daily operations and teach them how to interact with guests. This improves their level of confidence, and reduces chances of guest complaints too.

Everything comes down to confidence. I see in Sri Lanka a mind-set that if something cannot be done, then that’s ok. But what I am used to is very different. If it cannot be done, then you find a way to do it. It helps me to drive my team to constantly achieve goals. I don’t easily give up in life and I want my team to have the same ethos. Because everything we achieve, we achieve together as a team.

You joined Uga Escapes in January 2017 and have been at Ulagalla since April 2017, almost two years. What achievement are you most proud of?

A: Getting the staff accommodation ready. It needed an upgrade and it was the first thing I changed after joining. For me, looking after my team is key. If I look after my team, they will look after my guests. The accommodation before and after the renovation is like day and night. I have photographs and every time I look at them, I feel proud that I have been able to do that for the staff.

What do you think is most important in staff accommodation?

A: A gym, TV room, and indoor games like table tennis. There are times when the staff come and say they don’t feel like going home anymore because they don’t even have running water. Here, they have been given comfortable rooms and all the facilities and they are being trained to take care of them. They are being trained to make their beds every morning and to keep the common areas clean. The heads of departments check on the staff accommodation once a week, I also go on spot checks every ten days. The staff appreciate the efforts. They feel that there is someone who cares, someone who checks up on them.

We also created a separate block for the female staff in twin sharing rooms. Now it is easier to attract women and the ladies are
RECOGNISED AS A TOP SMALL HOTEL, ULAGALLA BY UGA ESCAPES ALSO PERFORMED IMPRESSIVELY IN THE SERVICE, LUXURY, AND ROMANCE CATEGORIES OF TRIP ADVISOR’S TRAVELERS CHOICE AWARDS 2019. THE AWARDS ARE ISSUED ANNUALLY BASED ON CUSTOMER FEEDBACK.

The flagship property for Uga Escapes, Ulagalla opened in 2010 and follows the Wallawwa concept. The house has been lovingly restored with minimal changes to the 150-year-old building. The heritage plays an important role in the guest experience; photographs of the original owner and his family still hang by the reception desk. When guests step out of their vehicles, possibly tired after a long drive, they are given cold towels and invited to take part in a bell ringing ceremony. The bell used is very same one that used to hang at the gate of the Wallawwa. Originally rung to notify the servants that someone wished to visit the village headman, the bell ceremony introduces visitors to the traditions of the Wallawwa, while simultaneously notifying all the hotel staff that new guests have arrived.
much happier.

As one of the few female GMs in Sri Lanka, what are your views on women and the hospitality industry here?

A: There is a misconception that working in hospitality is not a suitable job for women. We, however, try as much as possible to change that.

We go and visit village schools and I bring Dilrukshi Kariyawasam, our Junior Front Office Executive with me. She is a role model for the young women. She is from the local area and has worked her way up from a laundry assistant to front office executive. Her career shows young girls that they can get into this industry and progress upward.

I was also recently invited by the Cultural Triangle Hoteliers association to talk to the women staff in their hotels. To share my experiences with them and let them know that it’s how you deal with difficulties that helps you to sustain in the industry. We discussed the problems they faced and how to overcome them. I have been in the industry for over 25 years and I started in Sri Lanka. For me, as a young woman in the industry, it was not an easy path, but if you are strong you can overcome it.

In my team, I have 13 women staff, in guest facing roles, the kitchen, laundry, and the garden. Previously, it was thought that women are not strong enough to work in the garden but we have proved them wrong. A woman can do any job that a man does, you just need to have the proper mind-set.

The hotel is located in a beautiful rural spot. Does that bring its own challenges?

A: If you are located in an area like this, it’s very important to have good relations with the community, the local people, and the police.

As an example, at the end of last year, we built 5 new villas and the access road was through a village. When the land owners wanted to sell, we were helpless. By good fortune, I spoke to the gentleman who helped with our coffee machine and he gave me access through his land. If I didn’t have that relationship I would have been totally lost getting the big trucks through the hotel to the site.

Community involvement is very important. We invite the local community to special events, like when we had an all-night pirith chanting, and we encourage them to supply us their crops of organic vegetables to create employment. If the paddy farmers don’t have enough water, we will divert ours to help them, they just need to come and ask.

What is your goal for the next two years?

A: To be the best boutique hotel. From a business point of view, we have a target of a minimum 98% rating on trip advisor.

My other target is to make sure my team is happy and well looked after. I want to hear their suggestions. I have one-on-one meetings and feedback is recorded anonymously and circulated back to the department heads. In return we, the management, review and respond by an agreed date. It’s not a one-way process. We need to put a lot of effort in to get these things done, but we do it because it’s important. 

"There is a misconception that working in hospitality is not a suitable job for women. We try as much as possible to change that"
Marketing pays dividends: But getting it right is a challenge

Marketing is the engine room of companies that must connect and engage with a steady stream of new customers to stay in business. For example, at the top end, the likes of Expedia Group and Booking Holdings each spend billions—billions—of dollars a year to spread the good news and create and maintain brand loyalty.

Nowhere is this customer outreach more essential than in the hotel and hospitality industries. Which is why Hospitality Insider is here to help you to a) get the best out of your marketing budget and b) just as important, effectively measure its ROI (return on investment). Over the coming year, we will examine how SME properties can get a grip on cost-effective marketing—marketing that is affordable and actually works—and how to best measure its ROI. In short, how, and by how much, does marketing add to your bottom line?

We will take an in-depth look at how the main online marketing tools including Facebook, Instagram and YouTube can be used to connect and engage with customers: how to maximise your hotel occupancy rates and restaurant takings, and thus drive up revenue. Most small to medium hotels and hospitality businesses cannot justify the expense of a dedicated marketing team. They might have the basics in place—website, Facebook page,
Instagram, (maybe) YouTube account, and possibly a blog—but they will likely be either outsourced or managed (mislabeled?) in-house by someone who has many other things to worry about. However, you go about it, the bottom line is that the right marketing strategy—one that reaches the right customers in the right place at the right time—is now so vital that if you haven’t got one you are in trouble. But how do you know if you’ve got it right? Or, more to the point, got it wrong?

The answer is three-fold: first you engage the right people—people who demonstrably know what they’re doing—and pay them the right amount to create the right marketing strategy; then you implement it; then you measure its success (or failure).

Google ‘marketing return on investment’ (MROI) and you get 250,000,000 results. So advice on how to get the best out of your business is itself big business. And it all comes down to money—how much you invest in marketing a hotel in which you have already invested millions, often expensive borrowed millions on which investors want the expected return.

Which is where a medium-to-long-term business proposition runs head-on into the kind of short-term thinking that underpins many an enterprise: buy it for $X today and sell it for $X plus 35 percent tomorrow. Little or no marketing cost, and an immediate and easily measured ROI.

But that shopkeeper mindset does not work in the tourist-facing hospitality industry. Here, you are selling a dream, an experience where customers need to be wooed and won over time, not hit over the head with a boilerplate sales pitch followed by “thank you and goodnight”.

For a hotel, that dream, that once-in-a-lifetime guest experience, often comes down to two things: value and customer engagement.

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- >2 billion active users (more than a quarter of the world’s population!)
- $55 billion generated from ad revenue in 2018
- 65 million local business pages
- >70 languages available
- One-third of users engage with brands regularly

INSTAGRAM

A global platform of engaged users. Picture heavy content lends perfectly to users daydreaming of their next vacation.

- >1 billion monthly users
- >500 million daily users of Instagram Stories
- 83% of marketers use the platform
- >80% of users follow a business on the app
- Thursday is the best day to post for user engagement

YOUTUBE

An essential tool for marketers, not just cute cat videos.

- >1.9 billion logged-in users visit YouTube every month
- >1 billion hours of video content watched every day
- >70% watchtime comes from mobile devices
- 91 countries have local YouTube versions
- Can be navigated in 80 languages, covering 95% of the internet population
- 14 years since the first video, ‘Me at the Zoo’ was uploaded
service, both of which depend on right-minded—or, at the very least, not wrong-minded—management, which itself is in short supply.

But while ROI is an essential component of any business, it can be difficult to exactly quantify. This is particularly the case with marketing—which is why it has its own acronym: MROI, or marketing return on investment.

In a recent interview, Jill Avery, a senior lecturer at Harvard Business School, says: “One of the downsides of marketing ROI is that it is easy to only recognize the incremental profits in short-term sales and underestimate the long-term benefits that marketing brings to brand value.

“This can be particularly challenging for executives who might be impatient to see a return. A CFO might just see marketing expenses walking out the door and not a corresponding build-up of cash flows and assets.”

Crucially, she says, “measuring the lag time associated with most marketing spending is another common challenge. If you spend $1 today, it might take three years for the marketing to ‘work’ and for the consumer to make a purchase.”

Which is hotel marketing in a nutshell, she says, where managers “are under tremendous pressure to deliver quarterly earnings, and may not be patient for the longer-term effects of marketing to take hold”.

Her takeaway? “Every marketing dollar you spend today is building your brand as an asset for the future. So, ideally your marketing program is not only affecting sales and profits this year, but also strengthening your brand equity and customer relationships over time.”

Accepted metrics in the hospitality industry state the following: 60-65% of bookings are made online; bookers spend an average of 53 days visiting 28 different sites over a period of 76 online sessions; more than 50% of bookers/travelers use social media for travel tips and information.

Meanwhile, over 69% of travelers use a search engine to plan their trip, and travelers conduct hundreds of Google searches, visit hundreds of websites and view thousands of images and videos in the course of deciding where to go and what to book.

On top of those raw statistics is the accepted fact that the aforementioned social media and ‘key influencer’ bloggers now play a make-or-break part in the success—or failure—of a hospitality business.

Which brings us back to the “sharp focus on minimising costs” and managers who “may not be patient for the longer-term effects of marketing to take hold”. Too often, when a hotel’s occupancy rate and restaurant takings fall at or below break even, the temptation is to cut the cost of anything that does not return an immediate ROI.

The result is often to reduce marketing spend when it is most needed, followed by a corresponding failure to connect and engage with potential customers. The outcome? A downward spiral of falling occupancy rates and restaurant returns, followed by cuts across the board, including essential service personnel, followed by … you get the picture.
TOURISM IN JAFFNA

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK

On the surface, tourism in Jaffna seems to be on the right track. Ten new hotel projects, a new train and the relaunch of Helitours flights were recently announced. Hospitality Insider spoke to hoteliers about the unique challenges they still face and their hopes for the future.

BY SHERWANI SYNON
AS OF MARCH, THERE ARE 19 HOTELS LISTED ON THE OFFICIAL SRI LANKA TOURISM WEBSITE, AND 10 NEW PROJECTS OFFERING 315 ROOMS IN THE PIPELINE.

I have been smitten with Jaffna since my first visit to the peninsula in 2011, as a part of a group of journalists to cover the first Jaffna Music Festival. The festival, a sister event of the biennial Galle Music Festival, was organised to revive the long-forgotten rich culture of the north, which had been alienated from the rest of the country for three decades. Back then, the city was in the midst of assembling its pieces. There were few hotels and fewer tourists. Differences in language meant a simple verbal exchange with local vendors proved to be extremely difficult. The journey from Colombo took an arduous 13 hours on a bumpy road. However, as I entered the peninsula, there was a sense of wonder that took hold of me. Four trips over eight years later and I still haven’t been able to shake it off.

Now the journey to Jaffna takes nine hours on a smoothly carpeted A9 road and six hours on the intercity train. As of March, there are 19 hotels listed on the official Sri Lanka tourism website and there are 10 new projects offering 315 rooms in the pipeline. Many are venturing towards the north, now more than ever, to experience the region’s rich culture and sample some of the best food the island has to offer.

Investors are seizing the opportunity to stake a claim in the lush landscape in the north, but connectivity has long been an issue of concern. While the Yal Devi train has breathed new life to the region, the six- to nine-hour journey is still a damp- er for the time-conscious foreign travellers, who are astounded by travel times in the island when compared to its size. For years, flying to Jaffna – an hour and a half journey from Colombo – was an option available to those who had the means but gradually independent domestic carriers cancelled their scheduled flights to the area. Here too, things
CHRISTOPHER PONNADURAI - General Manager of Jetwing Jaffna and North Gate by Jetwing

With roots in Jaffna, Ponnadurai returned to Sri Lanka after spending 30 years in Australia running his own North Indian restaurant, hoping to contribute to the island’s development. He feels that he has achieved what he set out to do and “if others can also do the same, Sri Lanka would be a better place”. He emphasised the importance of vision and patience when you want to drive change, and that you can’t implement western thinking in a local context and that it needs to be adapted to the setting. “I strongly believe change is possible, but it might take some time; that’s where patience comes in.”

Connectivity aside, what else does Jaffna need in order to thrive in the tourism sector?

Jetwing, a well-known brand in the hospitality industry, has two hotels in the north - Jetwing Jaffna, which offers accommodation in 55-bedrooms launched in 2016, and North Gate by Jetwing, a 44-bedroom property that the group started managing last year. Christopher Ponnadurai, a former restaurateur who was based in Australia for three decades, returned to the island in 2015 in the hope of contributing to the country’s development. Now, as the General Manager of both hotels, Ponnadurai feels that the lack of interesting experiences in Jaffna is one of the city’s main drawbacks as a travel destination.

Unlike the south coast, which has a plethora of activities and hosts experiences ranging from adventure and wellness to food, the north places emphasis on its more traditional, touristic sites including numerous temples and the Jaffna fort. While this may interest heritage and cultural visitors, tourism growth in the area is dependent on its
ability to create a diverse identity that will entice travellers with different interests.

“Arugam Bay is known for surfing and Mannar is starting to promote kitesurfing, so similar opportunities also need to be explored in Jaffna because tourists want experiences,” says Ponnadurai. In an attempt to do their part in introducing new experiences as well as providing travellers with the chance to explore the city in a unique way, he plans to launch horse-drawn carriage rides around Jaffna city for guests at both Jetwing hotels.

Echoing similar sentiments, Sangaran Hariharan, the owner of Jaffna’s first tourist accommodation – Subahas Hotel, also feels that the city needs to widen its offerings as a destination so that it can be an area that caters to a broader audience with varied interests. The 29-bedroom hotel, set up in 1970 by his father, a Kerala native who came to Sri Lanka looking for better prospects, has lived through the most difficult times of Sri Lanka’s 30-year civil war. Although Hariharan, the oldest of seven, studied as an engineer in London, he decided to follow his father’s footsteps by taking over the hotel when he returned to the country in the 1980s. A renowned brand with the baby boomers’ generation, Subahas still has a loyal FIT client base from France, Australia, Germany, England and is popular among Indian pilgrimage groups.

“From a tourist point of view, we don’t have activities specially for youngsters to enjoy,” says Hariharan, stressing the need for alternative options for families with kids and teenagers who visit the region. He cites the absence of activities as the biggest obstacle for tourism growth in the northern peninsula. In addition to rectifying this, the hotelier also suggests that the government should consider introducing defined areas for tourists especially on the coast so that they can enjoy themselves without upsetting the cultural values of the locals.

Due to the peninsula’s history and positioning, it is also one of the last locations in the island to welcome the tourism industry. While hotels might be opening up, the need for proper regulations to help navigate a budding tourism industry in a conservative culture is a point that seems to be unattended. In the absence of these, the hospitality sector needs to be cautious to ensure that locals in the region will not turn towards hostility as tourism booms, when the community is unable to cope with the influx of visitors or the culture clash.

The hoteliers emphasised that Jaffna has much potential but are concerned if
the government and Sri Lanka Tourism Board are doing enough to promote the destination. Due to its distance from Colombo, another question to ponder - is the region being packaged properly?

Fox Resorts, a hotel collection started by Capital Maharaja in 2017, opened its latest venture Fox Jaffna last year. At present, Fox Resorts manages several accommodations including Mas Villa in Kotmale, Ranna Beach Villa near Tangalle, and is in the midst of constructing another property in Kandy. With ancestral roots and land in Jaffna, setting up a hotel of their own seems to have been a dream of the Chairman of Capital Maharaja, R. Rajamahendran. Chris Quyn, the Chief Executive Officer of Fox Resorts, feels that there's significant tourism growth in the northern peninsula. Occupancy has doubled in this 24-bedroom boutique hotel since its launch in August and Quyn is confident that numbers will increase further by next year. The hotel is graced by domestic tourists, the diaspora community, and visitors from Germany, Japan, and several Asian countries. While he feels that certain niche travel agents are doing their part to promote Jaffna by designing custom tours, there's plenty room for improvement. Ponnadurai recommended that the city should be incorporated in the Cultural Triangle route - which currently comprises Anuradhapura – Polonnaruwa – Dambulla and Sigiriya to counteract the distance. The inclusion of the northern peninsula into this route will give travellers an opportunity to explore not only Jaffna culture but also the landscape unique to the area. "In the 1970s and 80s, we promoted Kandy in the south by including it on a day or two-day tour to see the Temple of the Tooth,
cultural dances, and the batik industry, and I think the same theory can be applied to boost Jaffna.”

Travel agents cite the lack of product knowledge on Jaffna as one of the main reasons they are unable to promote it to more visitors. While interest in the region has increased over the years, they feel hesitant to encourage tourists to visit, as it is difficult to find chauffeur-guides who have sufficient information on the area to accompany travellers. The importance of conducting a thorough study on Jaffna to explore available options for experiences and activities is also highlighted. This research can be handled in conjunction with the tourism board authorities to educate chauffeur-guides – who are essentially Sri Lanka’s ambassadors for travellers who visit the country.

Staffing is another major concern for this budding sector in Jaffna, as much as it is to hoteliers in the rest of the country. Despite the island’s eagerness for development, Sri Lanka continues to uphold some of its more traditional values. The country places a high value on careers related to medicine, law, accounting, engineering, and more recently, IT, and disregards jobs that do not fall under any of these categories. These views are shared by most families in Jaffna, an area where government jobs have always been highly prioritised, causing big problems to the hospitality sector, which is only starting to gain momentum. The lack of young blood...
with no scope for training except at the hotel is a spoke in the wheels. Compounding the problem, those who join the sector are ambitiously looking for a one-way ticket overseas as soon as they shed their training wheels. Ponnadurai returned to the country a year before the launch of Jetwing Jaffna in 2016, in order to recruit and train staff for the hotel. He trained 65 – 70 people and the hotel absorbed over 60% of its team from the Jaffna Youth Development Programme (JYDP) graduates. Although 85% of the current staff at Jetwing Jaffna are from nearby areas, recruiting new staff is difficult, especially for the stewarding department because “no one wants to wash dishes.” In 2015, when the hotel was launched, they received 500 applications for roles, but with the number of accommodations increasing over the last four years, the hotels have had to compete for the same pool of people, making recruitment a much harder task.

Although it has been three years since the first Jetwing hotel in Jaffna was launched, Ponnadurai believes the local response to the hospitality sector has not changed much, as it’s “difficult to penetrate their traditional values.” He adds, “People here are different. Someone who works in a restaurant in Galle, would want to go to Colombo to get more experience but here they just want to go overseas; they think that’s the only way to make it.” The fact that many in Jaffna do not speak the principal language used in the rest of the country is also one of the main reasons to seek foreign employment.

Exuding a more homely vibe in a modern setting, The Thinnai is a 39-suite hotel offering 58 bedrooms, some with cooking facilities, developed and managed by Thinnaveli Property Developers. Nissanka Mangalagama, general manager of the hotel, says that in order to deal with the lack of training opportunities in the north, they have started a hotel school in-house. Although the owners are keen on employing all of their staff from the area, the lack of training forced the management to hire key staff members, especially cooks from other areas. The in-house training programme trains people in front office, housekeeping, kitchen and food and beverage, and soft skills. Once they are sufficiently trained, depending on available vacancies, they are absorbed to the existing workforce or are qualified to seek employment in the hospitality sector elsewhere. After spending 16 years at Tu-ryaa Kalutara on the west coast, Mangalagama moved to Thinnai prior to its launch, seeking new challenges in a completely new setting.

Sharing his views on the training shortage, Quyn of Fox Resorts, a veteran hotelier with 32 years’ experience in the hospitality industry, says that there’s an urgent requirement for a hotel school in the north and it could be a joint venture between the government and the private sector. “People are keen to join the industry but they need to have the right kind of training.”

The region’s strong belief in the traditional caste systems is also another factor that means many families are hesitant to let their children join the hospitality sector, The absence of a common wastewater management system is yet another hurdle that is currently affecting hotels in Jaffna. Unlike in Colombo, the city does not have a common system in place to deal with wastewater, which forces hotels to invest in their own wastewater systems. In order to renew their licence every year with the Sri Lanka Tourism Board, hotels are required to submit a collection of reports including water sample, fire, insurance policy for public liability, medical reports of staff and the environmental protection licence by the Central Environmental Authority. The latter is only provided to hotels if they have duly submitted a report for a wastewater plant that will be built and operated at the expense of the hotel.
SANGARAN HARIHARAN - Owner of Subahas Hotel

Qualified as an engineer in the UK, Hariharan returned to Sri Lanka in the 1980s to take over the reigns of his father’s hotel - Subahas, Jaffna’s first hotel, in order to fulfill family obligations as the oldest child. The hotel was occupied by the LTTE as well as the Sri Lanka Army at different periods during the civil war. After resuming operations in 2013, Hariharan still wakes up at 5.30am every morning to ensure that the hotel is ready for new guests. The only family member to have committed his life to his father’s dream, Hariharan is uncertain what the future holds for Subahas.

Hariharan feels that this situation is unnecessary and extremely costly for the hoteliers and could be avoided if the local authorities invested in a common wastewater disposal system covering the northern peninsula, or at minimum the city area. After being given a grace period for being the oldest hotel in Jaffna, Hariharan is in the process of building a wastewater treatment plant for Subahas, investing a sum of “one million rupees” and will have to incur daily costs to manage and operate the plant once it is completed.

Several hotels including Jetwing Jaffna and Fox Resorts have managed to turn this situation to their advantage by recycling this water to maintain their gardens, after the water has been sufficiently treated. In the case of Thinnai - located 10 minutes from the city, they use it to sustain their organic farm at their sister property Thinnai Organic Farm. However, this could place city hotels that do not enjoy the luxury of space at a massive disadvantage. While this may be a solution to ensure that there is a functioning system for hotels which would not interfere with the local wastewater framework at present, whether it is practical and sustainable in the long term is a question yet to be answered.

Having seen Jaffna develop over a period of eight years, I’m amazed at the changes the region has gone through despite the many difficulties it has had to face. While many hoteliers are hopeful that the right infrastructure solutions combined with a larger selection of trained staff will help tourism grow, others ponder whether the lack of activities unique to the area will leave the city with more hotels and fewer travellers. An unattractive prospect for any tourist location. As for me, I hope my admiration for the peninsula continues to grow with every visit and that Jaffna will receive the attention it deserves, not only to boost its appeal as a travel destination but so that its culture, history, and environment will be preserved for generations to come.
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2018, A YEAR IN REVIEW

Asia-Pacific Region Continues to Dominate

The Asia-Pacific region continues to be the number one regional source of tourist traffic to Sri Lanka with a 47% share of the total tourist numbers visiting in 2018. Noticeably, this is down 3% on the last two years when the region was responsible for 50% of Sri Lanka’s tourist arrivals.

The European region has grown 4.4% compared to its market share in 2016 and is now responsible for 44% of arrivals. The Americas region has seen growth, particularly over the last year, increasing from 5% market share in 2016 (104,000 visitors) to 6% in 2018 (138,000 visitors). Meanwhile, the Middle East has decreased 2.2% to a 3% market share. Visitor numbers from Africa have remained constant at 0.6% of total visitors.
In 2018, India was the largest source market by a significant margin with 425,000 visitors, up 10.5% on 385,000 arrivals in 2017. The second-largest market was China, with 266,000 visitors, a slight decrease of 1.1% compared to 269,000 visitors in 2017.

Following closely was the United Kingdom as the third-largest market where arrival numbers increased by a quarter, up 25.9% on 2017 levels to reach 254,000 visitors.

Together, the top three source markets totalled 945,000 arrivals, 40% of Sri Lanka’s total visitor numbers for 2018.

The 4th, 5th, and 6th largest source markets all surpassed 100,000 arrivals. Numbers from Germany increased 20.5% to reach 157,000 visitors, Australia was up a huge 36.5% to 111,000 visitors, driven by an increase in direct flights. Meanwhile, France recorded a smaller increase, up 9.4% to 106,000 visitors.

With a combined total of 1.6 million, the top ten source markets provided almost 70% of Sri Lanka’s 2.3 million total visitor numbers for 2018.

### Top 3 source markets provide almost 1 million visitors, 40% of total.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANKING 2018 (2017)</th>
<th>COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE</th>
<th>% CHANGE COMPARED TO 2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>-1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (3)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (4)</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (6)</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (5)</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (7)</td>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>-4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (9)</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (8)</td>
<td>Russian Federation</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 (10)</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within the top ten source markets, Australia saw the largest increase in visitors, with arrivals up 36.5% on the year before. Visitors from the United States were up 31% while the United Kingdom increased 25.9%. Visitor numbers from Maldives and China declined.

### Visitor Numbers by Month

- **Hotels begin to feel the effect of cancellations in the MICE sector as a result of political crisis.**
- **Arrivals see a significant increase, boosted by UK cricket fans.**
- **Attacks in popular tourism spots Mirissa and Midigama receive international attention.**
- **Visitor numbers have increased just 4% since 2015 levels.**
- **Charter flights from TUI, Edelweiss, and Aeroflot commence.**
- **2017 tourism arrival figures saw little to no growth due to airport closure.**
- **2018 arrivals for 2018 finish up 10.3% year on year to 2.3 million.**
- **Between 2014 and 2016, Chinese visitor numbers in July doubled to 30,000, driving up mid-year arrivals.**
- **During Sep & Oct, 2018, there is little to no growth on 2017 levels.**

**Source:** Data in this article is taken from the SLTDA’s published statistics.
ALWAYS DRESSED FOR THE OCCASION - General Manager
Robert C. Hauck next to Prince Phillip's first car, a 1935 model Standard Nine
GALLE FACE HOTEL EMBRACES ITS HERITAGE ROOTS

Sri Lanka’s most iconic hotel is paving its way in a new direction

interview by SHERWANI SYNON
photography by SHAFRAZ FAROOK
Since its launch in 1864, the Galle Face Hotel has been a landmark attracting visitors from far and wide. In recent years, this icon of Colombo has had to compete with more modern hotels and global chains occupying its surrounding area. The hotel’s new General Manager, Robert C. Hauck, believes that the hotel’s rich heritage is the answer to setting it apart from the rest.

When you take an up close and personal look at Robert C. Hauck, the impeccably dressed General Manager of Galle Face Hotel, you will notice that his entire attire from his crisp grey-toned suit to his Panerai watch emphasises an appreciation for everything refined. A firm believer of ‘you have to dress the part,’ Hauck was appointed as the General Manager and Area Vice President eight months ago. Since then, much has changed in the oldest hotel East of Suez.

In 2016, Louis T Collection, an international hospitality management company tied up with Galle Face Hotel on a historic strategic transition in management. The Singapore-based company has several independently owned hotels under their wing, from Ares Eiffel Paris Hotel to Mantra Samui Resort in Thailand. Great things were hoped for from the partnership, which was planned for the long term. However, a little over 2 years later, in December 2018, it came to an end. “They did some great work and now it’s time we run on our own feet,” says Hauck, explaining that Galle Face Hotel was able to organise themselves independently after a strategic transition in management. The flat hierarchy in the hotel’s corporate team, they are now able to support the hotel. The flat hierarchy in the hotel’s management also aids them to respond to situations much faster when compared to companies that have complicated managerial structures.

With over 25 years’ experience in the hospitality sector that spans 14 countries, for the longest time, Raffles was Hauck’s favourite brand because of its history and potential compared to other hotels. Raffles Hotels & Resorts is part of AccorHotel, a leading travel and lifestyle group, with 13 hotels under this particular brand scattered across the world from Singapore – the pioneer of the brand – to Paris. Hauck believes, unlike independently owned properties, that hotels backed by global brands have limitations in their possibilities. He credits Gardiner’s involvement and their work relationship as one of the defining factors of their new vision for Galle Face Hotel.

“Their chairman is very passionate about the product. He’s an entrepreneur and wants to do a lot of new things and sometimes it’s my job to hold him back because he’s so passionate,” says Hauck, describing his relationship with Gardiner. With such passion, it’s unsurprising that big things are planned for the coming months.

Plans are already underway to set up a new venture that will help owners with heritage properties like Galle Face Hotel based within the island as well as overseas. “There are many proprietors, passionate about their hotel and who do not want to give up the reigns to an international brand but maybe need a bit of assistance in managing or marketing the hotel,” says Hauck. Independent owners might not be able to get the level of worldwide recognition or press exposure and, “Many owners don’t want the name of another company on their hotel and lose their identity as it has been in their family for many years so that’s where we will come in and give support but that’s still in the planning stage.”
The hotels, guesthouses and rest houses under Colombo's Hotel Corporation play an important role in the travelling history of Sri Lanka.

Along with the CHC group are able to cover the unique niche of historic properties.

With a keen eye for detail and the enthusiasm and energy of ten, Hauck is charismatic and has an uncanny resemblance to a James Bond character. He is always on the move, ensuring that everything is running smoothly, whether it's a conference or evening tea along the veranda. “To run a hotel is relatively easy. To run an old hotel; well, it's quite difficult, and to run it extremely well is almost an art,” says Hauck.

Galle Face Hotel has 156 rooms on offer in five room classifications including two suite categories. Originally launched as a hotel in 1864, no two rooms are identical, and over its 155 years of prestige has hosted many eminent personalities from statesmen, royalty, and celebrities, including Emperor Hirohito of Japan, Donald Bradman, and Vivien Leigh. In Hauck's view, the ideal customer, or the guests of Galle Face Hotel, visits the hotel to be a part of its history and does not expect everything to be perfect.

It's important for hotels to attract the right kind of guests that fit in with the product's philosophy and this is especially true for Galle Face Hotel, which prides itself for its niche angle, “You have to put the right people in the right shoes, and we practically sell handmade leather shoes and not running shoes,” says Hauck.

Hauck believes that those who come to the hotel are unique in their own way and expect a certain quirkiness, eccentricity, and great service. To enhance the guest experience, Hauck has initiated a few practices starting from presenting handwritten welcome cards to every guest that stays at the hotel. While the task may be considered laborious and time consuming, the concept of a handwritten, personalised note has the potential to take the traveller back to an era where this was the norm, executing the vision Hauck plans for the hotel's new direction.

Hauck has also resurrected four postcards featuring old images of Galle Face Hotel and the stamp which was launched in 2012 – the first and only Sri Lankan hotel to be featured on a stamp. He has even restored a sculpture of Yuri Gagarin – the first man in space – a gift given to the hotel by Russia in the 1980s, which he had stumbled across during his many wanderings in

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**DEMOGRAPHY OF CLIENTELE**

- **19%** BRITAIN
- **17%** AUSTRALIA
- **10%** INDIA
- **10%** USA
- **04%** GERMANY
- **04%** CHINA
- **04%** SRI LANKA
- **02%** JAPAN
- **02%** SWITZERLAND
- **01%** CANADA
- **27%** OTHER NATIONALITIES
To run a hotel is relatively easy. To run an old hotel; well, it’s quite difficult, and to run it extremely well is almost an art.”

The lobby - this is where a hotel comes alive.

In addition to the upcoming project, which Hauck guards safely in his suit pocket, he is also determined to place Galle Face Hotel alongside some of the most sought-after hotels in the world. He is currently working with Andreas Augustin, Founder of the Most Famous Hotels in the World, an independent company that produces literary publications of historical hotels to publish a book on this iconic hotel. Giving guests and visitors the chance to get an insight to the hotel’s vibrant history.

The landscape around Galle Face has gone through significant changes over the last few years, with global names such as Shangri-La, ITC, and Hyatt staking a claim on this prized land in the heart of Colombo. Hauck feels that “competition is important to increase quality” and that they are not simply competing with other hotels in the island, but also, with other destinations.

Hauck, whose career has taken him to the likes of Switzerland, Portugal, and several Asian countries from China to Taiwan, explained that in the past, they have made the mistake of competing against four-star hotels in Colombo. “We are moving away from that pattern because there are more and more international brands coming into the country.” Hauck is now committed to correcting past mistakes, because he feels he has understood the needs and psyche of their clientele; “They pay for this history and would be disappointed if it was very modern.”

He observed that he wants to distinguish themselves from other hotels that provide a simpler product unlike Galle Face Hotel, which is historic and has a different attachment and angle, especially to those who appreciate heritage. “Even if they don’t stay here, they have to come see the Galle Face or come for afternoon tea.”

Since his appointment in July 2018, Hauck has been instrumental in organising several noteworthy events, including a vintage suitcase competition hosted at the iconic chequerboard and celebrating Sri Lanka’s No. 1 ranking in Lonely Planet with guests from the global publication. Pimm’s o’clock, another initiative by Hauck, which takes place every evening is the signature drink of Galle Face Hotel as well as the recipient of the first crate of Pimms to arrive in Sri Lanka in 1865, carving a landmark in the history of the hotel.

With a strong background in brand development and public relations, Hauck is resolute in positioning the island on the map as a destination that must be explored. They have generated a lot of press coverage internationally and he believes that boutique hotels and nature hotels should also move in the same direction. “Sri Lanka has the essence of many things that other countries don’t possess,” says Hauck, stressing that they have to take advantage of the country’s unique location. At the same time, he emphasised that it’s important to look at long-term gains so that everyone in the hospitality sector will enjoy its benefits.

The minimum room rate has been a hot topic of discussion for some time. In Hauck’s view, Sri Lanka has to be careful of pricing itself too low. While potential guests are willing to pay set prices, it is human psychology that if they get a bargain, they would rather pay that instead. The Galle Face Hotel has been actively trying to get their rates up and has made a conscious decision to push for more FIT business, which they feel is suited to Galle Face Hotel’s iconic status.

A staunch believer of firm leadership, he doesn’t expect anything from the staff which he can’t do and says that in a hotel such as Galle Face, “the work never runs out.” Although adequate systems have been placed, systems alone will not ensure that things will run smoothly, and this stands particularly true in historical hotels.

He highlighted the value in setting priorities and directions, particularly when it comes to old hotels. The staff can be disorganised, but when they are aligned in the same direction, it becomes easier. “At the beginning, when you take over a hotel like this, you have to do a lot of micromanaging. I’m not a fan of it, but it’s almost like a brainwashing exercise to show people what the standards are. Once you reach a standard and everyone is on the same page, you can then concentrate on other areas.”

Driven by the vision to place Galle Face Hotel and the group’s latest venture at the forefront of hospitality by preserving its history and giving it due recognition, Hauck is leading the way for big changes at Sri Lanka’s grand old dame.
The Glassware Guide

Glassware is an essential investment, but being bound to break at some point, it is also a costly one. With the expertise of Shiyani Saranapala, we look at selecting styles to suit your establishment, how to store glasses properly and ask, is the champagne glass dead?

A fundamental essential for every establishment, the variety of choices on offer for glassware can sometimes seem overwhelming. Style, stability, variety, durability and of course, cost, all come into play. Frequent breakages are a given, so how do you make a wise investment choice?

Shiyani Saranapala, Head of Operations at Vinum Academy of Wine & Beverage, recommends before making any purchases, to ask yourself ‘what is the nature of your establishment?’ and ‘how extensive is your wine program?’ Are you a casual, laid back café, serving simple food, with 5-10 wines on offer? Or are you a fine dining establishment with an extensive list where guests expect a certain standard?

“At the end of the day, we all want to raise the bar rather than adhere to the norm,” Saranapala says, “but knowing who you are, who you want to be, and what you want to offer is the first step”.

The next consideration is overheads. “For anything that’s breakable, there’s always a sense of do ‘we really need to invest in this?’” says Saranapala. Before moving into the specialist wine industry four years ago, she worked in hospitality. The mental image of a financial controller sitting on the manager’s shoulder asking ‘how much?!!’ is a familiar one.

Expenditure on things that are, inevitably, going to keep breaking should be carefully considered alongside operational requirements. Crystal glassware may be luxurious but it also requires hand washing and careful polishing. Have you got sufficient staff to allocate to this time-consuming requirement? Will they treat the glassware with the required level of care? If the

Shiyani Saranapala, Head of Operations at Vinum Academy of Wine & Beverage. Her favourite pairing – Prosecco with a spicy crab curry.
answer is anything other than a confident 'yes’ to both questions, it may be better to go for dishwasher-safe varieties.

A hotel that provides banquet services with 500+ covers needs glassware that can be dealt with easily in high numbers, transported, and quickly turned around. A café with 30 covers but does two sittings every lunch needs glasses that are fairly sturdy, not easily breakable, and dishwasher safe.

First and foremost understand, who and what you are as an establishment, then focus on what’s operationally viable.

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**ALL OR ONE?**

The traditional minimum requirement for glassware is a set of three: one good glass for white, a slightly bigger glass for red, and a flute for champagne & sparkling wines. Rose can be served in a glass meant for white, so Saranapala recommends that if your menu is “comprehensive but not extensive”, these three should serve you well.

“It’s not necessary for establishments to invest in 7 styles of glassware, but it also boils down to your wine menu” says Saranapala. “If you have a wine list that is 60-70 bottles strong then you’re going to have multiple styles and aroma profiles.” More extensive wine lists require a more specialised range of glasses designed to enhance the flavour profile of each grape variety, and ultimately the guest experience.

The trend of a ‘universal glass’ that can be used for any type of wine has bounded on the scene to challenge the traditional approach. “It’s a clever concept from a storage, usage and maintenance point of view” says Saranapala. Using universal glasses removes operational complexities like having to stack multiple styles in a dishwasher, as well as reducing the space needed for storage. “I’m not sure how the glass manufacturers feel about it, as they’d want people to need multiple styles” Saranapala muses, but “there seem to be more pros than cons. It will come down to people experiencing what the glass has to offer”. With a single universal glass costing in the region of $30 (Rs5,400), there is a trade off with the cost. On the one hand, you only need to purchase one style, not 3 or 4, but on the other, the impact of a single breakage is significantly higher. “Price-wise you might be better off having a red and a white glass, but if the universal glass becomes more popular, it will become more affordable”.

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**TO STEM OR NOT TO STEM?**

Another trend that’s becoming popular, particularly in European bistros is stemless glassware. Minimising breakages, portabil-
ity, and compact storage are some upsides, but the downside is that without a stem to hold, there is nothing to prevent the transfer of body heat to the wine, which often affects its taste negatively. Saranapala’s view? “I’m not opposed to it, but personally I’m a bit of a traditionalist; I like a wine glass that I can hold by the stem”.

~ STORAGE ~

Taking proper care of glasses is crucial to safeguard their longevity. Sri Lanka’s tropical climate brings with it its own set of complications: dust, pests, and high levels of moisture are issues island-wide.

Handy Hint: Different wines can be stored together in a wine fridge, then brought down to the cooler temperatures required in an ice bucket before serving.

The humid climate means storing glasses in the boxes they arrive in isn’t wise, as the cardboard will inevitably disintegrate and attract mould. If proper racks aren’t an option, storing them upside down in porous plastic crates will prevent dust and pests from going inside. Operationally, they are also lightweight, stackable, and easily moved around.

Be mindful of where you store your glasses. You don’t want to have to wash them every time you get them out, so minimising dust and odours is important. Since the first step of tasting wine is the smelling, avoid storing glasses in musty cupboards or near cooking areas where food aroma molecules may settle inside the glass.

~ TIME TO SCRAP THE FLUTE? ~

It’s long been associated with special events and celebrations, but is the champagne flute actually essential for enjoyment of the wine? Saranapala says no. What is important for sparkling varieties is
that the glass has a tulip-shaped base. This enables a slow release of bubbles by keeping the CO2 in the wine longer. A straight flute displays the bubbles beautifully, but it doesn’t give space for the aromas to develop. A wider, white wine glass with a tulip-shaped base may be more suitable for sparkling wine than a round-bottomed flute. Focusing on the shape, rather than the size, is key.

*COST*

‘Wine glasses, like fine wines, have always been a symbol of civilized living’ said the Russian wine writer and entrepreneur Alexis Lichine. The amount of money you want to spend on your glassware is tied to your type of establishment. As the price of a bottle of wine goes up, often so does the guest’s expectation about the glassware. High-end establishments may choose to invest in international branded glassware from the likes of Riedl or Plumm as part of the particular experience they aim to give to their guests.

Prices vary widely, with a single glass costing anything from a few hundred rupees to easily ten times that. An average price per stem is around Rs1,000-1,800, says Saranapala. “If six glasses are broken this evening, you want to ensure you have enough in reserve for tomorrow,” so think about buying 20% more stock than your sitting numbers require. This also helps ensure sufficient supply if guests choose to drink two styles of wine in one meal.

When investing in new glassware, it pays to think carefully about all the options available and choose styles that match with your establishment style and operational requirements.

**Stemless glasses** are growing in popularity, and by virtue of their design may be less prone to breakages.
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From Field to Fine Dining: Harvest Table at Anantara Peace Haven

Experiencing authentic Sri Lankan life is high on the list of most visitors to this beautiful island, especially when it means sampling the country’s delicious cuisine.

At Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort, the Harvest Table experience does just that, combining traditional farming methods, outdoor cooking, and the trend for the hyper-localisation of food. Set in lush paddy fields within the hotel grounds, itself a 21-acre former coconut plantation, the Harvest Table experience begins in the lobby where guests are met and taken on a walk through to the organic gardens, tucked at the back of the property and delightfully positioned beside a stream. The private tour of the gardens is conducted by Executive Chef Chaminda Pathirana, who enlightens and entertains, showcasing the types of produce growing and describing the traditional medicinal values of particular varieties. Perfectly ripe veggies are harvested, with guests getting a hands-on experience, before the tour winds its way to the traditional ‘muluthange’ (kitchen) in the paddy field.
Akila Roshen, Chef De Partie at Verela, welcomes the arrival of the catch of the day. Guests are given the option to choose their own fish, which is then cooked and served with red rice pilaf harvested from the resort, garden spinach and the chef’s signature curry emulsion.

Executive Chef Chaminda Pathirana leads guests on a tour of the garden, harvesting fresh produce for their lunch.

While the chefs start to prepare the food, guests can unwind (and cool down) with a well-deserved fresh king coconut beverage. A particular highlight is the arrival of Ranji, a local fisherman, who paddles down in his boat to deliver his catch of the day. Guests are given the chance to choose their own fish for their main course, under the guidance of the chef who describes the different tastes and textures on offer that day. The experience culminates in a four-course lunch, set above the paddy fields in a private dining tree house. Rustic, with stunning views, it is a setting worthy of an Instagram post. Served with organic wine, each course is introduced by the chef, who describes the balance of favours and explains how the guest-picked raw veggies have been transformed into fresh fine dining.

With this experience, Anantara Peace Haven has created an experience that taps into the cultural and gastronomic heritage of Sri Lanka, whilst maintaining the luxurious standard that their guests expect.
Leveraging Influencer Marketing

Finding the right Social Media Influencer for your brand in a world where everyone prides themselves on being an ‘influencer’ can be arduous. While their posts might be stunning, images and big numbers alone will not necessarily boost your brand presence in the way many influencers promise. Selecting the right influencer for your business is key. Our guide to influencer marketing shows you how.

As social media platforms gain momentum with every passing hour, it’s important to play an active role if you’re looking to promote your hotel to travelers across the world. More and more, millennials (aged 18 – 34 yrs) are using their Instagram and Facebook newsfeed to plan their next travel destination. Working with well-known Social Media Influencers (SMIs) can be a great way to leverage your brand’s exposure, but finding the right SMIs takes work.

In the past few years, SMIs have been playing a key role in leveraging brand presence across the world. While there are many legitimate and authentic influencers who want to promote brands for a freebie, there are also many fake accounts ruining the reputation of the good. So how do you find the right SMI that is best suited to you? Follow these seven steps to help you find the right influencer for your brand.
FAMILIARISE YOURSELF WITH THE NITTY-GRITTY

First things first, investigate their social media platform content. If they haven’t sent a press kit for you to review, ask for it and make time to go through it thoroughly. Ideally, a press kit will include links to all their social media platforms, analytics and insights, and the demographic of their audience base of these platforms. If they have a blog, ask for screen-shots of sessions, page views, average session duration and pages/session. This will give you a better understanding of who their audience is and if they are the right fit for you to ensure that you are marketing your product to the right clientele.

STUDY THEIR CONTENT

The SMI might have great images but do these images reflect your hotel brand and style? Remember, just because the images look fantastic on their platform does not necessarily mean they will complement your brand. Go through their past content, read through their posts, and watch videos they have created. When you work with an SMI, you give them the opportunity to be an ambassador of your brand so make sure that their content resonates with your hotel’s brand and philosophy.

CHECK ENGAGEMENT LEVELS

An SMI with over 200,000 followers is interested in working with your hotel. That’s fantastic! But how do you find out if these followers are fake or real? With many people jumping on the bandwagon of becoming a digital nomad (another name for SMIs), hotels need to be careful and selective. Make sure to read through the comments to understand what their audience is like. Are the comments engaging and does it sound authentic? Is the influencer interacting with his/her followers? Go through their followers’ accounts and ask yourself, are these the kind of clients you want for your hotel? Another important thing to make note of is the SMIs’ engagement rate. Select one recent post and apply this formula: Like + comment/number of followers’ x 100 = engagement ratio. On average it’s best to work with influencers who score more than 2% and be cautious of influencers with exceptionally high engagement because it could be fake. As the popularity of the influencer marketing grows, more people are resorting to buying followers and likes in order to enjoy the privileges of being an influencer without necessarily doing the actual work it requires.

NEGOTIATE MORE

You’ve done the necessary groundwork and you’ve decided to work with an SMI who compliments your hotel brand. In exchange for a few social media posts on their account, they would like a night or two at your hotel. What about them do you like? Is it their photography, blog, or vlogs? If there’s something particular that stands out, ask them if they would be willing to give more of it. Perhaps it can be a few images which you can use for your own marketing campaigns in the future, a 30-second video for Instagram or Facebook or an additional post on their platform. They might say no but there’s no harm in asking!

SIGN UP A CONTRACT

If you have an intention to work with many SMIs to promote your hotel, it’s best to draw up a contract or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to ensure that you and the influencer are on the same page on expectations and deliverables. This will give both parties a document to refer to at any given point. Make sure to include exact details, from the names of the influencer(s), accommodation basis, meals and beverages, and the number and type of deliverables agreed on.

REVIEW FIRST

Ask the SMI if they could share the post with you before publishing it on their platform. While you can’t demand big changes, you can review the post and see if it aligns with what you wanted from them. For SMIs, their accounts are their identity, so ensure that your request for changes are respectful and within reason.

ASK FOR A REPORT

Once the content has been published, ask the SMI to provide a report inclusive of screenshots of the posts supported with engagement insights. These details will give you a better understanding of how the posts performed as well as these can be used for your own marketing reports. Further, you can use this information as a reference to negotiate your next SMI collaboration to get the best results for your brand.
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