STORY OF SAYERLACK

Sayerlack is the flagship brand distributed by JAT Holdings and has the most innovative and highest quality wood finishes in the industry.

Since 1954, Sayerlack has offered a range of high-performance coatings for protecting and decorating wood. Easy to apply, they cater effectively to specific demands of all kinds. With over 60 years’ of experience under the belt, Sayerlack offers finishes that embody the ultimate durability and aesthetic quality.

When it comes to treatment and finishing of wood, no challenge is impossible for Sayerlack; with its high level of innovative coatings, dreams of protection, durability and beauty of wooden structures become a reality. Now with its new range maintenance products, which includes products for exterior and interior wood, antique furniture, flooring and even boats, there is no wooden surface that Sayerlack cannot protect.

Talk to the experts for more information

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28 THE ART OF SELLING
Upselling and cross-selling are essential skills. Understanding how and when you can promote products and deals is critical in maximising revenue through the guest cycle.

35 AN EXPERT’S GUIDE TO CURATING A WINE LIST
How to delight your guests and bring in the revenue.

54 THE DOMINO EFFECT
With security in place and a dozen promotions to choose from, are people in Colombo ready to return to hotel buffets and post work drinks?

"Recovery is not going to happen overnight. It’s a gradual process and a lot of thinking needs to be done in terms of the strategy going forwards"

~Rahul Chaudhary

22 FROM EAST TO WEST
How CG Hospitality is making its mark

66 HOSTING A FAM TRIP FOR SUCCESS
The surprising things travel agents are trained to look out for.
"Each organisation has their own style of operation. **The most important component is whether you can adapt and adjust** to that environment"

**ROHAN FERNANDOPULLE**
From being the first Sri Lankan Executive Chef at the Hilton Colombo to his latest position as the General Manager of Cinnamon Lakeside, Fernandopulle is always on the lookout for new ways to innovate.

**SUSTAINABLE GASTRONOMY AND WHY IT MATTERS TO HOTELS**
The number of international hotel chains who have made declarations to commit to sustainable practices this year is striking.

**59 RING, RING..HELLO? IS ANYONE LISTENING!?**
We all know first impressions are critical. Is your hotel really giving a positive impression on the phone?

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As an industry, hospitality is known to be highly stressful. Ensure the well-being of your staff is not overlooked.

"Each organisation has their own style of operation. **The most important component is whether you can adapt and adjust** to that environment"
THE RAMADA GM IS A MAN ON A MISSION

"As things are now, if hotels act together to attract potential guests it would have a much greater impact. For that read destination first. Sri Lanka first. The rest will follow"
3D Movie Time!

Sit back, headset on, here we go!

Move with your dashing heroes or get inside the most exciting story and look around your favourite movie sets at the Serendib Business Class Lounge in Bandaranaike International Airport. Our Lounge staff will help you pick the perfect adventure, to have fun while you wait!
EDITOR'S NOTE

From East to West

With long hours, demanding clientele and intense working environments it’s easy to see why the hotel industry is considered one of the most stressful occupations. The age of pocket technology with all its bleeps, pings, buzzes and alerts means a constant bombardment of information and requests. Even the non-urgent becomes pressing by virtue of on-the-go notifications.

While this might be a great development for guest satisfaction, allowing personalised communication and lightning-fast responses to requests and complaint handling, constant connectivity’s impact on mental health and well-being looks less rosy. Stress can have a hugely damaging impact on employee morale, staff retention and in turn business profitability, yet it is not costly to address. The Burnout Risk on p.62 provides practical strategies you and your staff can use to identify and tackle stress factors before they cause lasting damage.

As leader in a multinational conglomerate, our cover story interviewee this issue is no stranger to stressful situations. His father, Binod Chaudhary will be well-known to many in the industry for CG Corp Global’s investments in Sri Lanka, going as far back as 2001. Now Rahul Chaudhary leads the hospitality arm of the family business and is driving its rapid expansion. Drawing on his experience managing a portfolio spanning 15 countries, he speaks candidly about his strategy for growing the company internationally and reflects on Sri Lanka’s positioning as an investment destination.

On a lighter note, this issue we’re also taking a look at sustainability in the kitchen, under the spotlight thanks to the UN World Sustainable Gastronomy Day. Three very talented chefs from hotels in Sri Lanka have created dishes to celebrate different elements of sustainable cuisine. Accompanying this is our first ever video series - up on our website now - we’d love to hear your feedback.

Rachael Cove
rachael@hospitalityinsider.lk
A TEA DESTINATION FOR THE AFICIONADOS

Stay and dine at the highest elevation in Sri Lanka, while exploring the history of tea, plucking your own leaves to be made into personalised mementos, discovering local lifestyle, learning the working of a tea factory and partaking in a tea tasting experience. A holiday here is never just about ‘just another vacation’.

Heritage Tea Factory, Kandapola, Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka
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www.heritancehotels.com/teafactory
18 travel agents and tour operators visited Sri Lanka on a 10-day long familiarization tour from 6 -15 July. The visit comes a month after the Australian government lowered its travel ban to ‘exercise a high degree of caution’.

The tour provided the agents with the opportunity to visit lesser known locations amongst tour groups, including Trincomalee and Riverstone, as well as more established destinations. Their itinerary had a special emphasis on the cultural sites, and included the southern beaches, Kandy and Nuwara Eliya, which the agents had expressed interest in prior to their visit.

SLTDA reported that over 4,000 tourists arrived from Australia during June, making it the second largest source market, surpassing China and the UK. The visit organised by SLTPB hopes to capitalise on Australia’s growing interest in Sri Lanka.

18 travel agents and tour operators visited Sri Lanka on a 10-day long familiarization tour from 6 -15 July. The visit comes a month after the Australian government lowered its travel ban to ‘exercise a high degree of caution’.

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KHL REVENUE DROPS BY 27 PER CENT IN Q2
John Keells Hotels Plc (KHL) reported a loss of 437 million rupees in the June quarter, a 66 per cent increase from a year earlier.

Interim accounts disclosed that revenues from hotels in Sri Lanka fell 27 per cent in addition to a closure of a property in the Maldives.

Sales in Sri Lanka fell 27.6 per cent to 746.3 million rupees, after arrivals numbers fell 71 per cent in May after April events, followed by a 57 per cent drop in June.

Revenue at KHL’s Maldives operation fell 15.7 per cent to 948 million rupees, as one of its island resorts, Cinnamon Dhonveli Maldives, was partially closed for refurbishment.

Group level revenue for the June quarter fell 22 per cent to 1.7 billion rupees from a year earlier while the cost of sales rose 19 per cent to 658 million rupees, leading to gross profits falling 23 per cent to 1 billion rupees. Finance costs grew 75 per cent to 104.6 million rupees.

SRI LANKA HOTEL PIPELINE
Total pipeline: 31 Hotels 6,388 Rooms

16 Hotels 3,965 Rooms
In Construction:

12 Hotels 1,926 Rooms
Planning stage

3 Hotels 447 Rooms
Final Planning stage

Hotel Performance
Revenue down by 36 per cent and occupancy by 40 per cent says STB, whose sample comprises 147 hotels and 14,749 rooms in Sri Lanka.
Year on year metrics show the expected drop in performance compared to Q2 2018, but average daily rate increase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Down</th>
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<tr>
<td>Occupancy</td>
<td>40.2% to 32.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADR</td>
<td>7.9% to Rs 17,800</td>
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<tr>
<td>RevPAR</td>
<td>35.5% to Rs 5,730</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supply</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demand</td>
<td>40.9% to 428,178</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revenue</td>
<td>36.3% to 7,600 million</td>
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Sustainability

GREEN GLOBE CERTIFICATES FOR CINNAMON HOTELS

Cinnamon Bey Beruwala and Cinnamon Dhonveli Maldives have been awarded certifications by Green Globe Initiative in recognition of their global sustainability practices.

This is the fifth consecutive year that the Beruwala property has received this highly acclaimed ‘Gold’ status by Green Globe. All Cinnamon properties have received Green Globe certifications in the past.

Based in the US, with partners across the world, Green Globe identifies travel and tourism companies that apply eco-friendly approaches based on internationally accepted criteria.

In order to win this certification, both Cinnamon properties had to go through an in-depth evaluation process. The hotels had to demonstrate their ability to manage energy consumption, reduce their carbon footprint and achieve sustainable growth that aligns with national and regional environmental goals.

New Openings

TEA & EXPERIENCE FACTORY OPENS IN KANDY

Theme Resorts and Spa opened its latest hotel, Tea & Experience Factory on August 10.

The hotel located in Mandaramnuwara at the foothills of Piduruthalagala, the highest mountain in Sri Lanka, occupies a former tea factory built in 1830.

Offering 16 rooms and dormitory space for researchers and students, the hotel also has a tea factory within its premises. Through this unique setup, the management aims to provide guests the complete tea experience from leaf to cup.

The hotel has already gained interest from international tourists and have received reservations for August and the winter season.

Industry

East Coast Calls for Better Connectivity

Hotels in the east coast reported an average occupancy of 40 per cent during the month of July.

April to October is generally the best season for the east coast however, similar to the rest of the country, the east has been severely impacted by the events of Easter Sunday.

The President of the East Coast Hotel Association and General Manager of Amethyst Resort, Roshanth Selvaraj said that in the previous year the average occupancy rate was at 90 per cent.

Selvaraj said that the hotel association is working closely with the Eastern Province Tourism Bureau to market Trincomalee, Ampara and Passikudah directly to travel agents overseas.

“When a traveller asks about the east coast from a local travel agent, before checking with the area they immediately respond saying it is the offseason. We need to break that myth because it’s affecting the tourism industry in these locations.”

He added that they are also looking into solving the connectivity issue to Passikudah. At the moment, there are only intercity trains and buses at night to the location, with the exception of seaplanes operated by Cinnamon during the daytime.

“Passikudah is not a rich destination. We have a lot of backpackers who visit the area and they are not in a position to spend money on seaplanes. The lack of connectivity during the daytime is a huge drawback for tourism in the area,” says Selvaraj.

Crisis management workshops for SMEs

A series of workshops on crisis management and recovery measures have been conducted in Negombo, Hikkaduwa, Kandy, Polonnaruwa and Trincomalee for small and medium tourism enterprises (SMEs).

The initiative led by Market Development Facility (MDF), an Australian private sector development program endorsed by The Hotels Association of Sri Lanka (THASL) hopes to address the concerns of the SME sector in the aftermath of the April events.

The sessions are led by tourism industry veteran Srilal Miththapala, a Senior Tourism Advisor for MDF.

The workshops covered aspects including strengthening security, crisis communication and marketing, crisis budgeting, cash flow management, debt repayment strategies and revenue management.

During these sessions, hoteliers expressed that they are devising different tactics to mitigate loss due to the dip in arrival numbers. Hotel association members in Hikkaduwa collectively bargained for better terms with their suppliers which led creditors to ease off hotels for a short period. In Kandy, several hoteliers have switched suppliers to lower-cost options to permit the purchasing of small quantities.
AWARDS

HOTELS RECOGNISED FOR SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

The first National Sustainable Tourism Certificates (NSTC) were awarded at a ceremony in Colombo on 5 August. 37 hotels were awarded in recognition of their sustainability efforts in bronze, silver, gold and platinum categories.

The grand winner of the night, receiving the platinum award was Heritance Kandalama in Dambulla.

Speaking at the event, Kishu Gomes, Chairman SL Tourism, gave an impassioned speech highlighting the importance of Sri Lanka becoming more sustainable. Gomes estimated that Sri Lanka tourism could increase to 5 million tourist arrivals in four to five years. However he cautioned “we do this right or not at all, meaning we grow tourism in a sustainable manner, or not at all.”

The awards were established in partnership with the Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN) of UNDP. They aim to make Sri Lanka’s tourism businesses more competitive locally and internationally, and to build the country’s reputation as a sustainable tourism destination. So far they have been launched for the accommodation sector, with plans to extend to all tourism suppliers in future.

The criteria for the awards were set by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC). Randy Durband, CEO of GSTC congratulated the efforts Sri Lankan hotels had made so far but emphasized that this is only the beginning of the journey.

Upali Rathnayake, Director General of SLTDA, described the many benefits of sustainable practices to the environment and to the country financially. At the moment tourism is the third largest FX earner, but with the top two diminishing, “tourism can take the responsibility of the national need,” he said.

As an industry, tourism has a heavy environmental impact, from energy consumption to resource use. We need to maximize the benefit to the country while protecting the resources and minimizing waste Rathnayake explained. “These awards are a journey towards the future.”

Congratulations to all of the winners.

ELYON COLOMBO OPENS DOORS

The Elyon Colombo Hotel opened on 1 August. Based at Orion City, the 31-room property targets business travelers, with its convenient location and ease of access to the airport.

Presantha Jayamaha, Co-Founder of management company Elyon Hotels, acknowledged that now may not be the best time to open a new hotel with the current situation for tourism in Sri Lanka, but told reporters, “If not now, when? As Sri Lankans, we must believe in this country, this industry and our future.”

The Elyon Colombo is the chain’s second hotel in Sri Lanka. In 2017 they entered the hospitality sector with the management of the Best Western Elyon Colombo. Jayamaha describes the chain as a stand-alone lifestyle brand, which aims to create spaces for guests to rest, meet and think. The hotel plans a location-based strategy, focusing on clients of the nearby businesses, tech-savvy travelers and the MICE sector.

Despite the downturn currently being felt, Elyon Hotels remain optimistic about the future for tourism in Sri Lanka and is on the lookout for other locations to expand the brand into said Samantha Gunaratne, COO of Elyon Hotels. “Speed is not a concern for our expansion. Getting it right is crucial and properties below 100 rooms are ideal.”

Heritance Kandalama in Dambulla took home a platinum award and a special recognition award.
The South Asian Travel Awards 2019 (SATA) will be held in September at the Amari Galle. The awards celebrate players in the region’s hospitality and travel industry including hotels and suppliers. The decision to hold the event in Sri Lanka was taken carefully SATA President, Ismail Hameed said.

Amal Goonetilleke, CEO of THASL and a former SATA judge, said although there were initial concerns, this is a great opportunity for Sri Lanka and a “good initiative for getting Sri Lanka back on the map”. This is the fourth year for SATA. This year the nominees come from six countries: India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal, and the newly-added Bangladesh.

Cinnamon Hotels and Resorts have appointed Dermot Gale and Rohan Fernandopulle as the General Managers for Cinnamon Grand and Cinnamon Lakeside, respectively.

Gale was the former General Manager at Cinnamon Lakeside before transferring to Grand. He has been with Cinnamon Hotels since 2014. He first arrived in Sri Lanka as the Executive Chef at the then Trans Asia Hotel in 2002. His first appointment as Resident Manager was at Cinnamon Island Alidhoo, the chain’s first international property in the Maldives, in 2006. Gale has also worked at Imperial Queens Park and Amari Watergate in Thailand, Accor Hotel in Bali and Centara Hotels and Resorts.

Rohan Fernandopulle, the former Executive Chef at Hilton Colombo, served as the General Manager at Waters Edge prior to his appointment at Cinnamon Lakeside. Turn to page 48 for an in-depth interview with Fernandopulle.

Anantara Kalutara Resort recently added to its family friendly experience with the launch of the ‘Glider’ Adventure Tower.

At the tower guests can rock climb up, abseil down or take a 165-meter zip line over the Kalu River estuary. The resort also offers activities such as watersports, archery and rifle shooting for adventure-minded guests.

The 141-room Anantara Kalutara opened in 2017 and is one of two Anantara properties in Sri Lanka.
CHOICE HOTELS EXPANDS TO SRI LANKA

Choice Hotels Asia-Pac, one of the largest hotel franchise group in the Asia Pacific hopes to strengthen its presence in South East Asia including Sri Lanka. Krest Hospitality, an affiliate of Kosmopolitan Hospitality, will identify new properties, negotiate contracts, implement staff training and provide marketing services for hotels in these destinations.

At present, Choice Hotels Asia-Pac has a presence in several locations in India and Singapore. The company hopes to increase this number to more than 20 properties in the next five years. Krest Hospitality recently signed an agreement to build a new Quality hotel in Phuket, Thailand – Resort Kata Phuket – scheduled to open in September 2020.

INDUSTRY

TAXES REDUCED TO FACILITATE CHEAPER AIRFARE

Sri Lankan authorities have taken measures to reduce fuel, embarkation and ground handling costs for a period of six months from 1 August.

Chairman of SLTDA, Johannne Jayaratne, stated that the reduction of these costs will have a cascading effect on the Sri Lanka tourism sector, which is making a slow recovery. At present, the fuel, embarkation and ground handling costs in Sri Lanka are the highest in the region.

“The frequency of flights are controlled by these taxes so hopefully it will have an impact on the number of flights arriving into the country once these are reduced,” says Jayaratne.

The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) issued a media release stating the measures they have taken to reduce costs in order to facilitate cheaper airfares to tourists. As a part of these measures, the CAA has requested the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) to sell aviation fuel at cost and SriLankan Airlines have also been asked to reduce its ground handling charges.

The Treasury has also been instructed to delay the implementation of the budget proposal to increase the embarkation levy by $10, the statement read.

ASIAN HOTELS AND PROPERTIES REPORT LOSSES IN Q2

Interim accounts of Sri Lanka’s Asian Hotels and Properties Plc (AHPL) reported that net losses fell to 328.3 million rupees in the June quarter from a 64.9 million rupee profit in the previous year.

AHPL is a part of the John Keells Group and operates its Cinnamon brand city hotels in Colombo.

Cinnamon, one of the three targets of the April bombings, operates through AHPL.

The company’s revenue for the June quarter was 861 million rupees down by 48 per cent compared to 2018. Cost of sales fell 23 per cent to 629.9 million rupees and gross profits dropped by 72 per cent to 2319 million rupees.

“Advance bookings at Cinnamon hotels including those outside Colombo are 75 per cent of the levels seen last year, so there are signs of recovery,” says Chairman of John Keells Group, Krishan Balendra.

AWARDS

‘World’s Best Island’ says Travel + Leisure

Travel + Leisure, a premier travel magazine in the United States, named Sri Lanka as the ‘World’s Best Island’ on their website.

The recognition comes as a boost to Sri Lanka’s reputation as a tourist destination following the April attacks.

The ‘World’s Best’ is an annual travel awards program conducted by the magazine based on the annual reader survey. Readers rated islands according to their activities and sights, natural attractions and beaches, food, friendliness and overall value.

The travel award ranks destinations and companies across more than 90 categories, including from the best city in the world to best domestic airline.

Sri Lanka scored 92.12 points, beating hot tourist destinations like Palawan in the Philippines and Bali in Indonesia to secure the top position.
**Promotions**

Cinnamon launched ‘Bring A Friend Home’, a promotion to boost Sri Lanka’s tourism industry to coincide with World Friendship Day on 30 July.

The initiative encourages Sri Lankans and expats living on the island to nominate foreign friends to visit the island through an array of packages. These include stays ranging from two to seven days at various locations such as Colombo, Hikkaduwa, Trincomalee and Yala.

Sri Lankans living here and overseas, and expats with a valid resident visa are eligible to nominate their friends for this program. “Cinnamon’s Bring a Friend Home promotion aims to create some much-needed enthusiasm and excitement for Sri Lanka once again as an experiential travel destination,” says Dileep Mudadeniya, Vice President John Keells Group, Head of Brand Marketing Cinnamon Hotels and Resorts and CEO of Cinnamon Life Mall.

Those interested in taking part can register online and invite friends via email, Whatsapp, Facebook or Twitter. Invitations can be sent until 15 December 2019 for stays within the same period.

Sri Lankans and expats who invite their friends and family for this program will qualify for a raffle draw to take place on January 2020.

**Awards**

Sri Lanka has been celebrated as the ‘Best Safari Destination outside of Africa’ in an article by Forbes.

Published on 30 July, the article highlights key wildlife sites in Sri Lanka. Gal Oya National Park, which was selected in February by Forbes as one of the ‘16 Most beautiful places to visit this spring’ is a highlight. The Yala National Park, Sigiriya, Kandy, Galle and Polonnaruwa where Disney’s ‘Monkey Kingdom’ was filmed are also mentioned.

The writer cites that while Africa has many draws for safari lovers, Sri Lanka provides the opportunity for ‘adventure-seekers to balance out their vacation with hikes, temple tours and culinary experiences’.

**Tourism**

Several hotels in the northern peninsula reported their occupancy rates in July are between 25 to 50 per cent.

General Manager of Jetwing Jaffna and North Gate, Christopher Ponnadurai said that the two Jetwing properties are at 40 – 50 per cent occupancy as of the end of July.

He hoped that occupancy would increase to around 50 per cent during the Nallur festival, scheduled for the first week of August.

Last year, both Jetwing properties recorded a 70 - 75 per cent occupancy rate in July and August.

Despite Indian tourists showing interest in the northern peninsula, the destination was not included in the Sri Lanka Tourism promotion package that was designed to target this market.

“The north needs to be on the map as there are many tourists, especially Indians who show an interest in the location,” says Ponnadurai. The General Manager made similar observations in Hospitality Insider’s March – April issue, which had an in-depth article on tourism in Jaffna.

The Managing Director of Subahas Hotel, Sangaran Hariharan said he has witnessed a slight pick-up in business in July compared to the previous two months.

Set up in 1970, Subahas is Jaffna’s first registered tourist hotel and has lived through the most difficult times of Sri Lanka’s 30-year civil war. At present, the 29-bedroom hotel has an occupancy of 25 per cent, which includes locals from Colombo and NGO officials.
Hospitality chain Aitken Spence Hotels celebrated the recognition of TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence 2019 for 16 of its properties located across Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Oman and India.

Deemed the world's largest travel platform, TripAdvisor’s Certificate of Excellence is given to hotels that reflect not only high standards but also out-of-the-ordinary experiences for guests.

Among the hotels in Sri Lanka, this certification was received by Heritance Ahungalla, Heritance Kandalama, Heritance Tea Factory, Heritance Ayurveda, Heritance Negombo, Amethyst Resort, Earl's Regency and Earl's Regent. TripAdvisor’s certification gives the local traveller a guide to the industry leaders, among which eight of Spence’s hotels in Sri Lanka qualify.

In the Maldives, Adaaran Prestige Vadoo, Adaaran Prestige Water Villas, Adaaran Select Meedhupparu, Adaaran Club Rannalhi and Adaaran Prestige Ocean Villas received the Certificate of Excellence award from the portfolio of properties across the atolls. Al Falaj Hotel, Desert Nights Camp in Oman and Turyaa Chennai in India were also coveted with this award signifying their devotion to deliver a truly distinct experience.

In a statement, Aitken Spence said that the achievement showcases the company’s commitment to enhancing guest experiences by providing superior product and service, no matter the location.

Several key members at Galle Face Hotel have left their positions. General Manager, Robert Hauck – who was featured on Hospitality Insider’s second issue – is one of them.

Nalaka Dissanayake, the Cluster Director of Human Resources for the hotel and Ceylon Hotel Corporation (CHC) and Narelle McDougall, Head of Sales and Marketing for the hotel and CHC also left their job roles in July.

Hauck was appointed as the General Manager of the iconic last year during the hotel’s partnership with Louis T Collection. Hauck continued with Galle Face Hotel when the partnership came to an end in December 2018. McDougall and Dissanayake were appointed to their roles in February.

Acclaimed Japanese architect, Kengo Kuma, the man behind the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Stadium, is set to design a Japanese funded hotel in Ahungalla.

Wakana JPN (Pvt) Ltd, the investors behind the hotel signed an agreement with the Board of Investment of Sri Lanka recently.

This investment opportunity comes as a positive sign to the tourism sector. With an investment of US$ 8.4 million, the Wakana group plans to construct and operate a 21-room boutique hotel in Ahungalla, located south of Bentota.

In addition to this new property, the Wakana group also owns and operates Coral Rock by Bansei in Hikkaduwa and Club Villa Bentota. Coral Rock Bansei was previously managed by the Jetwing group for a year from 2015 to 2016.

The Wakana group hopes that the hotel will amalgamate Sri Lanka hospitality with Japanese style, creating a unique product that will attract travellers to the island. Every aspect of the boutique hotel from its interior to cuisine will highlight the traditions of both countries.

Kuma is perhaps the most notable Japanese architect to be commissioned in Sri Lanka after Shigeru Ban and Tadao Ando who have designed private residences on the southern coast.
Jetwing Lighthouse reopened on August 1 after closing in May for renovation. The refurbishment included the renovation of 63 rooms in the main wing, public areas, restaurants and the pool bar. The main wing which previously had deluxe rooms has been updated to the luxury category.

A disclosure notice issued to the Colombo Stock Exchange in May revealed that a sum of Rs 200 million had been invested for the renovation.

In addition, the management has decided to operate Jetwing Lighthouse Club under Jetwing Lighthouse referring the two sections as main wing and spa wing.

Jetwing Lighthouse was designed Geoffrey Bawa in 1996 and was opened to the public in 1997.

Quan Spa wins at World Luxury Spa Awards

Congratulations to Quan Spa at Weligama Bay Marriott Resort & Spa for winning Best Luxury Beach Resort Spa in South West Asia. The hotel celebrated its 2 year anniversary on 19 July.

The World Luxury Spa Awards 2019 were held in St Petersberg. Spa Ceylon Ayurveda was a big winner on the night, taking home four awards: Best Luxury Ayurveda Spa and Best Luxury Spa Group globally, and the continent awards for Best Luxury Urban Escape and Best Spa Manager for Shenuka Fernando.

ANGEL BEACH OPENS IN THALPE

Angel Beach, the newest beach club/hotel in Thalpe opened its doors to guests on 1 July. The property fashions itself as a beach club following a similar concept to that of renowned international brands including Nikki Beach in Thailand, Finns Beach Club and Potato Head in Bali.

Angel Beach offers 11 rooms, three bars and a restaurant. They also have 70 sunbeds with safety lockers spread across the property, which they intend to promote to day visitors for a minimum spend. The hotel plans to host regular events and parties during the week and the weekend.

“This is a new concept in Sri Lanka. In July alone we had an average occupancy of 50 per cent and we’re very confident that tourism will bounce back soon,” says Sunil Perera, the Chairman of Angel Beach.

Perera expects that average occupancy would increase up to 60 per cent in August – a popular month among summer holidaymakers from Europe. He added that TripADeal, a renowned Australian online travel agency, had endorsed Angel Beach and they hope to work with the travel company closely offering packages designed for the Australian market.

Sri Lankan PATA’s New Board

The Sri Lanka Chapter of Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) appointed Asitha Panabokke, Executive Director of Mahaweli Reach Hotels PLC, as its new chairman for 2019-20.

Cammy Gunasekera, Director of Viluxur Holidays and Dimitri Cooray, Manager, Operations of Jetwing Hotels Ltd were elected as joint vice-chairmen.

The Sri Lanka Chapter of PATA assists its members to access international commercial contacts. Its primary aim is to promote Sri Lanka as a renowned popular destination using the PATA network.

There are 70 local members in the Sri Lanka Chapter consisting of travel agents, tour operators, ground/water transportation operators, sightseeing operators and hoteliers whose business are located on the island.

The following members were appointed to the Committee of the PATA Sri Lanka Chapter: Anil Hapugoda, Assistant Vice President of Aitken Spence Travels Ltd, Mahesh Wanigasekara, Head of Operations of Hamoos Travels (Pvt) Ltd, Zahara Cader, Managing Director of Tallman Tours Ltd, Nipuna Lokuhetty, Managing Director of Red Apple Travels & Holidays Lanka (Pvt) Ltd.
July Arrivals reach 115,000
International visitor numbers continue slowly upward

In July 2019, 115,701 international tourists arrived in Sri Lanka. This is down 47% compared to July last year, when arrival numbers reached 217,829.

Despite the drop, when viewed in the context of the last three months, the figures appear more promising. May saw a YoY decline of 71% and June 57%. Slowly but steadily the international tourist arrival numbers are climbing.

Arrival numbers increased by an average of 800 per day in July, from 3,319 arrivals per day in the first week to 3,959 in the last week of the month.

Since the travel advisories have been relaxed or lifted, international visitors have felt more comfortable in returning. Travel agents are reporting an increase of interest in Sri Lanka and an uptick in bookings, particularly towards the end of the year.

Total arrivals year to date are 1.1 million, down 18.7% vs July last year. Officials are expecting around 2.1 million arrivals by the end of 2019.

Regionally, arrivals from Europe increased 185% month on month to 57,668 visitors. The Europe region accounted for 50% of total arrivals, up from 30% in May and June. Asia & Pacific arrivals increased by 30% to 44,341.

Tourist arrivals by region

India continues as Sri Lanka’s top source country with 18,309 arrivals, 16% of the total. 22% more Indians visited Sri Lanka in July than in June.

The UK was the second largest source country with 13,010 arrivals. This is down almost 50% year on year however, arrivals from the UK and other European countries have increased significantly month on month. UK arrivals trebled in July to 13,010, versus 4,365 in June. Arrivals from Switzerland were up 320%, from France up 260%, Germany up 153% and the Netherlands up a huge 817%. Arrivals from China, normally in the top 3, doubled to 6,926 in July but are still down 75% year on year.

Top ten source markets

16% India
11% United Kingdom
7% Germany
6% China
6% France
6% Netherlands
5% Australia
3% Maldives
3% Canada
3% Switzerland
THE TOYOTA WAY
[Jeffrey K. Liker]

Published by Toyota Motor Corporation, The Toyota Way sums ups the philosophy and guidelines that led the company to immense success. The book has two key sections - continuous improvement and respect for people, vital topics for a manager or a business owner. Through 14 principles, the Toyota Way notes the value of establishing a long-term vision, working on challenges and continuous innovation. It also reflects on aspects that play a crucial role in hospitality such as building respect and teamwork. The importance of training and developing exceptional people and teams who follow the company’s philosophy is also highlighted.

THE SOUL OF LEADERSHIP
[Deepak Chopra]

This is an ideal read for managers and supervisors, and for anyone who is looking to enhance their leadership skills. Deepak Chopra is a renowned spiritual guide who has been teaching leadership to CEOs and other top executives for years. Soul of Leadership dwells on crucial skills that a leader of any industry would need. Through the acronym L-E-A-D-E-R-S, Chopra addresses key abilities that make a leader such as awareness, empowerment and responsibility. The book also highlights the importance of constantly observing and listening to your surroundings and team.

GM Library
This issue’s picks come from Rohan Fernandopulle, GM at Cinnamon Lakeside.

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.
Data from STR shows negative results for the Asia Pacific region in three key performance metrics. This continues the negative trend also seen in 2019.

**Asia Pacific**

- Occupancy: -1.0% to 69.1%
- Average daily rate (ADR): -0.7% to $97.32
- Revenue per available room (RevPAR): -1.6% to $67.25

Manilla, Philippines bucked the trend with an increase in ADR and RevPAR. The country saw a 9.8 per cent increase in tourist arrivals during the first five months of 2019. Despite the rise in inbound tourism, occupancy in Q2 was down 1.1 per cent due to strong supply growth.

**Central & South Asia**

- Occupancy: +0.1% to 65.7%
- Average daily rate (ADR): 2.9% to $113.66
- Revenue per available room (RevPAR): +3% to $74.68

Following positive metrics in Q1, the upward trends in ADR and RevPAR have continued in Q2 for Central & South Asia. Metrics for the first 6 months of 2019 are all positive vs the same period in 2018.

### YTD June 2019 % Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Occupancy</th>
<th>ADR</th>
<th>RevPar</th>
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<td>Asia Pacific</td>
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<tr>
<td>Americas</td>
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<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: STR’s sample comprises >65,000 hotels and 8.8 million hotel rooms around the globe.
No More Miniatures

InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) will be switching to bulk-sized bathroom amenities across all of its 843,000 hotel rooms by end of 2021. The sustainable practices of hotels have increasingly been in the spotlight, especially around the issue of single use plastic.

In an interview with Skift, IHG CEO Keith Barr said that the pressure was coming from colleagues and customers, rather than government legislation. It is estimated the move will save 200 million bathroom miniatures a year.

ASCOTT CONTINUES ASIA PACIFIC EXPANSION

Singapore-based CapitaLand’s wholly owned lodging business unit, The Ascott Limited (Ascott), has signed contracts to develop another 26 properties with over 6,000 units across 22 cities and 11 countries.

The majority of the properties will be in the Asia Pacific region and are signed under management contracts, with three on franchise agreements. The company is pursing an asset-light business model. With these new properties, Ascott has expanded into six new cities across Asia Pacific, Central Asia and Africa and has increased its presence in Australia, China, Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand.

To July this year, Ascott has signed contracts for more than 40 properties, and increase over 40% vs the same period in 2018. Ascott has also opened 16 properties, up 70% YoY, and is targeting over 40 properties by year end. By 2023, they aim to have 160,000 units worldwide.

With the recent completion of the Ascendas-Singbridge transaction, CapitaLand through Ascott has become the sponsor of both Ascott Residence Trust (Ascott Reit) and Ascendas Hospitality Trust (A-HTRUST). Including the assets held under these two hospitality trusts, lodging assets under CapitaLand are valued at S$31 billion, equivalent to 25% of the Group’s total assets under management.

Mr Kevin Goh, Ascott’s Chief Executive Officer said, “The combination of Ascott Reit and A-HTRUST is a win-win for both unitholders as the combined entity will be Asia Pacific’s largest hospitality trust with an asset value of $87.6 billion, making it a lot more attractive to investors.”

UK FINES MARRIOTT

The UK Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) has communicated its intent to fine Marriott International (Marriott) £99.2 million ($120 million) in relation to the Starwood guest reservation database incident.

Marriott announced in November 2018 a data breach that resulted in around 339 million guests having personal details stolen. The incident is thought to date back to 2014, before Starwood was acquired by Marriott, but was only discovered in 2018.

Marriott International’s President and CEO, Arne Sorenson, said: “We are disappointed with this notice of intent from the ICO, which we will contest.”

Iconic Hotel Reopens

The iconic Raffles Hotel in Singapore reopened on 1 August following a long renovation. The hotel now offers all-suite accommodations across nine distinct categories. The total suite count has increased from 103 to 115.

The three-tier renovation commenced in 2017 and was led by interior designer Alexandra Champalimaud, supported by Aedas, a global architecture and design firm. “Exquisite new suite categories, vibrant lifestyle experiences and exclusive dining concepts are designed for international visitors and Singaporeans to meet, stay, shop, dine and celebrate,” said the hotel in a statement.

Raffles Hotel Singapore is owned by Qatar-based Katara Hospitality and is part of Accor. The hotel first opened in 1887 and was declared a National Monument a hundred years later by the Singapore Government. The previous restoration took place in 1989-1991 when the hotel was closed for two and a half years.
Hyatt Expands Luxury in APAC

Hyatt Hotels Corporation (Hyatt) is planning to open 21 new luxury hotels and resorts in Asia Pacific by the end of 2020. This will boost Hyatt’s luxury portfolio in the region by 25 per cent.

The luxury properties opening will be under several brands, including seven under Park Hyatt, which normally averages only one opening per year. The recently acquired Alila brand will add two resorts in Malaysia and Oman.

Other openings include seven in China and two each in Japan, Indonesia and South Korea. Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, New Zealand, India and Saudi Arabia will each receive one new property.

Luxury currently accounts for 40 per cent of Hyatt’s overall portfolio in the region. Hyatt expanded its Asia footprint in 2018 with the acquisition of Two Roads Hospitality, which added 85 properties and 23 new markets.

In 2018, aggregated total gross bookings for the Asia Pacific (APAC) travel market reached $418.1 billion. This is based on data from 13 markets covered in Phocuswright’s report, Asia Pacific Online Travel Overview 2019.

Rapid infrastructure development and rising disposable incomes contributed to a 7% increase year on year. Burgeoning domestic travel demand, especially in China, India, Indonesia and Malaysia, supported this growth, placing the region well ahead of both the US and Europe.

AWARDS

World’s 100 Best Hotels

In 2018, aggregated total gross bookings for the Asia Pacific (APAC) travel market reached $418.1 billion. This is based on data from 13 markets covered in Phocuswright’s report, Asia Pacific Online Travel Overview 2019.

Rapid infrastructure development and rising disposable incomes contributed to a 7% increase year on year. Burgeoning domestic travel demand, especially in China, India, Indonesia and Malaysia, supported this growth, placing the region well ahead of both the US and Europe.

Readers of Travel + Leisure have picked their 100 best hotels around the world. Asian properties account for over one-fifth with 22 properties in the list, including the coveted number one spot, taken by The Leela Palace Udaipur, India.
Readers recently voted Sri Lanka as the number one Island in the world for 2019, but that enthusiasm hasn’t been enough to push any of Sri Lanka’s hotels into the global top 100. The hotels were rated on their facilities, location, service, food, and overall value.

Thailand dominated in the regional list, taking 10 spots in the Top 15 Resorts in Southeast Asia. The winner however, was the 234-room JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay Resort & Spa in Vietnam, which opened in 2017. With three spots in the top 15, Vietnam is cementing its reputation as an up and coming destination for luxury travel.

TRENDS

Where the world travels
Top origin countries and their number one destinations.

More people travel internationally from the USA than anywhere else in the world, however China has jumped in the rankings from 7th in 2009, to 2nd today. Could China claim the top spot soon?

Source: Mastercard’s Global Destination Cities Index: Origins, which ranks where people travel internationally from, and their top destinations. In the new edition of the report. *These countries also in Sri Lanka’s top ten source markets.
From East to West
HOW CG HOSPITALITY IS MAKING ITS MARK

interview by RACHAEL COVE
photography by SAJITH SUKUMARAN
HIS FATHER’S FIRST HOTEL INVESTMENT WAS IN THE TAJ SAMUDRA, COLOMBO (pictured). Now Rahul Chaudhary is building the hospitality arm of the family business into a global ‘one-stop shop’.
In 2001, Binod Chaudhary made his first investment in hospitality. In 2006, when his son Rahul Chaudhary joined the business full time there were three hotels. By 2018 they had 95 hotels, and in August 2019, at the time of writing, CG Hospitality has a portfolio of 132 hotels, 98 of which are in operation, the remainder signed and under development.

When talking statistics about CG Hospitality it’s important to say ‘at the time of writing’ since the group is signing new properties “literally every other week”. At present, they are opening close to 15 hotels a year and Rahul intends the rapid pace of growth to continue.

Almost twenty years ago, Binod Chaudhary’s initial hospitality investment was made in Sri Lanka, in the Taj Samudra, along with two Taj properties in the Maldives. At the time, Rahul says, “even Sri Lankans and Maldivians were not willing to invest in these assets.” His father’s bold move was to be the start of a long partnership with Taj and today, the group is probably one of Taj’s largest partners globally, with multiple properties in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Thailand, India and of course, Nepal.

It was also the start of a long relationship with some of Sri Lanka’s hospitality groups, most notably Jetwing, when in 2008, before the end of the war, they invested in Jetwing Vil Uyana and Jetwing Seashells (now Jetwing Sea).

Rahul himself joined the family business full time in 2006, after finishing college where he excelled at sports and spent part of his summer vacations observing his father at work from a corner of the boardroom.

In the thirteen years since he joined, the portfolio of properties has grown by 4,300 per cent and expanded into 15 countries.

In Sri Lanka, CG Hospitality now has a portfolio of 16 properties in various partnerships with CHC, Ekho, Jetwing and the joint venture with Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL) for their earliest property, the Taj Samudra.

CG Hospitality owns the global management company CG Hotels & Resorts, which manages and owns a range of hotels.

Nepal was crippled by a catastrophic earthquake. From the rubble, commerce and social infrastructure emerged, including a row of shops along what is now known as the New Road. Mr. Bhuramull Chuadhary was one of the shopkeepers who made a living importing textiles from India and was privileged to be able to sell them inside the palace, to the courtiers and the King’s people.

Fast forward two generations and Binod Chaudhary, Bhuramull’s grandson, is the Chairman of CG Corp Global, a multinational conglomerate with 112 companies and 76 brands around the world. Nepal’s first and so far, only, billionaire, he is ranked 1,349th by Forbes on their rich list.

The story of Binod Chaudhary’s CG Group is one of entrepreneurial endeavours, ambition and great success. A legacy that Binod’s son, Rahul Chaudhary, Managing Director of CG Corp Global, aims to continue in his leadership of CG Hospitality, the fast-growing hotel and travel arm of the business.

His vision? To be a billionaire hotelier from Nepal with a spread from east to west and a hotel in every country he wants to visit over his lifetime.

"Hospitality is a very capital intensive business. The biggest way you’re able to realise returns is by selling an investment. No other space in commercial space and real estate make more money than hotels with a capital gain"
mid-scale to luxury hotels through its own brands ‘The Zinc’ and ‘The Fern’.

The majority of CG Hospitality’s portfolio, around 70 per cent, are managed assets, the rest are owned or jointly-owned. Many international hospitality groups are steering clear of asset ownership, focussing only on the management side however, at CG Hospitality, “our strategy is not only asset light, we are investors and operators both. We look at ourselves as a one stop shop,” says Rahul.

“Our strategy was to start with investments first,” he explains, “but then we decided to spread our reach into different markets. If you just go through the investment route, the speed at which you can do that is not fast.”

To diversity into different markets at speed they made investments in management companies. In 2015 they invested in Indian-based Concept Hospitality. At the time of investment, the company had around 23 operating hotels under its management, today, they’re already at 67 in a period of just 3-4 years. Other investments have been made in Thailand-based InVision Hospitality, which Rahul says provided 13 asset-light hotels, and in a management company called Alila. The latter expanded their footprint to 4 other countries however, this was sold at the end of 2018 to Hyatt Hotels Corporation.

While the amount of investment varies widely, one constant is that the company does not take minority positions. Rahul expects a ROI of at least 10 per cent every year and an IRR of 15-20 per cent, minimum.

For some time, a well-publicised goal has been to reach 200 hotels. Originally expected in 2020, the timeline for this has been revised to 2023, in part because the purchase of certain management companies - which would have added a sizeable number of keys in one go - did not proceed. Rahul isn’t concerned with the changing timeline, after all he says, “I’m still young”, but he is using the additional space to up the stakes; no longer just ‘200 hotels’, the new goals is “200 hotels including some of the world’s most iconic.”

Despite appearances from the impressive growth, it hasn’t all been smooth sailing. Given the chance to click his fingers and change one thing, Rahul would have considered certain investments in some newer markets more carefully before proceeding.

Looking to the future, he sees opportunities in the hospitality sector across a variety of markets and is keen to continue expanding the brand across verticals. “The opportunities are in the Indian Subcontinent, South East Asia, Middle East and East Africa. They’re there in the distressed asset space and in the mid-market space.”

Geographic diversity is already a hallmark of the group. In Q1 2019, a new Taj opened in Nepal and their next opening is in Dubai in October, followed by Bhutan in Q2 2020. Investments in Vietnam, a country experiencing remarkable growth rates in arrivals are under consideration, as well as potential purchases of hotels in Kenya.

Rahul is approaching the future with a three-pronged strategy for growth beginning with investments in key cities. Second is investments in asset-light companies or asset-light assets, which could be given to one of their existing companies to operate. The third approach is to grow the business through the fund route.

CG Hospitality has already launched a fund in India focussed on the mid-market space to cater for the growing demand from India’s middle class and is embarking on a Europe fund.

While the geographical focus remains on the Indian Subcontinent and South East Asia, Rahul is not ruling out any locations, “We’re also looking at Europe and if we can find an investment opportunity of an asset-light company in any of these markets, then we’ll go there as well.”

NEPAL AND THE NEW SRI LANKAN LANDSCAPE

Rahul believes that the evolution of Sri Lanka’s tourism industry is one Nepal can look towards for reference, particularly in its development beyond being a cheap backpacker destination. The Sri Lankan government and many in the industry here have voiced that the right approach is target lower-volume, higher-spending tourists who can provide maximum economic benefit with minimal environmental impact.
"Nepal I believe, is going through a similar process that Sri Lanka went through 10-15 years ago," says Rahul. "We touched 1 million tourists back in November 2018, but the majority of that 1 million is unfortunately not the quality traffic."

The establishment of the Meghauli Sarai property is clearly a source of great pride. The 100 per cent owned property, managed by Taj Safari, has been collecting ‘best in the world’ accolades since it opened in 2016. Commanding rates of $700 per night room only is “almost completely unheard of in a place like Nepal” and drives niche and quality traffic.

“When people come to a new country, they want to explore other cities as well. So a property like this has a positive ripple effect, whereby other hotels and cities slowly benefit.” In the near future, Rahul would like to see Nepal become a focus travel market for investors as well as for travellers.

Of course the tourism landscape in Sri Lanka has changed dramatically in the last three months.

Rahul believes Sri Lanka was “heading in the right direction.”

"I know Sri Lankans are incredible people, always positive and optimistic. But hospitality unfortunately is not always optimistic and positive. There are a lot of things that need to fall in place before you know you’re going in the right direction."

THE GROWTH OF CG HOSPITALITY

The first hospitality investments:
Taj Samudra in Sri Lanka,
Taj Exotica and Vivanta by Taj in the Maldives

Investment in Jetwing Vil Uyana and Jetwing Sea

CHC Portfolio

August 2019:
A portfolio of 132 hotels
98 in operation, the rest expected to open within 2 years
In any recovery, when there’s a wound it leaves a scar. Recovery is not going to happen overnight. It’s a gradual process and a lot of thinking needs to be done in terms of the strategy going forwards,” he says. The question for Sri Lanka to consider is, once you pick yourself up from a fall, how do you adopt a strategy to ensure you don’t fall into the same trap again?

Protecting and managing the perception of the market – through PR – is one answer to this. To illustrate this Rahul highlights the example of Dubai about where there are many negative news stories, “but the way Dubai is able to protect its image, growth and offerings – what is there for tourists – is quite phenomenal.” The end result: people still go there.

A SURVIVAL MINDSET

For the short term at least, it looks like Sri Lanka will be taking a backseat in CG Hospitality’s growth plans. While positive about the opportunities on offer, Rahul is “cautious” about getting into further investments here.

In analysing the post-Easter Sri Lanka market, he says, “As bad as it sounds, where there is war there is opportunity. Right now, Sri Lanka is a brilliant investors market. Every day I get tonnes of hotels that are for sale, and in terms of the market itself, it couldn’t get lower. Having said that, I would be a little cautious to get into an investment in Sri Lanka because while things will get back on track, will it be tomorrow, or next year?”

India suffered a major terror attack in 2006 and Rahul believes the ripples are still being felt, as in America from 9/11. “Even today, the Indian market has not gone back to its glory like it was before. It’s an emotional response that yes, we want things to go back to normal, but how and when that is going to happen is anyone’s guess.”

Considering himself a “hotelier first”, Rahul is prioritising his existing hotels and ensuring their survival, over new Sri Lankan investment opportunities. “It may be an investor and buyer’s market, but for a group like ours, which already has 16 hotels to consider, I would like to be a little bit careful.”

"First I want to make sure the existing ones are doing well, standing on their own feet. "But let’s see – never say never. If you get a good opportunity in the market, we’d love to look at it, but look at it with a pinch of salt.”
Upselling and cross-selling are two very important components in increasing revenue at a hotel. Understanding how and when you can promote products and deals to new clients as well as staying guests is critical in maximising revenue through the guest cycle.

The Art of

Enquiry Stage

When responding to an enquiry, list the USPs of additional categories and the cost for an upgrade. This will give clients a better idea of what is available and may prompt them to select a higher category.

Offer guests a limited time deal or discount for an upgrade. The fear of missing out (FOMO) is real and it plays on people’s psyche, motivating guests to act fast.

Do you have a sister property in another location? Include details in your correspondences and if possible offer guests an incentive to book both.

From the Time of Booking Till Arrival

Send guests info on experiences and activities your hotel offers a month prior to their arrival. It acts as a gentle reminder on what your hotel offers and demonstrates that you are looking forward to their visit.

Conduct ongoing training and update staff regularly on products that they can upsell and cross-sell. These include, spa treatments, F&B promotions, experiences and activities offered by the hotel as well as by affiliated suppliers.

Train staff in the subtle art of upselling and cross-selling products. Remember, a guest’s comfort is always first priority. Helping staff understand how and when to approach clients for a cross-sell, how to handle rejection and when (or if) to broach the subject again is crucial.

Send a sufficiently detailed form that guests can complete during the confirmation process. This will equip the staff with the information they need to cross-sell products that are best suited to the guest during their stay.
CHECK-IN AND DURING THE STAY

If guests are arriving straight from the airport or after a long journey, encourage staff to give a short introduction about the spa. Provide guests with a spa menu so they can view it at their leisure.

Your guests are now at the hotel and are having a great time. Does the hotel have a destination dining especially for couples? Tell them about it. If possible, show them the location and brief them the extent the hotel goes into to indulge guests.

Are your guests lounging by the pool? Take this opportunity to tell them about the amazing cocktail selection on offer. The guest might reject it but at least they are aware of what is available.

During a guest’s stay at a hotel, there are plenty of opportunities to cross-sell products. Keep an eye for this window and motivate staff to practice the art of selling.

CHECK OUT

A few days after your guests check out send them a ‘thank you’ email. Offer them a membership to a loyalty program which will provide discounts in the future.

Update your clients about what’s happening at the hotel once in three months. This will help create an emotional bond with your guests and keep the hotel at the forefront of their minds when they start thinking about their next holiday.

According to a national consumer survey by Ipsos Public Affairs, 61% of consumers would be open to spending more if an additional service compliments or enhances their main purchase.
As the dust settles on the Easter Sunday hotel bombings, with their dramatic impact on tourist arrivals, the expected slow and painful recovery might be happening a lot faster than many had feared.

The tourism and hospitality industries and their extended supply chains were hit for six, particularly those heavily-leveraged properties that were already operating on wafer-thin profit margins in a highly competitive market.

But thanks to prompt action by the government and tourism authority, including a moratorium on hotel bank loans, many in the industry are now tentatively looking forward to business more-or-less as usual by next season, if not quite by the end of this year.

But there will likely be a shake-out, and some properties will do better than others, much of that down to the better quality and foresight of their management teams. For those who do less well, crisis management will have been something learned—or not learned—the hard way.
Tackling under performing middle management was a priority when WASIM CADER took over as GM in November 2018.
In 1969, Jabir Cader, already a respected Sri Lankan businessman, parliamentarian and government minister, built what is now the Ramada Hotel (originally named the Alhambra) a short walk from Galle Face Green in central Colombo.

At that time, the family was closely involved in the film industry, and Jabir had originally intended to build a 1,000-seat cinema on the site. But the film business suffered a series of setbacks, culminating in its nationalisation in 1971, and the cinema plan was shelved.

Having seen the writing on the wall, and with the nascent tourist industry beginning to show slow but steady growth, Jabir saw that an upper-mid-market hotel, franchised and branded by an international chain, would be a sound alternative investment.

Thus the Holiday Inn Colombo was born, with the property operating successfully under that name for the next 35 years. But in 2009, the management team—which was, and still is, effectively controlled by the Cader family—elected to switch their franchise allegiance to Wyndham Hotels and its internationally renowned Ramada brand.

At that time, Wasim Cader, grandson of the late Jamir, was the business development manager, with degrees in economics and accountancy from the University of London, membership of the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM), and three years of marketing and brand-management experience from Cinnamon Hotels.

As business development manager, he was “responsible for all branding and marketing activities of the hotel, and was involved in the rebranding from the former Holiday Inn to the current Ramada.”

These experiences were good reasons, amongst others, why the hotel board elevated him to general manager in November last year. In the all-pervasive Internet age, with social media and OTAs (online travel agents) dominating the market, effective online marketing and brand management are - and will increasingly be - key to a hotel’s success or failure.

As is the management team, on which subject Wasim pulls no punches. He freely admits that the overall quality of management had been “sadly lacking”, and that “middle management were to blame for staff failures, and senior management for not employing better middle managers.”

Part of the problem, he says, was the ‘them-and-us’ attitude which isolated some managers from the people they were supposed to be managing, leading to poor staff moral and lack of motivation. This affected their dealings with guests - the all-important customer service - leading to adverse comments on some of the OTA sites.

This failure by middle management to address and deal with staff shortcomings meant that one of Wasim’s first self-appointed tasks as GM was to cull poorly performing managers and staff by “getting
rid of the bad eggs one way or the other, by encouraging them either to leave or to change their attitudes and mind-sets. Favouritism and red tape were cancelled. Everything is now all on merit.”

A key component of that cull is to reduce the overall room/staff ratio from 1:3 to 1:2 over the next 12 months, by up-skilling and multi-tasking. Wasim believes that commensurately better pay and working conditions for fewer but better-performing staff - and better performing managers - will be a win-win: good for moral and motivation, and good for the hotel by reducing staffing and staff-related costs.

Specific examples of this hearts-and-minds approach were pay rises awarded after the bombings, plus two days paid leave per week, upgrading staff-room facilities to include free internet access (the password is ‘smile’) and installing mobile-phone chargers in the locker room.

He says: “Some hotels discourage their staff from using their mobiles at work, but I believe it is important that they are able to keep in touch with their families, particularly in an emergency involving their children. This is a real morale booster.”

As is the fact that he has improved staff medical insurance cover, which ensures “much better health services for the staff, both for themselves and for their families. They can now claim all medical expenses, as in or out patients, which is also good for morale and staff loyalty.”

Meanwhile, to further counter that ‘them-and-us’ management attitude and foster team spirit, all managers, including Wasim himself, must now eat in the staff canteen rather than the hotel coffee shop or restaurant as previously.

All of the above and more are some of the reasons why Wasim believes that the Ramada, with its 94 rooms, is now performing significantly better than most of the rest of Colombo’s similar properties. For example, he says, in the final week of July, occupancy averaged 67 per cent, compared with 25–30 per cent for most of the others.

Much of that is due to the fact that the Ramada has the second-biggest banquet hall in Colombo and can thus cater for high-society weddings, where guests often number in the several hundreds, and big international MICE gatherings.

SECOND FAMILY

Ruth De Cruze, the Ramada’s long-serving housekeeper, has been with the hotel for 40 years and sees it as her second family. Now aged 60, she joined the staff as a young room maid straight from school. Today, having "risen through the ranks", she controls a staff of 32, including the laundry.

She says: “Over the years I have done all their jobs, so no one can pull the wool over my eyes! My main focus is to make sure that everyone performs their tasks properly and as well as they can.”

Training and experience-building are vital, she says, and while some can get set in their ways, “we encourage them to accept new ways to do things, which will help improve their career prospects as well as benefiting the hotel.”

She says she is one hundred percent behind the general manager’s efforts to reduce the staff-to-room ratio because the resulting better pay and working conditions will lead to better staff motivation and loyalty.

The ensuing up-skilling and multi-tasking will also mean that staff feel more empowered and highly valued, she says, which will improve morale and thus benefit the hotel as well as themselves.
It also helps that in 2013, the hotel spent Rs700 million refurbishing the lobby and rooms, together with the salon, business centre, gym and pool. Five years previously, many millions had also been lavished on a complete refurbishment of the banqueting hall.

Much of Wasim’s own motivation stems from what he sees as the core values of this ‘new’ Ramada: passion, courage and trust, which together with managerial humility and empathy, are arguably in short supply in the Sri Lankan hotel industry.

Referencing the ‘island mentality’ that exists among some in the hotel trade, Wasim says that to best serve foreign business travellers and families, their main target markets, he prefers managers and staff who have worked abroad and have wide experience of foreign cultures and preferences.

He says: “Working in a tourist hotel at every level, especially when dealing face-to-face with foreign guests, can be difficult because of cultural differences. It is a tough job, and many old habits will have to change.”

He adds that the bombings “have made us look hard at our customer relations,” and that for the industry to get back on its feet, hotels “must act together to market Sri Lanka as a destination, while striving to make the country a better place for Sri Lankans.”

He also decries the fact that many hotels, particularly the smaller and more exposed SMEs, have been slashing rates in “a race to the bottom”, a price war that “damages the whole industry because it leads to cuts in services and disappointed guests, as well as having adverse knock-on effects for the local economies.”

A major part of that problem, he says, is that once rates have been cut close to the bone, particularly online and with the OTAs, it is “extremely difficult” to get them back to where they were without creating a customer backlash.

This is underscored in the case of the Ramada by the fact that 40 per cent of bookings are online, of which 5–7 per cent are directly through the hotel website.

Which is why he emphasises the need for more and better collective online marketing that focuses on brand values, quality of service, and an overall ‘Sri Lanka experience’ that matches or exceeds guests’ expectations.

“Marketing individually is a waste resources if it is not effective,” he says. “As things are now, if hotels act together to attract potential guests it would have a much greater impact. For that read destination first. Sri Lanka first. The rest will follow.”

After such a terrible tragedy it might be considered tasteless and offensive to talk of silver linings. But hotels and hospitality are hard-nosed industries, and dispassionately evaluating the effects of any kind of disruption are part and parcel of doing business.

With that in mind, Wasim says: “I hope there will be a silver lining to the tragedy. That in a year’s time the situation will be better than it would have been without the tragedy because it is focussing politicians’ minds on the need for a coherent destination marketing strategy.”

He adds: “That means looking at everything in a different way, with a new way of thinking that will benefit not only the industry itself but also the whole country.” We can but hope.
**An expert's guide to curating a wine list**

How to delight your guests and bring in the revenue.

Wine culture in Sri Lanka may be small but it is growing, says Sydney Rathnayake, Assistant F&B Manager at Mount Lavinia Hotel. A WSET certified sommelier and wine educator, he is one of the most knowledgeable sommeliers in Sri Lanka. Here, he shares his wisdom on creating a wine list, pricing for success, and inspiring the next generation of wine lovers in Sri Lanka.

**FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE**

Understanding your business is key when choosing your wine list.

The first step is to think about size. If you're a restaurant with 50 covers, you can't have a wine list with 50 wine labels, nor could you be offering 20 wines by the glass. It would be better to go with a smaller list of say 20, with well-known labels.

Once you’ve chosen your total number, break down your wine list into sparkling, red and whites.

In a country like Sri Lanka, I recommend having 15% of your wine list as bubbles and 20% red.

Sparkling wines don’t need a big section, they’re perceived as expensive so there isn’t a big demand for them. Since this is a tropical country, consider more lighter-bodied rather than full-bodied reds. Most restaurants have at least some spice on their menu and Côtes du Rhône works well with this. Pinot Noir is also very versatile and goes with fish.

Then the remainder of your wine list (65%) is white. Off-dry whites like Riesling and lighter-bodied wines like Sauvignon Blanc are good choices. Sri Lankan food can be very creamy so you need wines that will work well with those dishes. Consider a Chardonnay with malolactic fermentation, it has a creamier, buttery taste.

The above are suggestions, but what’s really important, is that you choose wines that will go with your food. Fundamentally, a restaurant is all about the food. Wine is a condiment that enhances its flavor.
"There are many hotels and restaurants in Sri Lanka that haven’t wanted to invest money in wines. They think there are no customers who will come and enjoy it, but I believe this is wrong. When I talk to people, they are interested in wine, the only thing missing is the connection. They don’t have places to go to enjoy it"
Normally the sommelier takes the risk in recommending a wine based on the occasion, food choice and palate of the guest. When there’s no one to do this, people like to try before they commit. That’s why wines by the glass are important, they open up a sale.

Choose your number of wines by the glass carefully based on the size of your restaurant. If you offer 15 wines by the glass and people order one of each, you’ll be left with 15 bottles open. That’s a loss of 60 glasses (5 glasses per bottle).

If you don’t offer wines by the glass, at least have the option of mini-bottles.

LOGISTICAL DIFFICULTIES
A lot of practicalities around wine are challenging in Sri Lanka and storage is one of these issues.

During transportation, wine should be temperature controlled. That includes during shipment, on the way to the warehouse and when it’s being delivered domestically its final destination.

Unfortunately most of the time in Sri Lanka suppliers do not provide the proper temperature controls and this can harm the entire product. It’s a threat to the hotelier, because when you have low quality or faulty wines and a guest complains, it is the restaurant who has to replace the bottle and incur the cost.

It’s very important to use a trusted distributor because they take this matter seriously. If you have a knowledgeable receiving system you can also check and reject the stock at the point of delivery, but it’s not possible to do this all the time.

Of course once wine is in your hotel, you also need to store it properly.

Large hotels can make long term investments. If they invest knowledgeably in a good label at a reasonable price this year, in ten years it can make a fortune. Taking this approach requires the ability to buy in volume as well as sufficient finances for long-term storage, staffing and maintenance costs.

Most small to mid-sized hotels should go for a volume-based business where they buy stock this month and sell the next. Stock should be liquidated in a short period of time, there’s no point in trying to keep wine for long-term storage or investment.

MAKE REGULAR CHANGES
Even though Sri Lanka doesn’t have seasons like Europe it’s still crucial to change your wine list every six months. Why? Because it’s good for your clientele and your profits.

Within six months you will know how your current wines are selling. Those that are selling well you can keep on the list, but those that aren’t you can change for better quality or more well-known labels. By doing this regularly, you will find which wines are good for your business and keep your regulars interested with variety.

Refreshing your list is also an opportunity to clean out your storage as you don’t want long-term, non-moving stock.

In Sri Lanka, where supply can be complex and there’s no guarantee you can get the vintage you want, supplier constraints are another reason it’s a good idea to make regular updates.

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Consumers are increasingly paying attention to environmental issues and expect the brands they patronise to do the same.

The number of international hotel chains who have made declarations to commit to sustainable practices this year is striking. Major companies are beginning to take action on matters of high-priority to their customers, even if—and somewhat cynically—these much-publicised steps to remove plastic straws or mini-toiletry bottles are only a drop in the ocean of what could be done.

The hospitality industry has a high environmental impact, through resources, energy consumption and waste, and F&B departments are sizeable contributors to this.

The sustainable gastronomy movement and the UN-designated Sustainable Gastronomy Day, held annually on 18 June, aim to draw attention to the impact of culinary actions and focus the world’s attention on the role that sustainable gastronomy can play.

So why should chefs and managers care about sustainability in their kitchens? Because not only is it good for the environment and makes financial sense, it is increasingly what guests want and expect.

Experiencing epicurean delights has always been an attraction for people who want to travel. Booking.com says 46 per cent of global travellers would pick a destination for its great food and a survey by GlobalData found 28 per cent of consumers globally are influenced by the popularity of a destination in terms of food and drink, when deciding where to go.

Gastronomic Tourism is on the rise around the world. Chengdu is one destination that has made food a priority and the city’s focus on popular food culture has been rewarded with a World Tourism Organisation (WTO) rating as one of China’s best tourist cities. UNESCO has a special category in its Creative Cities network for Gastronomy.

At the same time, the world is facing a crisis in food supply. The recently-released World Resources Institute report on Creating A Sustainable Food Future estimates that to feed the expected 9.8 billion people alive by 2050, the world will need to produce a huge 56 per cent more food than in 2010. That’s along with converting an area twice the size of India to agricultural land.

Chefs, the UN says, are a key ingredient in promoting sustainable food systems. Within their control is the power to reduce waste, source locally, choose ingredients that have a smaller carbon footprint and empower others, whether competitors or customers, to follow suit.

Through appropriate planning, customer education and intelligent food utilisation chefs in hotels can make use of their powerful platform and become “agents of change”.

In honour of UN World Sustainable Gastronomy Day, three talented hotel chefs in Sri Lanka used their creativity, ingenuity and resourcefulness to create dishes on a sustainable theme for Hospitality Insider. Here’s why Sustainable Gastronomy matters to them.

The 5 Principals of Sustainable Gastronomy Day

1. Improving efficiency in the use of resources is crucial to sustainable agriculture.
2. Sustainability requires direct action to conserve, protect and enhance natural resources.
3. Agriculture that fails to protect and improve rural livelihoods and social well-being is unsustainable.
4. Enhanced resilience of people, communities and ecosystems is key to sustainable agriculture.
5. Sustainable food and agriculture requires responsible and effective governance mechanisms.
Consumers are increasingly linking quality to geographical origins and traditions. This is seen across the consumer spectrum, from the popularity of single origin coffee and chocolate bars, to restaurants that carefully explain the locale, climate and conditions, not only of the wine, but of the steak they serve.

Knowing where food comes from is increasingly important to guests. When coupled with sustainability, the natural offspring is sourcing locally.

Locally sourced ingredients involve less greenhouse gas emissions thus reducing the carbon footprint of the meal. They also support local producers and benefit the local economy.

Chef Kennedy Jayamanne, Executive Chef at Jetwing Blue in Negombo, knows the benefits well, “Supporting our local market and local vendors is key to sustainable cuisine,” he says.

Sustainable tourism is growing in Sri Lanka, and when people come for sustainable tourism, they are also looking for sustainable food. So we always have to think about the food as well.”

Jetwing has long been known for its sustainability initiatives and has picked up numerous awards in recognition of the steps the company has taken, from encouraging biodiversity and organic farming, to using green energy to power hotel kitchens.

Kennedy is proud to work for a brand that has makes sustainability a priority. He has been with Jetwing for 14 years, but his association with the company goes back much further, to his first job as a kitchen trainee in Jetwing Sea (formerly Hotel Seashells) in 1978.

For Kennedy, sustainability gastronomy also means looking after the health of the guests. He says chefs in Sri Lanka are increasingly interested in sustainable practices, just as guests are increasingly interested in healthy food – both organic and locally sourced. Using local suppliers means the chefs can ensure the quality of the ingredients direct from the source.

Jetwing has five hotels in Negombo, all of which are supplied by Jetwing’s own organic farm. For this dish, all the vegetables were sourced from the farm and the rice came from Jetwing’s paddy fields in Kaduruketha. The prawns are from Negombo, supporting the local fishermen in the market.
CHEF KENNEDY
Jayamanne at Jetwing Blue, Negombo
CHEF METHTA
Ekanayake at Movenpick Hotel, Colombo
The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) says that data on food waste in Sri Lanka is scarce. On a global scale, around 30 per cent of all food grown is lost or wasted before it is consumed, that’s around 1.3 billion tonnes, or $1.3 trillion dollars. Wastage occurs throughout the supply chain, from initial production and transportation all the way to end consumption. Food that is wasted takes up valuable space in landfill sites and represents an unnecessary waste of the resources it took to produce, such as the land, water and seeds.

Getting the most out of your ingredients makes sense for the environment and for your business, as Chef Meththa Ekanayake at Movenpick Hotel Colombo says, “When you minimise waste, it can help the community or be used to feed someone else. From the business point of view, by saving waste you save money for your business.”

Reducing food waste may not be difficult in principle, but in a hotel culture where buffets are the norm, diners have grown to expect extravagantly large portions of each dish piled up in front of them. In recent months when many hotels stopped their buffets, others reduced the sizes of offerings to accommodate fewer covers. While the number of dishes available was the same, hoteliers reported receiving complaints from guests about the smaller portions. They were frustrated about having to wait only a few minutes for buffets to be re-stocked with freshly prepared dishes. Clearly the education of guests has a role to play in waste management as well.

Inspired to step into the kitchen by a family member who was working as a chef, Chef Meththa has worked at the likes of Amaya Hill Resort and Hilton Colombo. He also spent time abroad with InterContinental, Jumeirah Emirates Towers and Le Meridien Hotels & Resorts. He joined Movenpick Hotel Colombo as the pre-opening executive chef in 2016.

Nowadays, chefs need to innovate in order to remain competitive Meththa points out. In the last ten years, he has seen a significant change in guests’ attitudes to dishes, particularly since 2017. “The market competition is higher,” because guests are well-travelled and “most of the time they are more aware of international food than the chefs.” He believes guest preferences are moving away from traditional food, towards dishes with a twist.

This fusion style is incorporated into Meththa’s chosen dish for sustainable gastronomy day. “Although I thought about doing a rice and curry with traditional presentation, because really is it very sustainable, I decided to create something totally modern – that’s what guests want these days.”

**Dish Name:** Free Range Chicken, marinaded with Ceylon spices, wrapped in banana leaves and served with curried pumpkin, brinjal pahi, gotukola and mango chutney emulsion.

**For a Great Dish:** Ingredients must be fresh, without too much handling.

**Sustainable Gastronomy is Important because:** We have to protect the environment, support the community and at the same time serve high quality, healthy, fresh products to guests.
“Sustainability is such a vast subject,” says Chef Ralf Vogt, Director of Operations F&B at Mount Lavinia Hotel. “In a nutshell, “It is a commitment to the environment,” and one that Ralf has tried to make in as many ways as possible. Since re-joining Mount Lavinia Hotel at the end of 2018, he has instigated the removal of many unnecessary plastic items from the kitchen and restaurant. Gone are the individual jam and butter packets, along with plastic straws. Single-use paper items have also been targeted: paper towels replaced by linen and the paper chef’s hats by cotton, “something with a little more style,” says Ralf with a wry smile.

A big believer in cooking with seasonal, local produce, for his sustainable gastronomy dish Ralf has chosen a vegan option. “I was very interested to find out that vegan is the most sustainable food because it does not use any animal products. Any animal product, even chicken and fish produce a lot of carbon, so to be sustainable we try to get away from using these.”

The Mount Lavinia Hotel has long been running a vegan buffet spread on Poya days, an event popular with tourists and locals alike. Veganism and vegetarianism as lifestyle choices are growing in popularity and it’s a trend that hotels need to take action on, or risk alienating a growing number of potential customers.

It’s estimated there are 3.5 times as many vegans in the UK as there were in 2006 and in the US, the number of consumers describing themselves as vegan has risen 600 per cent in just over three years. According to Google trends, Australia and the UK were the top two countries for veganism in 2018 (based on search queries), closely followed by Canada at number five. All three countries are in Sri Lanka’s top ten source markets.

Veganism does not only encompass the food that people eat, but also the products they come into contact with. The Hilton at London Bankside launched a vegan-friendly hotel room in February, which offers every element animal product-free, from the plant based keycard to the eco-cotton carpet. Food for thought for future Sri Lankan hotel designers, perhaps.
CHEF RALF VOGT,
Director of Operations F&B at Mount Lavinia Hotel
Earl’s Regency in Kandy, the Earl’s Court Group’s first hotel and its crown jewel, is leading the way to offer personalised service at every aspect to their guests.

The hotel, headed by Managing Director, Emal Gunasekera and General Manager, Buwaneka Bandara is using innovative ways and creative thinking to set the bar high for the hospitality sector in Kandy as well as in Sri Lanka.

Set up in 1999, Earl’s Regency has 126 bedrooms and is favoured by British, German and Australian clientele. The hotel is managed by the Aitken Spence Group.

“We feel that in order to be sustainable in the long run we need to have a strong pool of repeat guests,” says Emal Gunasekera, who has been fundamental in establishing Earl’s Regency Hotel as a trendsetter in the hospitality industry.

Training and empowering hotel staff - their strongest asset - is something the management prioritises. Apart from regular on-going training sessions, Emal Gunasekera ensures that the staff are in a position to provide the best service, whether it’s recommending a restaurant to a guest or having a comprehensive idea about the guests’ preferences.

Providing personalised service is supported by investments in the latest technology. From paperless check-ins at the reception to tablets in rooms, Earl’s Regency is leaving no stone unturned to guarantee seamless service and guest comfort.

“We are keen on introducing AI and the latest devices to support our staff and enhance guest service. Our staff is fully engaged and the initiative to introduce paperless check-in

Personalisation is a catchphrase that every hotel across Sri Lanka wants to be associated with. At a time when boutique hotels are championing the idea of personalised service, how can hotels with large inventories offer a bespoke service that caters to a guest’s needs? And can they sustain it in the long run?
was suggested to us by our front office staff. So we know that they too want to improve and provide the best service to our clients,” Buwaneka Bandara added.

By utilising the latest software that retains information about guest preferences, Earl’s Regency is making personalised service a reality, attracting and sustaining repeat clients.

Even in terms of culinary options, Earl’s Regency is determined to serve the best. The hotel’s latest food outlet, which is still under construction, promises to provide an authentic culinary experience prepared by experts in that particular cuisine.

The new restaurant will be a combination of fine dining and fusion cuisine. General Manager, Buwaneka Bandara says, “We want to create a dining space where guests can request for any dish, whether it’s Italian pizza or Japanese sushi, and they are provided with the authentic dish.”

At present, the hotel has two dining outlets: Far Pavilion (the main restaurant) and Royal Pavilion (an Indian themed restaurant). The Tap bar offers a vibrant social space and Mountbatten Lounge is for guests who just want to enjoy the perks of a cafe, undisturbed.

“Our buffets and the restaurant are very popular and we want to take this a step further and position Earl’s Regency as a culinary hub in Kandy,” says Emal Gunasekara.

Their comprehensive culinary options make Earl’s Regency Hotel the first choice for many couples who are looking at wedding venues. Unlike most hotels, where couples are met by the banquet coordinator to discuss budgets, at Earl’s Regency they are first introduced to the Executive Chef who will help them design a meal around their preferences.

Prioritising guest needs is at the heart of everything that Earl’s Regency does. This includes providing products or services that are value for money - the vision that drives the managing director and the hotel to work towards excellence.

He points out that what a client earns during his stay at the hotel, be it a memorable experience or guest satisfaction, is a part of the vision that drives him and the hotel to work towards excellence.

Security is another aspect that the hotel has focused its attention on. In the aftermath of the Easter Sunday events, the management tied up with an established security service provider to enhance the surveillance at Earl’s Regency. They have also taken steps to conduct a three-day workshop specifically for security personnel to educate them on the basics of hospitality and guest interaction.

With innovative plans underway, the management at Earl’s Regency Hotel is working tirelessly to provide exceptional service and be recognised as trailblazers by the hospitality sector in Sri Lanka.
FROM CHEF TO GM: ROHAN FERNANDOPULLE is the new GM at Cinnamon Lakeside
ROHAN FERNANDOPULLE IS A NAME FAMILIAR TO MANY. From being the first Sri Lankan Executive Chef at the Hilton Colombo, to his latest position as the General Manager of Cinnamon Lakeside, Fernandopulle is always on the lookout for new ways to innovate. Here, he speaks to Hospitality Insider about his career change from chef to GM, his vision for Cinnamon’s F&B sector and how he plans to navigate the recent slump in tourism.

INTERVIEW BY Sherwani Synon
PHOTOGRAPHY BY Sajith Sukumaran
You were a chef for nearly three decades, why did you change career paths?

I actually never wanted to leave my chef career but I was forced to. When The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) took place in Sri Lanka in 2013, I was working at the Hilton Colombo, which is owned by the government. The retreat, which is the main event of CHOGM, was scheduled at Waters Edge, which comes under the Urban Development Authority. In order to get the venue ready for this event, Waters Edge was looking for someone who had experience working with heads of states. As an executive chef, I’ve handled many dinners of such nature. I’m also a member of the Club des Chefs des Chefs, which is for chefs of heads of states. Since the two establishments were owned by the government and I had the experience, I was asked if I was willing to take up the position as General Manager at Waters Edge.

What was your steepest learning curve during this transition?

When I joined Waters Edge, there was a culture shock as I went from a multinational company to an independent hotel. While I was learning to adapt to the cultural differences, I had to set up the brand standards and SOPs. Doing that from scratch was an intense learning curve.

Which quality helped you the most during this transition?

I have the ability to work with anyone. My time in the kitchen has introduced me to a variety of personalities and characteristics. My greatest strength is the ability to motivate people and align them towards one goal.

What was your proudest moment as an executive chef?

That happened just before I left the Hilton in 2013. The hotel was celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2012 and I suggested the idea of organising a 25-course meal to coincide with this milestone. The dinner hosted 80 members of the Chaîne des Rôtisseur (an international gastronomic society). I closed four restaurants and converted those into satellite kitchens for this event. We had different kitchens churning out multiple courses. It’s not easy to organise something of this nature. I would say it’s the greatest achievement of my career.

You were attached to an international chain at Hilton for nearly three decades and now you’re the general manager of Cinnamon Lakeside, as well as the vice president for F&B initiatives for all Cinnamon properties. What are the key differences you see in terms of management and operation in the two chains?

Each organisation differs and has their own style of operation. The most important component is whether you can adapt and adjust to that environment. As I see it, the main difference is when I was at the Hilton, if there was something we needed in terms of expertise or training, all we had to do was to call up another Hilton hotel. As Cinnamon is a local chain, with hotels in the Maldives, we don’t have similar advantages that are offered at multinational hotels.
Through his culinary networks, Rohan has been able to organise staff training with a Michelin star chef and a champion mixologist.

"Each organisation differs and has their own style of operation. The most important component is whether you can adapt and adjust to that environment."

As the vice president for F&B initiatives for Cinnamon Hotels and Resorts, how do you plan to overcome the challenge of providing international training to the F&B teams at the hotels?

I have made a lot of contacts over the years and I’m also part of several associations including Bocuse d’Or (an international gastronomy contest created by French chef Paul Bocuse). Through these networks, I have already been able to facilitate two separate trainings with a Michelin star chef and a champion mixologist.
star chef, and a four-time champion mixologist for the F&B staff of Cinnamon resorts. I hope to continue organising training programmes with acclaimed professionals in the culinary industry.

**What is the most interesting part of being in-charge of F&B initiatives for the 15 Cinnamon properties?**

The opportunity of sharing knowledge and skills with the younger generation is the most interesting and satisfactory part of this role. My time is fading and it’s time to empower the next generation with the skills they need to succeed. I remember the pain and frustration I experienced when I was in their position. If I’m able to give someone the helping hand they need, I think that’s the best accomplishment.

**Do you have plans to introduce brand features that will link the F&B outlets at Cinnamon together?**

All hotels should have their individual identity but in the same light, there has to be some common elements as well. At the moment I’m working on introducing some features that will connect the properties. Part of this idea is to have a signature cinnamon welcome drink and a cinnamon cocktail at all of our hotels. For these, I want to use ingredients such as tea, cinnamon and arrack, which are 100% Sri Lankan. They will tell a story that connects people to the island.

**How do you decide if a dining concept needs to be changed or updated?**

It’s very difficult to sustain a food and
"My time is fading and it’s time to empower the next generation with the skills they need to succeed. If I’m able to give someone a helping hand, I think that’s the best accomplishment."

"The tourism industry is experiencing a slump at the moment. What strategies have you implemented to navigate this?"

I joined the hotel on 2nd May and by my second week, I decided that we needed to host a buffet spread. All the other hotels had stopped their buffet promotions, so I asked our chef to put on the best buffet possible. The first few days drew in about five people but after ten days, it gathered pace. People were prompted to come to us because no one else was doing it. Now we are introducing an ‘all you can eat buffet’ at all of our restaurants on the first Sunday of the month. Basically, guests can come in and move between all our restaurants for a set price.

Were you concerned about the risks of hosting a lavish buffet at a time when people were reluctant to visit hotels?

I like to take calculated risks. If you want to be a winner, you have to take risks. The staff were initially a bit hesitant when I told them I wanted to have a buffet spread but I helped them understand that no other hotel was doing a similar promotion. When you’re a general manager you need to take responsibility and make decisions, sometimes they work out and sometimes they don’t. In this case, it worked out and we were able to attract a new crowd that had not visited Cinnamon Lakeside previously.

You started your new job at a new hotel only a few days after the Easter attacks. How did you connect with your staff and motivate them?

When I joined, everyone was depressed and their morale was really low. As soon as I could, I made sure to meet all the departments separately and spend time with them. I used this time to conduct refresher courses to keep the team motivated. I also organised a spring cleaning project at the hotel and we got all the staff involved in this. I think that really gave me the opportunity to get to know the team and bond with them.

What do you consider the most important factor in managing people?

Engaging your team is the most important aspect in managing people. My way of getting things done is to get the team involved and engaged in coming up with ideas. Once you do that, the team will be passionate. They will take ownership and responsibility for implementing the ideas.

What is your favourite part of the day?

I would say the daily morning meeting with the heads of departments because it’s casual. We talk about the previous day and the week ahead over coffee.

What do you miss most about being in a kitchen?

Tasting the food.

CARER HISTORY

- **GENERAL MANAGER**
  CINNAMON LAKESIDE AND VICE PRESIDENT - F&B / CULINARY
  CINNAMON HOTELS & RESORTS
  MAY 2019 - PRESENT

- **GROUP CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER**
  GFH MANAGEMENT COMPANY
  JUL 2018 – APR 2019

- **GENERAL MANAGER**
  WATERS EDGE
  JUN 2013 – JUN 2018

- **EXECUTIVE CHEF**
  HILTON HOTELS WORLDWIDE
  MAR 1985 – JUN 2013
Three months on, Sri Lanka’s tourism sector is still placing its pieces together. With security in place and a dozen promotions to choose from, are people in Colombo ready to return to hotel buffets and post work drinks?

BY SHERWANI SYNON
Apart from the dwindling occupancy rates, hotels around Colombo reported a 15 to 90 per cent drop in the food and beverage sector – an essential component of a hotel’s revenue – in the immediate aftermath of Easter Sunday. Hotels that drew in guests in the hundreds to their restaurants and bars with minimum effort were abandoned overnight. Restaurants turned into ghost towns that no one dared to visit out of fear. Curfews implemented in the nights following the attack and during the second week of May, reinforced this apprehension. The result was that the tourism sector, which had previously relied on domestic travellers during the civil war when international arrival numbers were low, had nowhere to turn to.

Three months on, in early August, establishments are reporting a return of business, up 50 – 80 per cent on May. The loyal local client base were the first to return to their favourite restaurants to support them in their hour of need. The introduction of reduced value added tax from 15 to 5 per cent, coupled with attractive promotions and discounts have been tempting guests to return.

Several F&B directors we spoke to said that they called their regular clients and informed them about promotions and discounts hoping to entice them back to the hotel in the initial weeks after the attacks. While the numbers were low in the beginning, they have picked up steadily, particularly in July. Food and beverage outlets at hotels are now seeing more guests and interest.

Hotels located beyond city limits were positioned at a slight advantage when guests opted to avoid city hotels due to Colombo’s safety concerns and visit these venues instead. In addition to the regulars who visited these hotels to show their support, new faces also began to patronize the outlets.

Many establishments also reported that they noticed an increase in corporate executives visiting their hotel for lunches and drinks in June. “We have a lot of corporates coming in for lunch unlike before,” says a spokesperson for a hotel in Colombo. This observation also resonated with a smaller boutique property that is popular among Colombo’s C-suite.

The F&B Manager of a hotel known for its rooftop bar said that their loyal clientele in the corporate sector is the reason behind their quick recovery. “We hosted several corporate events at our banquet space in June. These events and the executives who frequent our bar has helped us sustain the hotel when occupancy was low.”

Hotel buffets, normally a Sri Lankan favourite, have made sluggish recoveries post April, and understandably so. Considering that of six targets, three were buffets, many people have taken their time to warm up to the idea of visiting hotels again, let alone buffets. Many hotels paused these spreads of copious amounts of food in order to manage costs in the months of May and June. The management of a hotel, known for its high tea promotion decided to only host it when they had received a notable number of bookings in advance.

After reviewing guest interest from May till mid July, several hotels have decided to resume buffets in some of their restaurants, in an attempt to test the waters. Family gatherings and celebrations have always played an instrumental role in the success of hotel buffet offerings, providing large bookings and making up a significant part of many hotel’s clientele. However, families in particular have shown hesitance in returning to city hotel restaurants with some preferring to staying away from hotels completely and others venturing to hotels beyond city limits. Perhaps in time, families will regain their confidence in returning to their Sunday habits of hotel buffets and swims.

Independent restaurants in Colombo reported a faster recovery than hotel F&B outlets have experienced. After a steep drop in May, the restaurants we spoke to saw an increase of 60 - 65 per cent in clientele in June. The manager of a cafe, popular among locals and the expat community, noted that the majority of their guests up until mid July were locals. “Like for many establishments, May was a bad month for us as well, but we were able to recover during June. By the end of July we were completely back to normal,” says the restaurant manager.

Surprisingly, the traumatic events of April have had little impact on Sri Lanka’s wedding season which usually spans from May to July. It’s heartening to see that many couples weren’t deterred and continued with their plans. Wedding celebrations are not only good for business but also serve as an excellent, and much needed, boost for staff morale.

The client base: old vs new

Several F&B directors we spoke to said that they called their regular clients and informed them about promotions and discounts hoping to entice them back to the hotel in the initial weeks after the attacks. While the numbers were low in the beginning, they have picked up steadily, particularly in July. Food and beverage outlets at hotels are now seeing more guests and interest.

Hotels located beyond city limits were positioned at a slight advantage when guests opted to avoid city hotels due to Colombo’s safety concerns and visit these venues instead. In addition to the regulars who visited these hotels to show their support, new faces also began to patronize the outlets.

Many establishments also reported that they noticed an increase in corporate executives visiting their hotel for lunches and drinks in June. “We have a lot of corporates coming in for lunch unlike before,” says a spokesperson for a hotel in Colombo. This observation also resonated with a smaller boutique property that is popular among Colombo’s C-suite.

The F&B Manager of a hotel known for its rooftop bar said that their loyal clientele in the corporate sector is the reason behind their quick recovery. “We hosted several corporate events at our banquet space in June. These events and the executives who frequent our bar has helped us sustain the hotel when occupancy was low.”

Hotel buffets, normally a Sri Lankan favourite, have made sluggish recoveries post April, and understandably so. Considering that of six targets, three were buffets, many people have taken their time to warm up to the idea of visiting hotels again, let alone buffets. Many hotels paused these spreads of copious amounts of food in order to manage costs in the months of May and June. The management of a hotel, known for its high tea promotion decided to only host it when they had received a notable number of bookings in advance.

After reviewing guest interest from May till mid July, several hotels have decided to resume buffets in some of their restaurants, in an attempt to test the waters. Family gatherings and celebrations have always played an instrumental role in the success of hotel buffet offerings, providing large bookings and making up a significant part of many hotel’s clientele. However, families in particular have shown hesitance in returning to city hotel restaurants with some preferring to staying away from hotels completely and others venturing to hotels beyond city limits. Perhaps in time, families will regain their confidence in returning to their Sunday habits of hotel buffets and swims.

Independent restaurants in Colombo reported a faster recovery than hotel F&B outlets have experienced. After a steep drop in May, the restaurants we spoke to saw an increase of 60 - 65 per cent in clientele in June. The manager of a cafe, popular among locals and the expat community, noted that the majority of their guests up until mid July were locals. “Like for many establishments, May was a bad month for us as well, but we were able to recover during June. By the end of July we were completely back to normal,” says the restaurant manager.

Surprisingly, the traumatic events of April have had little impact on Sri Lanka’s wedding season which usually spans from May to July. It’s heartening to see that many couples weren’t deterred and continued with their plans. Wedding celebrations are not only good for business but also serve as an excellent, and much needed, boost for staff morale.
Attractive promotions, deals and discounts have been crucial in stabilizing Sri Lanka’s accommodation sector and this stands true for the food and beverage sector in hotels as well. Whether it’s a one-for-one offer, discounts on meals, bottle bank memberships or credit card deals, these have been instrumental in tempting visitors back to drink and dine.

The increase in the number of guests at restaurants and bars as a result of promotions has encouraged hoteliers to have faith in the recovery process. They have persuaded old clients to return and won over new guests. A Colombo hotel that boasts over eight food and beverage outlets said that they have witnessed an 80 per cent increase in covers in July, following a 90 per cent drop in May. The F&B Director credits the ongoing promotions as the biggest booster for the increase in numbers, which has helped them break even instead of running at a loss.

The General Manager of a boutique hotel known for its sumptuous menu said that he decided to introduce promotions after carefully studying the market. He added that the promotions were targeted for the low performing meal times. “Discount is a dilution of revenue so you have to be very careful in what you promote.” The restaurant, which accounted for 65 per cent of the hotel’s revenue prior to April, has witnessed a steady growth since the end of May. At the time of writing, the management are looking into phasing out promotions because they feel that they are able to retain their existing client base, and attract new guests without the additional frills.

Other hotels with large inventories, remain heavily dependent on F&B promotions with occupancy rates still around 20 per cent. “I feel that most people visit our restaurants and bars because of these promotions and if we were to pause or stop these, it would have a huge negative impact on our business,” says a concerned F&B Supervisor. This view is shared by other hoteliers who championed the idea of promotions in the face of the slump in the tourism sector.

While promotions may bring in
crowds, they don’t necessarily have a positive impact on revenue if everything is offered on discounted rates.

So how long can hotels continue with their F&B promotions? Certain city hotels say that they hope to roll them out till October hoping that business will be steady by then. A hotel that launched its promotions weeks after the April attacks says that they are now confident in where they stand and are looking to stop them soon. “In the beginning we relied heavily on promotions but over the last two months we’ve seen a 50% per cent increase in revenue from F&B and rooms. At that point we made a decision to stop some promotions and it hasn’t affected us negatively.”

While promotions serve as a great incentive, it is important to note that human beings are creatures of habit. Most of us like having regular drinks after work or a Wednesday lunch to help us get through the week, regardless if there’s a promotion or not.

**THE PEOPLE FACTOR**

Sri Lanka has long been celebrated as a tourist destination because of its people. There’s no hospitality without staff who are ready to greet you with a smile (and how many times has the ‘Sri Lankan smile’ been referenced in travel articles) and to tend to your requests. The April attacks were a huge blow to the industry as a whole, and they also shook the foundation of many livelihoods. Unable to retain a large staff, hotels have had to lay off people. In other instances, establishments weren’t able to give service charge – a sizeable portion of income to many.

Despite the labour gap in the hospitality sector, fresh employment is a subject that no one dared to bring up in the months following April, including internships for graduates. The Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism & Hotel Management (SLITHM) revealed that in the aftermath of April, 1,500 hotel school graduates who had hoped to enter the industry, lost their placements.

“Thankfully, we didn’t have to lay off any of our staff, and because the hotel was able to provide a fixed service charge, we were able to retain our workforce,” says the F&B Director of a staff force of 200. He added that since the F&B sector has had a steady growth in the recent weeks they hope to take in hotel school graduates on internships in the upcoming months.

All hotels Hospitality Insider spoke to except one said they were ready for recruitment. “We lost a few key members due to foreign employment and cruise lines and with business picking up, we need more people,” explained one manager.

The general manager of a hotel with a smaller workforce, credited his employees for sustaining the business. “The hotel performed really well in April prior to the attacks, so it didn’t affect the service charge aspect that month. Since we did really well last year, we were in a position to give a bonus in May, a month that was detrimental to them. At the end of the day the staff contributed to safeguarding their own jobs.”

With arrival numbers increasing, up to 115,701 in July, there’s a slow but positive growth in Sri Lanka’s tourism sector. It’s important to note that although it will take some time for international tourist numbers to return to pre-April events, the next couple of months are going to be crucial for the welfare of the industry. While it’s heartening to witness that locals are actively contributing to hotels’ revenue at present, both through F&B and discounted room rates, some have questioned if hotels will remember who supported them through this period. Will the hotel industry still value domestic tourists when foreigner numbers increase?
As a journalist, my job requires me to call hotels on a regular basis and I am amazed by the standards of telephone etiquette displayed by many front office staff. This is not a compliment. While I understand the reception desk may be inundated with calls and enquiries, that is no excuse for poor service. Every call to the front desk is an interaction with a potential guest and should be treated as such. If the caller is met with rudeness, abrupt answers or even worse - a staff member unwilling to actually listen accurately to the query - rest assured you can wave that potential business goodbye.

A potential guest is far more likely to rant about it on their social media account, tagging the hotel instead of addressing the issue with a manager. With social media becoming everyone’s go-to-vent centre, don’t underestimate the damage it can cause if the issue is not dealt with appropriately.

An example: during a call to a well-known Sri Lankan hotel, part of a global chain, I requested to speak to a person in the banquet department based at the hotel. In response, I was given the number of the corporate office in Colombo. The executive then promptly hung up on me. No further communication given. Needless to say I was shocked by the lack of professionalism and comprehension displayed. It felt like the executive had little to no interest in helping me with my query. Sadly this is far from an isolated incident.

The standard Do’s and Don’ts of telephone etiquette are not rocket science. Surprisingly though, on calls to many Sri Lankan hotels, you’ll realise that too many front office executives have forgotten this basic protocol.

The hotel management needs to be held responsible when front office staff display poor telephone etiquette. The manner in which a front office executive conducts themselves and interacts, whether in person or over the phone, is a direct representation of how the hotel operates. Attention to detail is a trait that Sri Lankans tend to overlook, but it carries immense value to a customer. At this time, when many hotels are taking time to upskill and cross-train their staff, scheduling time to brush up on essential telephone etiquette is easy, and could significantly impact the business.

6 TIPS TO HELP YOUR FRONT OFFICE STAFF GET THE BASICS RIGHT

1. Make regular test calls to gain a real understanding of how your staff handle calls. Once you know the realities, you can focus on the pain points.

2. Conduct mock telephone conversations with varied, and quirky enquiries during morning meetings. The cumulative impact of 5 minutes a day is significant.

3. Answering calls can be tedious at times, sharing regular peer and management recognition will keep staff motivated.

4. Have regular conversations with staff who have low confidence conversing in English and encourage all staff to learn the language basics for the hotel’s main clientele.

5. Teach staff to rate their own phone interactions with guests to develop self-awareness and gain understanding of how they can improve.

6. Your staff are representing your hotel brand on the phone. Introduce standardised phrases to answer and end a call and ensure all staff use them.
3 MONTHS ON, WHAT ARE THE TRENDS?

Arrival Numbers Begin to Rebound

There are two sides to every set of statistics. On the one hand, international arrivals in July are half what they were in July 2018. On the other, this decline is 10 percentage points less than it was in June. The gap between 2018 and 2019 arrivals is beginning to close.

While numbers are down YoY for all top source countries, this is to be expected under the circumstances. As a positive sign, there is a smaller gap between YoY arrivals for July, than June.

For the top European source markets, this gap has closed by an average of 13%. This shows that while July is traditionally a high month for visitors from European countries, the numbers are recovering in addition to this predicted seasonality.

Five of the top ten source countries in July are in Europe. Arrivals from France were up 260% month on month, Switzerland 320% and the Netherlands, which experienced a 70% YoY drop in June, increased 820%.

Arrival Numbers Begin to Rebound

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>YoY (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>70.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>57.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

International tourist arrivals

Year to date July total

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>July Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>1,382,476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>1,124,150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Arrivals in June were at the same level as 2012.
Europe Region Increases

Visitor numbers from Europe are recovering at a faster rate than other regions. This is helped by the start of the European summer and a significant amount of press coverage in the UK about Sri Lanka as a destination. In July 2018, the Europe region was 44% of total arrivals, in July 2019 it was 50%.

China particularly affected

In 2018, the top source markets of India, China and the UK provided almost 40% of total arrivals to Sri Lanka. Between May–July 2019, arrivals from the UK increased from 3,000 to 13,000. Between June and July alone the number of arrivals tripled. During the same period, arrivals from India have shown steady growth, increasing an average of 3,500 each month. The launch of the recent promotional campaign in India hopes to encourage visits planned at short notice from Sri Lanka’s neighbour. Of the top source countries, China and the USA show the highest YoY drop. Arrivals from China have doubled month on month in June and July, but on the back of a 90% decline YoY (from 17,100 to 1,600 in May) it will take a long time to recover at this pace. In July, China remains down 75% YoY.

The USA, which is known to be particularly cautious about its citizens’ safety overseas, also shows slow process. A fifth more Americans arrived in July than June, but July numbers remain down 58% year on year.
As an industry, hospitality is known to be highly stressful. How can managers ensure the well-being of their staff is not overlooked?

The word ‘stress’ is no longer foreign to the 21st century. It has built an unbreakable bond with our fast-paced lives and is no longer unique to a single individual or an industry.

In spite of its negative connotations, stress itself is not always a bad thing. It is our body’s way of indicating that danger is around the corner. It has helped the human race survive millions of years, through every natural disaster since the evolution of mankind. In addition to physical risks, we also have to be aware of mental and psychological threats that come as a combo deal.

Although threats have evolved over time, our biological set up still remains the same. So when we feel stressed at work - whether it’s being unable to meet a deadline or wanting to manage our time more efficiently - our bodies react the same way as if we were to be in a life threatening situation. Our primal need to fight or flight is automatically switched on to protect us from external dangers. This overreaction can be caused by getting stuck in traffic, difficulties in relationships and of course work, where we spend 9hrs+ a day - often over 50 hours a week.

As an industry, hospitality is known for its high level of stress. Long hours, around the clock service and accommodating difficult guest needs add to the complexities of a typical work environment. Two separate studies by John O’Neill (2011) and Ajeet Kumar Lal Mohan (2017) found that interpersonal relationships between employees is one of the leading stress factors. This is followed by inadequate training, dissatisfaction in compensation and workloads. Crucially from a management point of view, O’Neill’s research showed a negative correlation between job stress and quality customer service delivery. Put simply, the less stressed employee was able to provide better customer service than his or her stressed-out colleagues. Over time, stress can lead to exhaustion, a reduced capacity to learn, depressive symptoms and withdrawal. This will result in poor job performance and ultimately impact the operations of the establishment.

O’Neill’s research also shows that the “stress situation appears to be particularly acute for hotel managers.” So if you’re a hotel manager reading this article, I hope this serves as a reminder that it’s important to look after yourself as well as your staff.
HOW TO RECOGNISE A STRESS IN EMPLOYEES

- Over a period of time stress starts to take physiological symptoms. Pay close attention to employees who complain of having regular headaches, aches and pains, exhaustion and high blood pressure. Trouble with sleep, fatigue, indigestion and ulcers are also physical signs of stress.

- Mood is another good indicator when it comes to stress. Does the front office executive who usually readily greets you with a smile, seem withdrawn and quiet lately? Are you easily irritable for the smallest reasons? Speak to your front office executive and check in with yourself, are you overly stressed?

- A drop in job performance over a period of time is a warning sign. Go over leave records, is there a name or two that have taken leave more frequently than the rest? It could be due to stress, or it could be an entirely different matter but it’s best to address it with the staff in concern. Employees have a high regard for managers who are genuinely interested in their well-being and who make the effort to get to know them.

- A lack of cooperation or conflict with colleagues is another indicator you need to watch out for. Poor relationships with colleagues is a leading stress factor in the industry.

"When we feel stressed at work - whether it's being unable to meet a deadline or manage our time efficiently - our bodies react the same way as if we were in a life threatening situation"

HOW TO HELP YOUR STAFF DEAL WITH STRESS

Focus on clear and concise goals
This will give your staff a sense of direction and help eliminate unnecessary stress factors. It will also help them stay motivated and engaged. The goals need to be realistic, achievable and specific so they provide a framework your staff can work with. These goals need to be reviewed on a regular basis. Ensure that you notice and praise the small wins and not only focus on where he/she is falling short.

Listen to your staff
Hospitality is all about looking after guests and ensuring that their needs and expectations are met. In an attempt to provide the best service, managers can forget the importance of looking after the well-being of their staff. Take the time to get to know your staff and keep an open communication line at all times so that they can discuss what's causing them stress. Employees who feel that they are heard are motivated, further helping to reduce stress.

Address issues as soon as they rise
Addressing concerns as soon as they are brought to your attention helps employees build trust and confidence in you as a manager. Confrontation is not something most Sri Lankans are particularly skilled at, but this approach will help prevent issues escalating into stressful situations that could affects your hotel.

Rethink your work culture
Does your hotel focus only on filling rooms and having the best ratings on TripAdvisor and Booking.com? If so, you might want to rethink your corporate culture. If your work environment promotes embedded pressure and stress, you're bound to have more stressed out employees, poor job satisfaction and a high employee turnover. This can quickly lead to a reputation of being an undesirable employer.

**Techniques to Reduce Stress**

**Short Term**

- **Stretch**
  The next time you feel stressed, take a break and stretch. Stress is known to restrict blood flow, causing tension in your muscles and lower back. Stretching will help you reduce stress, improve thinking, and increase productivity.

- **5-4-3-2-1 technique**
  This grounding technique helps combat stress. Use when you’re feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

  - **5 THINGS YOU SEE**
    Acknowledge five things you can see in your surroundings. It could be the phone on your desk, the printer or the sous chef in the kitchen.

  - **4 THINGS YOU CAN TOUCH**
    It could be a notebook, cutlery or a glass of water.

  - **3 THINGS YOU CAN HEAR**
    It could be the doorman greeting a new guest, the phone ringing or prep in the kitchen.

  - **2 THINGS YOU CAN SMELL**
    It could be the smell of tea or a colleague’s handcream.

  - **1 THING YOU CAN TASTE**
    This could be a toffee or a cup of tea.

- **Talk**
  Talking about how you’re feeling with a trusted colleague or a friend has many positive benefits. Verbalising will help you process your thoughts and serves as a good stress buster. Never underestimate the benefits of a venting session.

- **Walk it off**
  Overwhelmed with the number of emails you have to respond to or stressed about your team’s performance? Take a break and go for a walk around the hotel or venture into the outdoors. Leaving an environment that is stressing you out for a short period will help you gain perspective of the situation and improve your mood overall.

**Long Term**

- **Revive a hobby**
  Having personal time is absolutely vital for your mental well-being. Having a support system that gives you pleasure will help you cope with stressful situations better. Work is important but taking time to enjoy life is equally so.

- **Spend quality time with family and friends**
  Having a support system you can share the good, the bad and the ugly times with is extremely important. Humans are social beings and our survival depends on connecting with others and maintaining healthy relationships with family, friends, and partners.

- **Exercise**
  A regular exercise routine has proven to be beneficial for mental and physical health. Exercise reduces stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol in the body and helps the brain produce feel-good neurotransmitter called endorphins. These will help you feel good and improve your overall mood.

- **Sleep**
  Contrary to Sri Lanka’s reputation as a ‘chilled out island’ we do not practice good sleep hygiene. On average, a person is required to have 6 – 8 hours of sleep in order to feel well-rested and energised to carry on with their day’s work. Reduced hours and disturbed sleep affects the brain’s speed to process thoughts and the ability to solve problems, which directly affects job performance.

**Health Problems**

- **Obesity**
  Stress causes higher levels of cortisol (stress hormone) which increases the amount of fat deposited in the abdomen area.

- **Heart disease**
  Long-term stress can increase the risk of high blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes.

- **Brain**
  Causes headaches and migraines.

- **Stomach problems**
  Aggravates gastrointestinal disorders and causes acute gastritis.

- **Depression**
  Leads to high rates of depression and anxiety.

- **Diabetes**
  When the liver produces additional blood sugar for energy for the fight or flight response, it could lead to Type 2 diabetes for some people.
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HOSTING A FAM TRIP FOR SUCCESS

Having conducted travel agent familiarisation (FAM) trips in Sri Lanka for four years, I know a thing or two about what makes a hotel stand out.

FAM trips are a great opportunity to market your hotel, but if you are unprepared or showcase a property in a poor state, you may find yourself on the unofficial ‘do not recommend’ list.

Follow these seven tips and be confident that your hotel will make a positive lasting impression.
1. **Cleanliness** - This is the most basic thing, but I can’t count the number of times I have visited hotels that had dirty walls or worse, discoloured linen. This is almost ALWAYS the first thing a travel agent will notice. Their trained eyes are meant to pick on the little things because that’s part of their job of ensuring that their clients receive the best. Hotel visits and inspections are always scheduled ahead of time, so if you plan to entertain agents, make sure that your hotel is in order. That means your hotel needs to be of the standard to welcome guests, irrespective of whether they are paying clients or travel agents.

2. **Know your product** - As a manager of a hotel, it’s your responsibility to know everything about the property, its history and the location. You need to be prepared to answer any question asked by a travel agent. This includes information about the nearest hospital and evacuation plans set in place. Answers like “I don’t know” or “I’m new to the property” will be looked down upon as they show your lack of preparedness.

3. **Pay attention to your food** - There have been numerous times when well-established hotels have failed to provide satisfactory vegetarian options. A vegetarian dish is not a salad with lettuce, tomatoes and egg, neither is it fried rice with chilli paste. If your hotel cannot offer a good dish with interesting vegetarian ingredients, you need to re-examine your menu. Travellers are increasingly particular about their food preferences and hotels can no longer get away serving a dull plate of carbs or greens as vegetarian or vegan. It’s important that your kitchen is able to keep up with the growing demand for dietary preferences.

4. **Prepare your staff** - They need to be in clean uniforms and ready to engage with guests. Your hotel might have the best of amenities but if your staff don’t match up to those standards, you’re unlikely to be welcoming the agent’s guests any time soon. Motivate your staff to brush up on their language skills. Attentiveness and attention to detail also play a vital role in service.

5. **Promote your location** - Accommodation options are underpinned by what the surrounding area has to offer. Unless your hotel has received individual global recognition, its location is a key deciding factor for most tours. If you want a travel agent to think of your establishment the next time they receive an enquiry, give them something to remember you by. Marketing your location, coupled with an interesting property or personal story will have a lasting impression on agents, as well as on guests.

6. **Ensure everything is in working order** - While this is harder to maintain for larger hotels, for small properties there really is no excuse. If you’re ready to welcome travel agents on inspection visits, regardless of if they are local or foreign, your hotel is ready to host guests. Unless there’s an unplanned breakdown, air-conditioning units, lights and fixtures all need to be operational. This also means no creaking doors, wobbly tables or slow-draining showers (simply the worst!)

7. **Share a fact sheet with USPs and important info** - All hotels have marketing collateral but how can you ensure yours is different? Stunning images are valuable but won’t make a travel agent pick your hotel over your equally-stunning neighbour. Instead, curate a list of USPs, amenities and services that will be useful to sell your product. Is your hotel close to a cultural site? Does it have an interesting story or offer a unique experience? That’s what you need to highlight on your fact sheet designed for travel agents. Superfluous words and an image of a model picking tea may charm your guests, but will have zero impact on a travel agent.
The message, the media & HOW YOU TELL YOUR STORY

Effective marketing is your key to success

‘Good’ online marketing can enhance your property’s brand and boost your bottom line. ‘Bad’ marketing can have the opposite effect by diminishing your brand, which will negatively impact occupancy rates and profits.

‘Good’ means a clear, effective message using words, pictures and video that connects and engages with potential guests who share your brand values.

‘Bad’ means an unfocused and confusing message that fails to communicate what your property stands for, and why potential guests would want to stay there.

Hotels began life as simple pot-luck bed-and-board hostellers for travellers in the bad old days when getting from A to B was a long and arduous—and often risky—business.

Then came tourists and everything changed. Simple became complex, pot-luck became fine dining, and bed-and-board became the full-service experience.

And then came the Internet, followed by OTAs, websites, social media—and growing pressure on hotels to define their brands and leverage their USPs across the full gamut of online marketing channels.

The drivers of today’s tourism and hotel industries are cheap air travel and—by far the biggest game-changer—the Internet. Online marketing has altered the world of hospitality beyond recognition.

In short, in this digital day and age when the message is the medium, your brand values and USP, and how you manage them both online, can mean the difference between success and failure.

Which has forced hoteliers to focus more closely on what their brands actually stand for and what they have to offer that others don’t. In other words, what they are and, just as crucially, what they are not.

So what does your hotel stand for? What niche do you aim to fill? What is your target market? And are you succeeding because you got it right or failing because you got it wrong?

These questions should be asked and answered even at the best of times. And right now, when times could hardly be less best, leveraging your website and social media to promote and market your property has never been more
important.

But some SME hoteliers, especially non-industry newcomers who jumped on the bandwagon to profit from the tourism boom, have been slow to accept—or even understand—the new reality.

Part of that new reality is that, with the collapse of bookings island-wide since the Easter Sunday hotel bombings, SME hoteliers might want to think about how they can benefit from out-of-house expertise to help them weather the storm.

For example, the Colombo agency eMarketingEye provides end-to-end digital marketing, social media, SEO (search-engine optimisation) and brand-management services for hotels around the world, including many in Sri Lanka.

Says CEO Rajitha Dahanayake: “With this existential crisis staring them in the face, Sri Lanka’s small-to-medium hoteliers need to radically revamp their branding and marketing strategies. To put it bluntly, they need to spend more. A lot more.”

Short-term recovery, he says, should focus on SEO and social-media, especially in the domestic market, with a blitz on special offers and promotions for rooms and restaurants.

Meanwhile, medium-to-long-term efforts to lure back foreign tourists should focus on destination marketing and remarketing through the website and blog, while spending whatever it takes to boost posts, pictures and video clips on Facebook and Instagram.

The bottom line? Says Rajitha: “Invest at least $10,000 on a 6-month marketing campaign with SEO, social media and Google Ads, and $2,000 on blog content and destination marketing.”

His views are reinforced by advertising veteran Rajiv Menon, Chief Executive Creative Officer at Phoenix Ogilvy, Colombo’s affiliate of that eponymous global ad agency.

With 27 years in the business, he is in no doubt about what hoteliers, especially SMEs, must do now: “More marketing and brand promotion. Much more. Beg, borrow or steal the money if you have to. But do it.”

Menon also agrees on the importance of destination marketing. “Tourism is now a vital Sri Lankan strategic industry, so it’s not just the hotels themselves that are in trouble, the country’s trickle-down economy is also suffering.”

He says that even before the bombings, marketing and brand promotion were essential to a hotel’s need to continuously connect and engage with potential customers in its target markets.

On that subject, the Santani wellness resort in the hill country near Kandy and quirky south-coast The Owl And The Pussycat boutique near Galle, are good examples of contrasting properties that have cleverly leveraged their distinctive USPs to maximum advantage.

Santani brands itself as “the first and only purpose-built wellness resort offering luxury escapes in Sri Lanka, designed according to the highest sustainability and eco-standards.”

“We spent more than two years searching for this pristine location,” it says, “because we understood humans heal and thrive most effectively where nature meets intelligent, sustainable design.”

Its website and online presence are handled by BenWorld-wide, “a boutique agency which specializes in understanding selected clients and delivering impacting technologies solutions”.

The Owl And The Pussycat, on the other hand, “dreamed of a simple, fun and unpretentious place ... with a sense of romance, food, and dancing in the moonlight. The place is tranquil, but social too. Every detail is lovingly restored and crafted by hand”.

It uses Simplotel, “a hotel technology company offering software-as-a-service (SaaS) to help hotels drive more bookings through all their channels—website, online and offline”.

"That essential ‘voice’ is a vital but elusive concept. Some might like it, some might not. Which is why it requires a lot of thought and empathy to get it right"

- Rajiv Menon
"In this digital age, how you manage your brand values and USP online can mean the difference between success and failure"

What these properties have in common—are websites and Facebook pages that clearly benefit from well-written, well thought out and engaging copy, and good pictures that illustrate and promote their individual brand values and distinctive 'voice'.

Says Ogilvy's Rajiv: “That essential ‘voice’ is a vital but elusive concept. Some might like it, some might not. Which is why it requires a lot of thought and empathy with the cultural preferences of your target market to get it right.

“Many Sri Lanka SME hoteliers have an ‘island mentality’ and are too emotionally involved with their properties to be able to stand back and take a dispassionate view of the best course of action.

“But this is a vitally important step in the process of branding and maintaining brand awareness, which is why it is sometimes best left to experts who have the experience and detachment to make the best ‘connect and engage’ value judgements.”

The take-away here is that, whether in-house or through an agency, effective marketing needs a clear strategy, beginning with ‘what is our message’ and ending with ‘how do we get that message across to our target demographic’.

If you manage it in-house, ensure that whoever handles the campaign knows what they’re doing and understands that every word, picture and video clip must create clear and compelling brand-value messages that potential guests can relate to and identify with.

INSTAGRAM IS A PERFECT MEDIUM for travel and holiday inspiration. The Owl and The Pussycat Hotel in Galle mixes photographs with quirky illustrations, staying true to the hotel’s design style.
INFLUENCERS
‘Key influencers’—professional travel bloggers who you pay in cash or kind to promote your property—can be a two-edged sword.

Their importance and value is underlined by the Cinnamon Hotels and Resorts Travel Bloggers Conference in Colombo, which every year hosts some of the world’s most influential travel writers.

However, there have also been many damaging public-relations fails when influencers have either gone ‘off message’ or otherwise landed the client in a Twitterstorm of protest about something they wrote.

The bottom line here is: research. Make a shortlist of potential bloggers, read their posts, make sure they are aligned with your brand values, and then create a detailed brief covering exactly what you want them to achieve.

They are like any other service provider, so treat them like one. Draw up a contract or MOU (memorandum of understanding), and make sure they stick to it.

PHOTOS
Meeting your guests expectations while reinforcing your brand values, whatever they are, should be your number one priority.

So the last thing you want is for guests to feel disappointed and disgruntled because your hotel doesn’t measure up to the pictures on your website and social-media channels.

In fact, you should be aiming to exceed their expectations, to generate feelings of surprise and delight that the reality is actually better than they expected.

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words, but bear in mind that savvy travellers know how easily ‘fake news’ and Photoshop retouching can misrepresent reality, deliberately or otherwise.

The bottom line here is: an off-the-cuff smartphone point-and-click pic won’t do. Hire a professional photographer who specialises in showing hotels to their best advantage (while not misrepresenting the reality).

He—or she—will also know the best formats and proportions to use for the main social-media channels, including Facebook and Instagram.

#HASHTAGS
The key here is—don’t overdo it. Hashtags play an important social media role in putting your words and pictures in front of potential guests, especially on Facebook and Instagram.

But both channels are increasingly penalising blatant attempts to game the system. You’ve all seen it—a mediocre picture with a three-word caption followed by a slew of inappropriate or random hashtags.

Just as bad is a concocted and often irrelevant caption where every other word is a hashtag. This not only makes it difficult to read, it screams ‘desperation’, which will diminish your brand, not enhance it.

CAPTIONS AND SEO
Unique descriptive captions and metadata will help you achieve the best possible Google SEO rankings for your pictures.

Professional photographers know this, and will embed the picture caption and metadata keywords you provide when they process your pictures in Photoshop.

At the very least, these should include the hotel name and location, plus any information that Google will (hopefully) match to a search string.

For example: ‘A party from India enjoys the sunset at ‘Your Hotel’ while sipping marguerites round the only salt-water pool in Galle, the historic fortress town on the picturesque south coast of Sri Lanka.’

Posting pictures with targeted and appropriate hashtags on social media, especially Facebook and Instagram, will help establish your brand and its values during a potential guest’s often lengthy ‘where to stay’ decision-making process.
The Value of Competition

Roshan Adhihetty is the General Manager at OZO Colombo, an ONYX Hospitality brand. Adhihetty first worked at OZO as the Director of Operations, before moving to Best Western, then returning to OZO to take the helm as GM. With 30 years of experience in the industry, he’s confident about the positive impact more international brands will have on Sri Lanka.

What was your first job in the hospitality industry?
I joined the Taj in 1990 as a management trainee. After three months in the classroom, my first job was in the coffee shop kitchen, in the pot wash. It was not what I expected when I joined, but I really liked how busy it was.
During the 3 years of training, I went through all 52 departments of the hotel.

You’ve been GM at OZO Colombo for two years. What changes have you made in that time?
We’ve expanded our portfolio of clients and ventured more into the corporate world. When I worked here before, as Director of Operations in 2015-16, the hotel had more of a leisure base. Now, we are focussed on the business traveller to a greater extent and have a lot of multinational corporate clients, plus major Sri Lankan brands. Over 60 per cent of our clientele is now corporate.
We actively began to target this market because of the emerging dynamics of the city. Colombo is undoubtedly the business hub. While leisure travellers pass through at the start or end of their trip, they stay a maximum of two nights. Over recent years, the leisure market has also thinned due to increased hotel supply. We still do leisure of course, but not to the same extent.
Corporate clients have to be very risk sensitive. Have the travel advisories impacted your business more than others, because of your majority business clientele?

When you compare with other city hotels that are in our competitor set, we have seen a large drop and it has affected us. Occupancy for August is down 40 per cent compared to last year.

Of course you can’t plan for disaster but you can plan to safeguard as much as possible. As an ONYX brand we have very detailed safety and security audits annually, which meant that in a way we were prepared. Making guests feel safe is our prime duty. Since Easter, I’ve participated in countless security audits and interviews with different corporate companies to discuss the security situation and how we will take care of their guests.

Now we see a lot of our business targets coming back. MICE, conferences and workshops are starting again as people get back to their day to day life.

You mentioned the increasing supply in city based hotels. With new international brands like InterContinental and Sheraton set to open, do you think this will become an oversupply?

Most of these new hotels will come into operation between 2022 and 2024. From now to mid-2021, it will be a process of building guest numbers back up because of what happened in April.

Once the new brands actually open, we may feel a lack of guests within the city, but with Port City operating and other building projects in the planning stages, I wouldn’t say that it will be an oversupply.

Year on year, we’ve seen a gradual slide in rates and since April we’ve brought them down, but I think that everybody has to stop somewhere. I believe these international brands coming in will actually drive up the rates.

When major brands come in they lift up your standard of service and products, and the local brands will have to rise to that level to compete. That’s a great advantage for the industry and the country.

Will it be difficult to build up your rates again?

Good question! It is an understanding that when you drop a rate it takes 4-6 months just to increase by $1 or $2 again. If you dip far it’s going to take some time to recover.

More hotels will create increased competition for staff. What are your views on the manpower situation? How can managers retain their talented employees?

Even now, staffing is an issue, although not yet a crisis. Every new hotel that opens takes people from another hotel and that causes a chain reaction.

Retaining passionate staff is not about the money per se. Yes the salaries and service charge do matter, but they are not everything. I believe salary levels will rise in the future when the major international brands come in. But even with passionate...
A Bangkok-based hotel management group with an Asian flavour.

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In Sri Lanka: 5 properties, 3 brands:
- **OZO** - midscale for the on-the-go guest, Colombo & Kandy
- **Amari** – upscale Asian hospitality, Galle, and Colombo (opening 2020)
- **The Mosaic Collection** – owner branded, ONYX operated, The Villas Wadduwa

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**OZO COLOMBO QUICK FACTS**

**2017**
Rooms

5 years
In operation

120
Staff

30%
Female workforce

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staff, if they receive a better offer from overseas, they will move.

When youngsters want to go abroad we should give them the freedom to do so. International exposure is as a good thing, they can learn a lot and bring back with them a world of experience. That’s when the industry needs to be smart, to utilize their skills when they return.

I believe staff engagement is what will be crucial over the next 3-5 years. Here at OZO we have a twice-yearly engagement survey, a practice that comes from ONXY. We’ve tried to create a culture of two-way communication where collectively, the team can raise issues and suggest what we should be doing to make it better.

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**Who inspires you?**
A general manager I worked for in the late nineties stands out in my mind. Sadly he passed away so I won’t mention his name, but even today I look up to him. As a young professional he gave me my eye for detail. His foresight and attentiveness really inspired me to get to where I am today.

**If you were not in the hospitality industry what would you be doing?**
The next hardest job – the army! When I was younger I actually wanted to join the military. One of my teachers was married to a famous general and I tried to pass her my CV to give to him. She called my mother, who said no!
WHAT DO YOU GET THE GIRL WHO HAS EVERYTHING?

HEAD TO COSMOMAG.LK TO SUBSCRIBE ONLINE
What makes a great night’s sleep?

With guests spending one-third of their holiday sleeping, the importance of a good night’s kip cannot be ignored. A recent American survey by consumer insights firm JD Power revealed getting a better-than-expected quality of sleep raised overall guest satisfaction levels by 11 per cent*.

This in turn, led to 78 per cent saying they “definitely will” return to that property.

Hotels, by nature, are in the business of selling sleep. This is equally fundamental whether you are offering a relaxing tea country getaway, or a city hotel catering for business travellers with early morning meetings.

So what steps can you take to give your guests the best night’s sleep?

Keep it clean
No matter what the size of your hotel, cleanliness has to be paramount and this is important for guests’ sleep quality as well. The look, feel - and yes, smell - of linen is crucial.

Pay close attention also to the cleanliness of the mattress & bed. A single review mentioning the horrors of bedbugs can do extensive damage to your hotel’s reputation, no matter how beautiful the rest of the experience may have been. Take for example, a recent TripAdvisor review starkly titled ‘Do not stay here > Bedbugs’. Potential guests are unlikely to subject themselves to that risk voluntarily, so they will take their business elsewhere.

Keep it quiet
Not all sources of noise are within the hotel management’s control, particularly if your property is located in a busy area, but those that are should be tackled head-on.

Issues like leaky faucets, loud AC or fans, poorly fitted windows and buzzing light fixtures are annoying intrusions that can disrupt sleep. Have your housekeeping or maintenance teams listen for sound issues when they check the rooms, and eliminate those irritating distractions.

Embrace the dark
A survey commissioned by IHG Hotels & Resorts found 80 per cent of guests have trouble sleeping away from home. This led the company to pilot use of a high-tech LED lighting system to regulate guest’s circadian rhythms.

While such products may only be an option for large and high-end brands, installing black-out curtains or blinds in your guest bedrooms is an easy way to help them achieve a restful night’s sleep.

Offer extras
Small touches can make a big difference. Consider offering in-room amenities specifically to help with sleep, such as earplugs, aromatherapy products and decaffeinated coffee or herbal tea.

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*Source: J.D. Power 2019 North America Hotel Guest Satisfaction Index
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EcoServe offers the hospitality industry a modern approach to buffets through showcasing kitchen creations in a more elegant style.

An aluminium hotplate is used to keep dishes warm so no water is required.

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