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M.U. MANIKU

Crafting a Legacy

CONRAD MALDIVES RANGALI ISLAND
DOMINIK KUENSTLE
DRIFT THELU VELIGA
KUREDU ISLAND RESORT
YEARLY REVIEW OF 2015





M.U. MANIKU

Crafting a Legacy

// Nashiu Zahir

Sitting in the board room of the Maldives Association of Tourism Industry (MATI), of which he has been the chairman since inception, Mohamed Umar (MU) Maniku begins to give an account of how he found himself involved in tourism. His memory does not seem to be tarnished by the years, and as he speaks, his love for his work and its legacy is apparent, as is a sense of humour.

He was just a young man who, after finishing studies in Pakistan, was serving the Maldivian government when opportunity knocked on his door. "It was really a matter of coincidence," says

Maniku. "There was hardly anything here besides government service when I came back after finishing college in '72."

Even at that time tourism was very big in Asia, Maniku recalled. The Maldives' neighbour Sri Lanka already had jumbo jets coming chock full of tourists. "It was big in Thailand too," Maniku says. "Also in Seychelles. There were direct flights [from Europe] to Seychelles. But we had nothing here in the Maldives."

And tourism prospects seemed rather bleak. A few years prior to Maniku's arrival, The United Nations had conducted a study - much derided since then - that found tourism to be

unfeasible in the country. There was no infrastructure or facilities to support the industry.

The advent of tourism

But it so happened that Maniku, along with his friends Ahmed Naseem and Hussain Afeef (Champa) met a European man by the name of George Corbin who visited the Maldives looking for new destinations. Corbin was into spearfishing, a practice that is now banned in the country. He had taken some rich Italians to Bangra in India on such an excursion and found the Maldives to be very promising. ▲

Early days; guests on a traditional dhoni in Kurumba lagoon.



“We were young and wanted to do all that we could to prepare for this.”

▲ “When Corbin and his friend came here, we put them up in our own homes,” says Maniku. “Naseem, myself and Hussain Afeef (Champa), took him around town just like we would any foreigner those days. We were just youngsters then. We took him to some nearby islands and they took a lot of photos.” Corbin, who represented the travel agency Sesto Continente in Milan, told the group that he could get some people down for spearfishing the following February.

“We were very excited,” Maniku beams. “We were young and wanted to do all that we could to prepare for this.” But at that time, the Maldives did not have means to communicate to the outside world besides Morse code. So the wait was fraught with anxiety. “He communicated with us through Morse code,” says Maniku. “But the messages would have to go through Colombo from here.”

But the wait was finally over and the Maldives’ first tourists arrived on a chartered Air Ceylon flight to Hulhule’, on 28 February 1972. They were put up in friends’ homes. “We did not know what to serve them,” Maniku laughs. “But they had brought their pasta and things, so it wasn’t much of a problem.”

Everyday around four in the morning, Afeef and Maniku used to go to Maagiri, one of the residences of the guests, to prepare breakfast. Then, at about 7 o’ clock, they used to take them on boats to shoot fish, in different reefs and around different islands. They would do this all day and come back in the evening. “That’s the story of the first overnight group of tourists who came here,” says Maniku. “It’s history that nobody can dispute.”

**Kurumba:
The first resort island and the end of spearfishing**

Then, because Maniku and his friends were convinced that Corbin will deliver guests, they started building what is now Kurumba, pooling in resources. Initially

they constructed thirty rooms with cut coral walls and coconut thatched roofs. There was tarpaulin on the floor although the bathrooms were tiled. “It was very simply done,” says Maniku. “We were very lucky in a way because we took on board the suggestions of tourists when we built the place.”

It took about eight months to complete; right on time for the next batch of tourists who were to get the first ‘island resort’ experience. Maniku and his friends procured a generator and received supplies for the resort from Sri Lanka. “I myself was the cook in the kitchen,” he recalls. “I worked for many years in the bar too, every day. We had to do things ourselves, we didn’t think to depend on anyone else. We had the energy somehow, and the drive to do this.” The island began to receive regular well-to-do visitors through Corbin. And its name was already being established abroad, especially in Italy by those who had stayed; they gushed about the island, the new destination in Asia, a veritable Paradiso.

Spearfishing however was a common pastime among tourists even then. “But we met some person, I think from the World Tourism Organisation,” says Maniku. “And he said: ‘My goodness you’d better stop this harpooning business, it’ll kill all the fish life.’ And we ourselves had seen this, because after a group of guests shot fish in Funadhoo [island] area, there was practically no fish for five months. So we stopped it.” Subsequently, legislation was passed to ▲



First group of tourists who stayed at Kurumba



Guests rooms at Kurumba



The first swimming pool to be built in a resort; Kurumba



Male offices of Universal Enterprises Limited



Room interior, Kurumba



Guests outside room, Kuramathi

ban the practice throughout the country.
Growth

With word spreading about the Maldives in Europe, bigger tour operators began to take an interest. “The word that Italians were coming here spread to Sri Lanka,” Maniku says. “It is a major hub of European tour operators.” Their scouts came to the Maldives on small aircraft. Tour operators soon began to sell Maldivian excursions.

“Apart from the Italians, among the first guests to the country were Swedes,” Maniku explains. “They started coming through the Swedish operator Vingressor.” This was followed by Kuoni and others.

With new flights coming in, the Maldives began to grow as a destination.

But it was a tough time. There were great difficulties in getting supplies. The airport was not built to cater to large aircraft so flights arrived in the Maldives from Sri Lanka; there was no direct link to the European market. This meant that Sri Lanka made money off tourists wishing to spend time in the Maldives, through packaged stays. “But we built the airport eventually,” says Maniku. “And the day that the Maldives truly became an independent destination was when [the carrier] Condor landed here. And we were instrumental in bringing the flight.”

Universal’s Strategy: Luxury tourism

Universal Enterprises, of which M U Maniku is chairman, believed that it was important to elevate the Maldives from

its then status as a low-end destination. “We realised that the Maldives as a product had all the ingredients to be an excellent one,” Maniku remarks. “Why can’t we create something in the Maldives that was on par with the top destinations abroad?” With that train of thought Maniku and his associates scoured tourist hotspots like Bali and others. He was convinced that it could happen here in the Maldives.

To this end, they started rebuilding Kurumba, under the guidance of a German designer. But at the time, Maniku notes, they received negative feedback from mass tourism operators who were sceptical as to whether the new product could be sold. But Maniku went ahead without their blessing. “We added all the ingredients to make a modern resort,” Maniku says. “We also made restaurants on the island because we felt guests should have more variety during their stay.” It turned out to be a bold and fruitful endeavour. Also it set an example for other resorts to go by.

Breaking the shell; beyond luxury, partnership with international brands

Despite the progresses that resorts made in the country, there was only so much that they could do by themselves. “We as a local brand came up against a barrier that we couldn’t break through,” says Maniku. “We believed that we needed the expertise, the marketing strength, the knowhow of reputed international brands.”

In the mid-2000s Maniku became involved with Starwood Hotels, who were seeking an island in the Maldives. They began to develop what is now W. “We were very keen on it, it was a new beginning for us,” Maniku says. “This project was driven from Singapore, with a Singaporean architectural firm’s involvement.” The design incorporated uniquely Maldivian features with modernity. “It had a huge “wow” factor,” Maniku laughs. There was an equity partnership between the two companies and it was one of the first American investments in the country, Maniku is proud to emphasise. “It was the first W resort in the world,” he exclaims. “It became such a big hit worldwide.”

It was an eye-opening experience for Maniku and his company. At the same time it made the Maldives into a top end destination.

“The day that the Maldives truly became an independent destination was when (the carrier) Condor landed here.”

MU Maniku with George Corbin





MU Maniku,
September 2015,
Male, Maldives



Reception, Kurumba

The first group of tourists to arrive in the Maldives



Universal also has stakes in Per Aquum, which runs Huvafenfushi and Niyaama in the Maldives and others in Zanzibar and Dubai.

Present Concerns

Now in his late sixties Maniku is still very much engrossed in tourism. He is building two properties in Raa Atoll with his family; something that keeps him occupied. Also, he is still MATT's chairman, a position he takes very seriously. He believes MATT's overarching purpose is to protect the tourism industry, and he is determined to do so. And looking back, he has blazed a trail for others to follow. But he does not seem to be in need of rest. "The fire is still in the belly," he says. "It's still going strong." ■

Universal Resorts

- Kurumba Maldives 5***
180 rooms
- Baros Maldives 5***
75 rooms
A member of Small Luxury Hotels
- Velassaru Maldives 5***
129 rooms
A member of Small Luxury Hotels
- Kuramathi Island Resort 4***
360 rooms
- Maafushivaru**
50 rooms
- Kandolhu Island 5***
30 rooms
A member of Small Luxury Hotels
- Dhigali 5***
180 rooms
Upcoming property, opening in March 2017. Located in Raa Atoll.



THILA

A playful take on dining

// Nashiu Zahir

Kurumba Maldives holds the honour of being the country's first resort, and it's also led the way in a number of other aspects. It might interest you to know that it was the country's first ever five star resort, the first with pool villas and the first property with multiple restaurants.

With eight restaurants and three bars, it's evident that food is a major part of the Kurumba experience; it won TripAdvisor's Best All Inclusive Resort Worldwide title of 2015.

Kurumba offers guests a broad culinary spectrum that spans from the Far East to Europe. But the recently refurbished Thila restaurant is their proudest

achievement in this regard.

The focus of the refurbishment was not only aesthetic, General Manager Jason Kruse informs; there was also a lot of consideration put into the time and motion of team members plus the guest experience: what they touch, feel and see. With a unique design, it allows an increased number of guests to sit over the shallow lagoon or 'thila' from which the restaurant derives its name, and take in some of the sights for which the Maldives is best known.

Thus, what used to be just a seafood and meat grill metamorphosed, in late 2014, into a stunning beachside restaurant. Thila is open and airy, with

a fresh white theme interspersed with touches of cobalt that brings to mind clouds and cerulean skies.

Dee Paule, the restaurant manager, says of the resort's signature restaurant: "What we're offering here is a refined, sophisticated take on cuisine." She adds: "Even some of our appetisers, scallops for instance, aren't just handed over on a plate but presented with such finesse and artistry that sometimes we get people saying that it's just too beautiful to eat."

And that's part of what Thila is about, refinement. Guests can indulge in fine champagnes, which Thila takes great pride in, paired with fresh lobster, oysters and other seafood.

The two storey building accommodates 150 people, and special functions can be held upstairs without inconveniencing the diners below. Its glass-walled kitchen offers guests a window into the bustle of the world within, and enables one-on-one interactions with chefs.

Breakfasts here have an Australian café feel, so you get your waffles and smoked salmon, (which is smoked in-house) on top of the usual breads, cereals and fruits.

"We're trying to do something that's a little bit different from the other restaurants here," says executive chef Ross Chapman. "We're playing a little bit more with the dishes."

In tune with its playful nature, the menu changes slightly every month, keeping things fresh and exciting, not just for diners but also for those involved in the creative process. Instrumental to these changes is the monthly specials menu. Through it the restaurant engages with guests on possible new items that may be added to the menu based on positive feedback and popularity.

"We're very keen on experimentation," Dee reveals. "From the chef's point of view, we focus on a different food source every month. In January we focussed on cod, and this month it's shellfish – oysters, razor clams and such. So with our change in focus comes the ability to play. That's when we do something different."

She mentions an intriguing item, black garlic ice cream, that is currently featured on the menu. "It's made here, and it takes about a month to make it," explains chef Chapman. He describes the taste – like molasses with a little bit of fennel. "It goes well with parsley and lemon, you really wouldn't know that it's garlic," he laughs. The restaurant also recreates the familiar; a new interpretation of the Maldivian staple Garudhiya is quite a hit with diners.

A kind of DIY philosophy is also apparent at Thila. "We try and make as much as we can in-house," says Chapman. Some items require weeks of effort, but the results are worth it. "So

you know the delicious smoked turkey that you had for breakfast was made in-house, the result of a five day process," he adds. The restaurant also makes different yogurts, bakes its breads, even experiments with creating different types of honey.

However, Thila is not just for the gastronomically adventurous. Guests can enjoy perennial favourites like steak and poached eggs. There are also options for vegans and vegetarians. Moreover, special requests for items not included the menu are accommodated whenever possible.

So Thila manages to be a restaurant that's interesting without being too eccentric. One that is innovative without being pretentious. It's the sort of place that makes you want to grab a seat and be surprised (pleasantly) by something new, or return to an old favourite. The sort of place that you imagine will stick around and remain remarkable for quite some time. ■