

AS GOOD AS YOUR LAST PERFORMANCE



He has the distinction of being the first Asian to be appointed Executive Chef at a historic Spanish Hotel, Alfonso XIII. For the past thirty years, Anura Dewapura has worked in key organisations in the Hospitality Industry across the globe. Having returned to Sri Lanka to take up the position of General Manager, Mount Lavinia Hotel, he speaks of his experiences abroad, his plans for the Hotel, and why, at the end of the day, there's no place like home.

By Ayesha Inoon

You've had a very exciting career, working for renowned hotels all over the world. How did you first enter the Hospitality Industry?

I started as an apprentice at a small restaurant in Galle Face Court. It was my dream to become an Executive Chef of a five star hotel in Europe. My family was quite appalled! They wanted me to be a doctor or an engineer. Still, that was my dream, I was very focused on what I wanted in my life and worked towards it. Having studied at Isipatana College, Colombo, I left Sri Lanka almost 30 years ago and my entire tertiary education was overseas. I obtained a First Class Honours Degree in International Hotel Management from the University of Manchester Metropolitan, UK and the Swiss Higher Diploma in Hotel and Catering Management from the Hotel Management Institute in Switzerland. I also did the Professional Development Programme at Cornell University in USA.

I've worked in over 13 countries including those in Europe, Australia, Asia, the Caribbean and North and South America. My last posting was at Hershey Entertainment & Resorts in Pennsylvania USA.

What prompted you to return to Sri Lanka after so long?

One of the main reasons was my father's death three years ago. Having been away for 30 years of my life, I didn't know him very well except for the occasional visit. It was a great shock when he died suddenly; I was in Puerto Rico at the time. I didn't want the same thing to happen to my mother. Then, when I met with Sanath Ukwatta, the Chairman of Mount Lavinia Hotel, I immediately felt very comfortable. He's a true gentleman – a genuine and honest person. This is especially important when working for a private company that is owned by one person or a family. He really convinced me that this was the place for me to be and I realised this was an opportunity for me to return to Sri Lanka. At the end of the day, it is my home, my motherland, my roots are here. At a certain age in life you begin to realise certain

things. In a nutshell, that's what made me return.

Also, Sanath Ukwatte said I could share my knowledge and experience with the team here. This is a service that gives me great satisfaction. It was an ideal situation, the right thing to do from every angle. It was not easy to initially convince my wife. However, afterwards she said that whenever I spoke of Sri Lanka she saw great joy in my face. It was the right time, and the right place, and hopefully everything is going to work out in Sri Lanka, as it should. I'm very positive about this.

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What benefits do you feel your overseas experience will bring the Mount Lavinia Hotel and the Industry in general?

I've accomplished certain things in my career and worked for top class organisations such as Starwood Luxury Collection, Regent International, LXR Luxury Resorts, Hershey Resorts and Michelin Star Restaurants. These are renowned, reputable properties. Along with my training, education and the experience that I have working in different environments, different types of operations and in diverse cultures, I feel that I could contribute immensely to this organisation and beyond. Professional Managers with cultural exposure are always an asset.

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Even in the USA, the job at Hershey's was offered to me. Having worked in different parts of the world, I have the ability to bring people together and get the best out of them. That's something I could share with others here.

Also I learn from others, as we all learn in this journey of life. I could work anywhere and will always be learning something.

What would you say were the highlights of your career?

The very first I would say is giving my first salary, that I earned as an apprentice, to my grandmother. She was really against my chosen career path at the time. Still, I gave her my salary, and it was my way of saying - "Don't worry, I will earn my living, and I will make it."

Realising my dream of becoming an Executive Chef was definitely a great moment

in my life. I achieved this position in a historic hotel, Alfonso XIII, in Andalusia, Spain. This hotel was built by King Alfonso XIII of Spain. No Asian had worked there before and all the Executive Chefs were previously from Spain or France. I had to work twice as hard to prove myself. The last dinner I made there as an Executive Chef was for 60, three and two star Michelin chefs including Paul Bocuse, Joel Robuchon and Freddy Giradet, the legendary chefs from Europe. After that dinner, I felt I had no one else to prove my cooking talents to. I hung up my white coat and moved to Bermuda as Food and Beverage Director. That was 15 years ago. Last but not least, I feel very proud to be the General Manager of this 200 year old historical property in Sri Lanka, and to know that I am going to be a part of its history.

What do you perceive as the strengths of Mount Lavinia Hotel?

Undoubtedly, our greatest strength is our people. We've got a wonderful team, renowned for their friendliness. Many of our team members have been a part of this hotel for a very long time – for example, our legendary Chef Publis, who has been here for 55 years.

We have a wealth of experience. In any organisation, it doesn't matter how effective you are or how sophisticated your facilities are, it's the people who make the difference. In that sense, the Mount Lavinia Hotel is truly blessed.

For guests it's like coming home – we have certain guests who have been visiting us continuously for almost 30 years. We have served their parents and grandparents, and we know their needs. There are not many places that can claim that.

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You've had the opportunity to experience the Hospitality Industry in a range of countries – as such, how do you feel the Industry in Sri Lanka compares with its global counterparts?

The Hospitality Industry is similar everywhere – different countries have different challenges, different type of workforces, and there can be different kinds of catering for different markets. Industry wise, I would not compare our Hospitality Industry to those in Europe or the USA. We have our own identity, values, own kind of style and our own culture which plays a major part in tourism. I take my hats off to the hoteliers who have survived amidst the atmosphere of the last 25 years. Now that

the war is over, we can all look forward to good things in the future. I think the time has come for us to come together as a nation and prepare for the new chapter in our history.

In the current economic context, many hotels are offering budget packages to attract more customers. Will you follow this trend?

I don't like the word 'budget'. Of course we have certain offers on the market like every other hotel, but I don't think I'd call them 'cheap' or 'budget'.

At any time our focus is on providing value for money. As long as guests leave out the door with a big smile and say, 'We had a wonderful stay, they were great people, and we really got the value for our money,' then we have achieved our goal. We have many assets, and we need to use them in a smart and collective manner. That's the way I would handle it, rather than by undercutting prices.

What other challenges do you foresee?

One of our main challenges is to maintain and develop our workforce. People in the Industry often get better offers in the Middle East and tend to leave. I hope this trend will reduce with the anticipated economic stability with the end of the conflict in the North and East.

There are other challenges like anywhere else – we have to be consistent and maintain our product and bring it up to the next level. Therefore, I don't know whether I would call them challenges – I prefer to look at them as opportunities. In this business I have always believed that "You are as good as your last performance" – and that's what has made me successful – and that will be my motto to the end.

What are the upcoming developments at Mount Lavinia Hotel?

We have a lot of exciting plans for the hotel and are working on bringing our product to the next level. We're launching our new website with state-of-the-art features for the customer's convenience. They will be able to conduct all transactions with the Hotel online.

The Hotel is a one-stop-shop for weddings – we have wedding coordinators who are well versed in all cultures and are able to organise everything from the cuisine to the photographer.

We also want to tap into the corporate market. This is the ideal site for the corporate business traveler in Colombo – being away from the hustle and bustle, and yet close enough to the hub of the city, so that they can enjoy the best of both worlds.

We're slowly working towards where we want to be in a couple of years. The Mount Lavinia Hotel has many strengths and we should bring them under one umbrella to move into the next decade. I am certain that we are going to be very busy and prosperous in the years to come.

