

Being Optimistic

Manesh Fernando, General Manager of Hilton Colombo and Area General Manager – Sri Lanka has a multitude of experiences having started his career at Hilton Colombo and thereafter, having worked in many locations overseas before returning to Sri Lanka. His knowledge is not limited to hospitality and tourism, but also includes IT and finance. He says that Hilton is always optimistic and its plans for Sri Lanka will go ahead even through these challenging times. DoubleTree by Hilton Weerawila Rajawarna Resort was opened recently indicating the optimism of the Group. Manesh Fernando stresses the need for Sri Lanka to think out of the box to seek new solutions so that the country will venture on a new path of growth.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe. | **Photography** Menaka Aravinda

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these are difficult times, but Hilton colombo remains positive. What is the thought process?

We are all part of a single ecosystem. This is the winter season where we usually see large numbers of tourist arrivals as well as the Sri Lankan diaspora returning for

the holidays. It is not only for rooms but also the wedding season where many overseas couples get married in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the entire tourism sector is affected. The difference with Hilton is that we have been in Sri Lanka uninterrupted for 33 years and have experienced and emerged from all phases. We have survived through the internal conflict, bomb explosions, aerial attacks and much more. But we have stayed in Colombo. During the bomb explosion of 1997, I was a trainee at the Hilton Colombo and I had the chance to watch our leadership in action at that time. That connection with the past and the connection to the future goes deeper. My team, consists of about 600 people, of which about 40 are from the opening team, therefore the traditions of this hotel remain. Traditions and the culture are made by the people. We believe in Sri Lanka and we reopened our Hilton Colombo recently, and we must thank the owners too who are firm believers in being proactive and positive.

We started preparing ourselves in December last year. Sri Lanka started to feel the impact of COVID-19 in March, and peaked around April and May. The situation was brought under control but unfortunately in October the second wave hit and we had to seize operations for the first time after 33 years when we found a COVID-19 positive team member. We had to be disciplined and we did not let anyone travel anywhere. We were transparent in everything that we did. We quarantined the first and second contacts and conducted 400 PCR tests and informed the guests and the community of the actions taken. We have now implemented a ‘bubble’ concept for the team, so no one comes to work straightaway. They come and stay in the hotel for two weeks after which we release them for work. With the rapid antigen tests being approved in Sri Lanka we are now reviewing the bubble system for staff.

When the first lockdown happened in March 2020, there was a period of uncertainty but we knew we had to maintain the connection and relationship with our guests. It was not about making money, we made only about ten percent of what we usually do, during this lockdown period. By doing home deliveries we maintained the personal connection with guests to ensure that their requirements were fulfilled. We were all occupied, and I too personally took orders. Second wave came and things happened and we had to take control. Hilton Colombo, be the staff or the guests, we are all part of the ecosystem and thus, we are affected by what happens in the country. But we continue to be positive and we believe that when the vaccines come to Sri Lanka we will be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

How do you motivate the staff and keep them positive?

I strive my best to look after each and every team member. We do not want to unnecessarily stress people. We had the pleasure of working with leaders such as Mr Gamini Fernando, whom we saw in action when we were young. We saw how they managed crises and the manner in which they worked. They set the culture. I cannot be anything less, so at least I strive to be closer. It is the Hilton culture to make things happen. We look after our staff. We will not sit back. Quoting our Hilton President for Asia Pacific, Alan Watts – “focus on the controllable”, and that’s what we do. It’s useless sweating over things we can’t control. Motivating staff is a big controllable you can focus as a leader. I motivate my staff to serve the customer. I use the word omnipresent- I am not there but I believe I am there. When someone talks to a staff member and it leaves a positive impression on the customer, then I believe I have done my job. There are many people that come to the hotel and it is not physically possible for me to speak to all of them. But what I do is motivate my people to look after them well.

what are the plans for Hilton colombo?

In March, when the lockdown was imposed, we did not have much to do, except for deliveries. We discussed with the owners that this would be the best time to refurbish the rooms. We sat with my management team, the chief engineer, finance, purchasing, front office and housekeeping and we went through all the renovation plans. We reduced the cost without dropping quality. We reduced the cost per room by around 50 percent, potentially saving the owners approximately USD 7.5 million. We believe we could make the best out of a difficult situation, revitalizing the product instead of just waiting. Currently, the elevators are being upgraded in the hotel. If we were to do that when the hotel was full, I wonder how we would have completed that task.

We are currently revamping the Chinese restaurant and work on the rooms will begin in January. That is how we are planning for when the airports open. We are not simply waiting and hoping, we are being proactive. Our Chairman, Mr Nimal Perera, who is also the Secretary to the Ministry of Urban Development is very supportive and a man of action. Quoting Mr Perera, I still remember the words “Manesh, let’s get on with it… let’s do things… if things don’t improve as we hope, we will face it then”. He wanted us to move forward. That was in March 2020.

Are you optimistic about tourism revival?

I am very optimistic. When a lockdown is imposed in Sri Lanka there is a lull and

people stay in their homes. But when the lockdown is lifted they return faster. Same thing is happening around the world, I had a leadership call with members from Asia Pacific, Japan, Australia, and China where this was discussed. China is almost at 90 percent in terms of revenue per room compared to last year already. When the vaccine becomes available and the situation is brought under control, tourism is going to bounce back much better than before. People are fed up of staying at home and they are frustrated. Once the situation is back to normal, the concept of 'revenge tourism' is going to happen. Therefore, I am very confident.

Hilton has opened a new property in sri Lanka. can you elaborate the group's plans for the coun□try?

We opened DoubleTree by Hilton Weerawila Rajawarna Resort. The hotel is doing well, thanks to the Sri Lanka Premier League Tournament. Thereafter, it will be the holiday season where Sri Lankans will be travelling around the country. The hotel is situated strategically at the end of the southern highway, and is two and a half hours from Colombo. DoubleTree by Hilton Weerawila Rajawarna Resort is a beautiful product with good food and service. It is located close to the Lunugamvehera and Yala National Parks. The famous Kataragama Devalaya is also situated a short distance away from the hotel. About 45 minutes away from DoubleTree by Hilton Weerawila Rajawarna Resort is Hilton Yala, of which construction is still on-going. It will be a top level hotel, which will give Sri Lanka tourism a major boost. We will be waiting for the opening of the airport to launch the hotel. At the same time, Hilton Negombo too is under construction. All work is ongoing as planned, and nothing has stopped. Once again I am lucky to have owners who can identify opportunities and think positively. The owner of DoubleTree by Hilton Weerawila Rajawarna Resort is Saman Upasena, a Sri Lankan entrepreneur and the largest black tea producer in the country. He has built the hotel with his personal funds. These are people who do not wait for things to happen, but who make things happen. Their guts and bravery is what will make the country successful. We cannot wait like fish in a tank. We are in the open world, in the big blue ocean, and we need to go out and take the opportunities when the waves come in. Hilton Yala and Hilton Negombo are owned by the Melwa Group, who are steel manufacturers. They have diversified into other areas as well including the tourism sector with these two properties. They are Sri Lankan entrepreneurs as well and are at the top level in their business. These are Sri Lankan entrepreneurs who are making things happen. They have the guts.

You started your career at Hilton colombo and now you are the Area

general Manager for sri Lanka. can you tell us about your career?

I am a second generation hotelier. My father used to work for Intercontinental Hotels Group and he was a hotelier by mistake. He used to work in the Government sector but had to change jobs many times due to political victimization. At that time there were only a few private organizations and he joined Galle Face Hotel as the chief engineer. He worked for Mr Cyril A Gardiner, Sanjeev's father. Therefore, I have known Mr Gardiner and Sanjeev from those days. That was the beginning of my hotel career, because when we were children that is where I learnt hospitality. The staff used to look after us and serve us. Galle Face Hotel is not simply a hotel; it is one of the roots or pioneers of the tourism culture in Sri Lanka. Then my dad leaves to Africa and he becomes the Head of Engineering for about 50 hotels in Africa for IHG, Intercontinental Hotels Group. We had to leave the country because at that time it was difficult to stay in Sri Lanka due to the political issues. I went to school in Sri Lanka and I went for a short time to Africa, which was to Nigeria with my sister when I was around eight years old. I loved it. Afterwards, we came back to Sri Lanka and I returned to my school, St Thomas' Prep. After Grade10, we had to leave again because at that time the internal insurgency was at a different level and there were all types of confusion. My dad decided that the family should move to Nairobi in Kenya and I did my A' Levels there. Thereafter, I went to university in England to earn by degree in Business, which was a neutral subject, where I could work in any industry. Following my graduation, I told my dad that I want to return to Sri Lanka.



Upon my return I applied for positions at Hilton Colombo, Oberoi, Ernst and Young, Unilever and HSBC. I was called in for interviews at Hilton Colombo, Oberoi, and Ernst and Young. I remember Mr M T L Fernando and partners interviewing me at

Ernst and Young and they were going to send me to Maldives to join their audit team. However, I wanted to be a hotelier and the Hilton Colombo started its management program despite the war. I became a management trainee and four years later, I had another passion- I wanted to become a pilot; tourism was going through a difficult period in Sri Lanka and I was thinking nothing is happening. Therefore, while I was here I started flying. I was about a week away from resigning from Hilton, when the elevator program was introduced. It was the Hilton corporate training program, which is a fast track program to train GMs. From the day you are selected it is their target to make you a GM within seven years. That was in 2000 and I started the program in 2001 in Australia, which was my first placement. Then I came to Singapore, thereafter to Vietnam, and then to East Malaysia, where I was the Director of Operations. Thereafter, I was the Director of Operations at the Hilton Phuket for a short time. I had the opportunity to either go to Singapore, Guam or Sri Lanka. People thought I was crazy because in 2007 I said I am going back to Sri Lanka at the height of the war; the aerial attacks had happened but I knew somehow that the war would finish because it had gone to a different level. Then I came back and I was interviewed by the now Senior Vice President of Middle East, William Costley, and I joined as Director of Operations at the height of the war. By 2008, I became the GM of the Hilton Residences, and after five years I came to head the Hilton Colombo.

I am currently the Area GM for Hilton in Sri Lanka. At the moment we have two others managing the properties at Hilton Residences and DoubleTree by Hilton Weerawila Rajawarna Resort. The Area GM provides, what we call ‘satellite leadership’ where we lead but we do not manage. It is a new style of management and that is how we operate.

Hilton throughout the history in sri Lanka has always been successful in having sri Lankan gMs. Your thoughts?

Hilton does have a tradition because we had Mr Gamini Fernando for this hotel and Hilton itself has the elevator program, which is all about developing local talent and also developing senior leadership. These activities are done proactively where we want to see a certain number of locals in positions. We have four GM’s in Sri Lanka; the Hilton Yala GM has already been hired, she is a Sri Lankan, we have the GM at DoubleTree by Hilton Weerawila Rajawarna Resort who is also a Sri Lankan, and we have the Hilton Residences where the GM is from the Netherlands. I am a believer that it does not matter whether you are a Sri Lankan or a foreigner, you have to have the best person in the position. I am delighted because the three GMs have

been selected not because they are Sri Lankans or foreigners but because they are the best for the job.

You travel around the country and you are always very optimistic. What can you tell us about this?

You can either be a negative or a positive, an optimist or a pessimist. Somehow I managed to become an optimist. It is a state of mind and an attitude. I remember, the then GM, Mr Gamini Fernando saying we are hiring you not for your degree but for your attitude, for the positive attitude. I managed to keep that and in the most difficult times, I always try to see what I can learn, what I can do and what I can teach someone else, and how can we bring the best of the situation. I travel because I love this country and I read greatly on history. My father read books and thereafter sends them to me. He was reading Robert Knox's book and then I took it from him and I started reading it. Daniel Defoe, the author of the famous Robinson Crusoe, had never been out of England but he wrote the story after reading the book by Robert Knox. There is so much history to go around the country, which we ourselves do not know. If you look at the temples, the technology and the purpose, there is so much to learn. We travel all around the world but somehow we do not know much about ourselves, which is a sad situation.

I have discussions with people such as Prof Raj Somadev to educate myself, because there is so much to learn. To give you an example, everyone talks so much about Sigiriya but how many people talk about Ritigala? It is an amazing place, and there are so many places that I want to visit and I am looking forward to it.



While being a hotelier you have extensive knowl□edge on it and Finance. can you share some of your thoughts?

We travel abroad and being an optimist I really believe as Sri Lankans sometimes we may look inside too much and we should be looking outside more. We should diversify ourselves. We should connect ourselves with the information superhighway. With a mobile phone you can have meetings with people living thousands of kilometers away. With the mobile phone you can trade with anyone in the world. Today Sri Lankan stock market is doing really well and how many people have the chance of going and linking with the world's stock markets? We should take the chance to read and educate yourself on any country. You could be trading in London, Dubai, US or anywhere in the world. Every Sri Lankan has a relative abroad, where they can invest via them, if they educate themselves to do so. There are so many things that we can do.

Sometimes, we try too much to reinvent the wheel, instead of actually taking the step to do anything. We have wasted a lot of time fighting wars and not really focusing on what matters. What we should do now is form an army of smart people who can connect to the world markets. For example, if you take the EPF, it has USD four billion worth of funds. If you take a country like Norway with a small population, Norway has the biggest sovereign fund in the world, and they have invested in Sri Lanka. They are one of the biggest shareholders in John Keells Holdings. They realized that they cannot depend on oil revenue alone. The stone age came to an

end not because stones became a scarcity but because of the development of technology. Norway invested the money all around the world and today they have the one of biggest sovereign funds in the world. Another small country, Singapore, everyone talks about how beautiful Singapore is. But Singapore is very smart, because it became an offshore banking space and many people invest money in Singapore. Do they simply pay interest to the account holders and wait? No. They took that money like a cash float and invested that money all over the world in companies such as Bharat Telecom in India, and Optus in Australia. That country has also used its funds to go abroad and invest because the country is too small and the market is too small.

Sri Lanka too has many smart people such as Dr P B Jayasundera. We make USD seven billion per year from earnings from foreign remittances of those working abroad. Why don't we allocate a small percentage of this and invest in the latest technological innovations via Wall Street, Shanghai or Hong Kong stock exchanges similar to what Norway or Singapore does. If we don't, we will be left far behind from the world. If we had invested ten years ago in shares in let's say Apple, we would have been making a significant profit today. For example, if we invested USD ten million in Apple in 2010 it would be worth USD 100 million today. We must allocate a small fund from the EPF every year to invest in the latest technology such as 5G, renewable energy, battery technology, and electric vehicle companies. If not, I believe we will take too long to come out of this cycle where we are short of funds. We must take a more proactive approach and go out and have smart people who can identify opportunities and invest accordingly. We need to think out of the box. We can also get our local high net worth individuals to do it officially, which will add to the country's foreign reserves.

During the lockdown period, my senior team and I went through massive voluntary salary cuts to ensure that the junior staff would be able to continue to work. No one was asked to leave. We looked after everyone. Once my salary was cut, what am I to do? I am locked inside the hotel unable to go anywhere. I studied and researched and learnt something new everyday. We are on a journey of learning. All things have to come to an end, good and bad, we have to do something else. We have to give the opportunity to younger people because we cannot stay in these positions forever. So my aim is to learn something new so that I can go do something else. There is so much of things out there, thanks to technology, it is time. If you give a villager a laptop, a solar panel and an internet link, they can program for anywhere in the world. You teach them the python language or AI languages you have, they

will do it and make money. I cannot learn those languages but what I did was learn the new quantum leap happening in the world in terms of technology. The traditional combustion engine and fossil fuel based industries are going out. What is the future of energy? It's Solar, lithium batteries and hydrogen. There are many things happening in the world.

How confident are you about the country and the future?

The current leadership in the past, they thought out of the box to get over hurdles. Fighting the Liberation of Tamil Tigers Eelam was a tough game and they were one of the toughest outfits in the world. To out think Velupillai Prabakaran it took some equally smart people. In the same way I believe to come out of this situation we need to use the same out of the box thinking, that is the way we can make it. We cannot go the same way. I am a hotelier but you cannot put all the eggs in one basket and become a tourism country only. If you do that, every time, a bomb goes off or a cyclone comes, something negative happens in the world, you come down. We need to find a way to diversify our earnings and think out of the box. The way to do this is, we should start saving and we need to invest with the next wave of technology, which is EV (electric vehicles), Solar, 5G, and Artificial Intelligence. If we don't have the scale to do startups we must at least try to invest in these companies via our EPF/ETF or Sri Lankan HNI's. The Colombo Stock Exchange is the oldest stock exchange in Asia. Can you tell me how many tech companies are on it? We still have the bulk of the stock market cap in telecom, banks, hotels, manufacturing and retail. There is not a single trailblazing tech-company on the stock market. The stock market is also quite a good reflection though people say it does not reflect the entire economy. But it gives a reflection of how the country is moving. I believe if we don't connect with the next wave, we will be left behind.

We have a fantastic country. I have lived around the world. I lived in Africa; I went to school in Nigeria, Kenya, Zambia and England and I worked in Australia, Singapore and Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand. Some countries I lived in were at a low level in terms of development. For example, Zambia is one of the poorest countries in the world though rich in resources. Then Singapore, resource poor but it is one of the richest countries in the world. Therefore, Sri Lanka has great potential. The day we decide to think smart, we will get out of this situation. I believe that this leadership is the one, which will think out of the box because it has the support of professionals and many intelligent people. Trade is two ways and now we are connected with the world. Paradise is in Sri Lanka. Use the Information Age to live here and work in countries such as the US. Be it trading or programing. With our

amazing location you can do two jobs. When its eight in the night in Sri Lanka its nine in the morning in New York. Be it trading on Wall Street or offering your professional knowledge by using websites such as Fiverr, we must individually think of how we can trade our knowledge and make our country rich.