

Hilton Colombo Residences: On An Upward Trajectory



Hilton Colombo Residences (HCR) is today one of the major hospitality service providers in the Colombo metropolis. Situated in the heart of the city, the Hotel has much to offer and has ventured to transform itself in order to enhance its services.Karim Schadlou, General Manager speaks on the upward trajectory of the hotel thus far and its plans to continue the growth momentum.

How has Hilton Colombo Residences progressed over the years?
We have been able to establish ourselves in the market as a fully-fledged hotel and

a recognised brand in Colombo within the Hilton Worldwide portfolio. The Residences opened its doors in 1998; the owning company has invested significantly towards uplifting the property, especially in the past few years.

We ventured on the renovation project in 2011 with the ballroom and successfully completed its refurbishment in 2012, it has been well-received by the market for social and corporate functions since. Then it continued with the conversion of the 28th floor, where we converted six apartments into 14 units and opened in January 2014, starting from 40m2 up to 50m2 spaces. This also includes two super suites, which are 100m2 each. All of our rooms have a multimedia hub, separate living and dining areas, open kitchenette and bar. We adopted a contemporary design, which is unique. These single rooms are ideal for short-term corporate guests who intend to stay for 2-3 nights on average but of course longer as well.

The hotel is going through transformation in the next few years to uplift the building. Our plan is to renovate five floors per year. Even though we stop this year with five floors, the plan is to continue next year with another five.

Also in 2014, four floors were renovated including executive and business suites; and this year, the renovation of 30 deluxe suites in five floors are currently underway. Further, we will continue to renovate the hotel’s lobby this year.

In addition to that we opened BASICO-the bar lounge in May 2014, which is a continuation of the food and beverage experience we offer at the Hotel. FLOW-our multi cuisine restaurant was launched just last month. The multi-million dollar investment replaces the former Union Bar & Grill (UBG). To enhance the arrival experience, the hotel’s entrance at Staple Street was completely revamped adding direct access to both food and beverage outlets, BASICO and FLOW.

It is important to note that all these renovations are being done while the hotel is in operation. The final outcome and the feedback we have received from our patrons so far, is very positive.

With all these renovations, how has the service standards of the hotel

increased over the years?
Service has enhanced very positively because first of all, Sri Lankans are known to provide exceptional services – it comes naturally to them. With these new improvements in the hotel, we also increased the training and development offered to the Team; our Human Resources department has doubled their training hours in order to prepare our team members to provide the service that complements the new and modern facilities. Each year, we offer selected Team Members an opportunity to visit sister hotels in the South East Asian region for a few days for foreign exposure. This has increased the Team's morale, capabilities and confidence in serving guests from different parts of the world.

What was the concept behind FLOW?

The former UBG was a very popular restaurant, but in keeping with the times, we want to continue to appeal to both guests who are residing in the hotel as well as patrons within the city as a place to be seen since there is a strong dining out culture in Colombo. By just introducing a stand-alone restaurant would not have been enough to attract guests, we increased the number of seats due to demand.

This Is Where We Have To Work Together With All The Brands Towards Training And Developing Team Members For All These Properties.

The 'open kitchen' concept, where the kitchen is built into the restaurant, was introduced to Sri Lanka for the first time. We cook right in front of the guests and have it served right away. The restaurant offers buffet and à la carte menu and is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner daily. In September FLOW will launch a Sunday Brunch as well.

Another unique aspect of FLOW's concept is the chef's table where 10-14 guests can be accommodated. It is a private dining room where we serve tailor-made four to six course menus with a dedicated chef cooking for the guests. It is a great opportunity as it is the first of its kind in Sri Lanka and can be used for family or business functions with the restaurant's chefs or even a celebrity chef cooking for you. In addition to the Chef's table, there are two private dining rooms.

We are highly focused on maintaining a high service level, food quality, in order to

provide the ultimate dining experience at the chef table.

FLOW is a multi-cuisine restaurant, where we offer cuisines from all over the globe. We have an Asian section offering Sri Lankan, Indian, Chinese and Japanese sashimi and sushi. When it comes to preparing western cuisines, the kitchen is equipped with a multifunctional oven designed and built in Australia. With it you can prepare a steak in two minutes, and bake a thin-crust Italian pizza in one minute. Or even a roast and a quiche can be prepared at the same time. It allows you to cook at 700 degrees, retaining the flavour of the respective dishes that are being made. Then of course we offer over 60 different labels of wines. We are offering a wide range of wines from around the globe-new and old world-which is ideal for this market since wine is popular.

All designs were inspired by similar dining concepts present with Hilton hotels in the Asia Pacific region and brought to life by a Singaporean design agency, TID Associates. The outcome of this project is positive. It is unique, modern, contemporary and provides seating for 168 guests; ideal for families and business guests from across the world. The name for the restaurant was taken from our sister hotel in Bangkok, which have been successfully running a restaurant named FLOW. We decided to adopt that name since it is within the chain and we wanted to bring it to Sri Lanka. Our aim is to combine great food and beverages with service to deliver the ultimate experience.

A significant number of international chains are coming to Sri Lanka. How has Hilton Colombo Residences geared itself to excel in the industry?
I believe the arrival of more international brands is good for the country and Colombo because it helps in placing ourselves on the map as a destination. Also, Hilton as a brand has been in Sri Lanka for over 25 years. I am happy to see more international brands coming in. I am sure they will be successful, and a healthy competition is always good.

It Is Essential To Restructure The Hospitality Schools So That They Deliver Practical Knowledge And Skills Along With Theoretical Components.

The challenge that we are going to face is, who will staff the hotels when there is a great shortage of labour in the hospitality industry. This is where we have to work

together with all the brands towards training and developing team members for all these properties. I know that in the next three years, at least two to three different brands will be introduced to the country.

Hilton Colombo Residences Has Seen Many Positive Changes Over The Last Few Years; It Will Continue To Grow As We Position It As A Hotel For Business And Leisure.

You mentioned that there is a shortage of labour in the sector, how do you think this issue should be addressed and what should be the contribution of the state sector towards finding a resolution?
A month ago, both our Hilton properties in the country hosted a youth forum with the participation of around 400 students for the second consecutive year. We organised this forum to generate awareness and pique the interest amongst young people to join the hospitality industry. Through this platform we want to improve people's perceptions about joining the hospitality industry. That's one component.

The other component could be the fact that we try more to export skills, which means that we train and export. But we should re-import as well. This is where the challenge lies, since the salary scale in Sri Lanka is relatively lower when compared with Maldives or even the Middle East. It is essential to restructure the hospitality schools so that they deliver practical knowledge and skills along with theoretical components. The labour is available, but you have to attract them to join and start work, and then of course, we can train and groom them for a better future. To a certain extent we need to bring in foreign specialists, especially when we have new hotels coming up.

There is a tendency towards 'green building' which focuses on waste management, the use of renewable energy and reducing the carbon footprint, when constructing residential apartment complexes. What are your thoughts on this?
Sri Lanka has plenty of opportunity to grow in this vital aspect. There should be a drive to be more environmentally friendly. Where Hilton Colombo Residences is concerned, we are currently in the process of changing our lighting systems to LED in public areas of the hotel. We will complete this project by the end of the year.

Secondly, Hilton Worldwide has implemented a global programme called, LightStay

4.0. This programme requires us to record our data on energy and water consumption and waste management among other aspects. These data will then be evaluated to understand the hotel's stance in promoting sustainability within the hotel. We promote the LightStay programme since it helps us to follow the guidelines in order to drive sustainability.

How can the hospitality sector be developed in order to increase its contribution to the country's GDP?
A proper mechanism should be established with the help of the Ministry of Tourism to create awareness on Sri Lanka and Colombo as destination; considering that we are going to have additional brands coming into the country. We need to sustain and maintain rates and of course we need to be consistent in service delivery in order to attract guests to come into the country. Sri Lanka has much potential; with its beaches, historical monuments, national parks and it needs to be developed further.

Can you elaborate on the CSR initiatives of the company?
Hilton Colombo Residences is aligned with Hilton Worldwide's Travel with Purpose corporate responsibility strategy. Through collaborations with NGOs such as Room to Read, a global nonprofit organization focused on improving literacy and gender equality in education, we were able to impact the communities where we live, work and travel.

Tell me a little bit about yourself?
I was born in Iran and grew up in Germany. I started my career in hospitality at the age of 18 with an apprenticeship of three years and went on to work in England and completed my higher studies in Switzerland, where I obtained my Degree in Hotel Management. I worked in Europe before I joined Hilton Abu Dhabi in 2000. Since then I have worked at Hilton properties in China, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Maldives and Sri Lanka. I am very passionate about what I am doing and I am happy to be in Sri Lanka. Having been with Hilton for 15 years, I believe that it is a great place to work. I am an open-minded person and maintain an open door policy where I am always approachable for my team members.

My aim is to deliver, together with my Team, the best service for our loyal patrons with consistency, personalised service, and 'Hilton Moments'. I love to be in Sri Lanka, and have been here for one and a half years and looking forward to staying

longer.

What message would you like to give to young people who are aspiring to be hospitality professionals?
Come, experience hospitality; we will train you and if you are passionate, we can guarantee a good career path for you with growth within the organization.

Final thoughts?
Hilton Colombo Residences has seen many positive changes over the last few years; it will continue to grow as we position it as a hotel for business and leisure. The brand has been present in the country for over 25 years, creating a benchmark for hospitality.




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