

MORE OPPORTUNITY

Posted on



Pankaj Sampat, Area Director - Sri Lanka, Maldives and Malaysia & Head - Taj Asia and Taj Safaris.

Blessed with beautiful resources, Sri Lanka is a land of unique opportunities when it comes to tourism. This is the belief of Pankaj Sampat, Area Director – Sri Lanka, Maldives and Malaysia & Head – Taj Asia and Taj Safaris, and the ideology upon which IHCL operates in Sri Lanka. Based out of Taj Samudra in Colombo, Pankaj Sampat manages six properties in the region, three in Sri Lanka, two in the Maldives and one in Malaysia. While elaborating on the plans for its properties in the country and the confidence in the tourism industry, Pankaj Sampat touches upon ‘Aspiration 2022’, IHCL’s long-term strategic plan. He comments on leveraging the group’s unique strengths and initiatives (Re-structure – Re-imagine – Re-engineer) to overcome challenges in the environments that the properties operate in. While explaining IHCL’s future plans in Sri Lanka, Pankaj Sampat highlights that they are extremely confident about Sri Lanka and can visualize a very bright future for the island’s tourism sector.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe and Keshini de Silva. Photograph Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda.

You were appointed this year as the Area Director for Taj in Sri Lanka, Maldives, Malaysia and you are also the Head of Taj Asia and Taj Safaris. Can you elaborate on your plans for the properties?

My portfolio currently consists of six properties as the Area Director for Sri Lanka, Maldives and Malaysia. Despite the fact that we operate in different geographies, my focus for all these properties is to continuously align ourselves with our Group, IHCL’s ‘Aspiration 2022’ set by our Managing Director and CEO Mr Puneet Chhatwal.

Our financial performance is extremely important to IHCL, as it has invested in four of these six hotels, while two of the hotels are on a management contract. These are extremely competitive markets and teams at the hotels and I have been constantly working on innovating unique experiences for our guests along with refurbishing our properties in Sri Lanka and Maldives. We also continuously keep challenging what we have been doing in the past and how we can constantly keep improving our operating efficiencies. This is directly linked to our vision ‘To be the most iconic and profitable hospitality company in South Asia by 2022’.

Our plans for all our hotels and resorts also include what we need to do for all our stakeholders most importantly our guests and how we exceed their expectations.

We also make plans for our associates that work for us on how we engage with them and how we create a talent pool so that we can help them grow along with the organization, which is also growing at a very fast pace. Last but not the least we make plans for the community that we work in, how we create livelihood opportunities locally along with being sustainable in what we do. Our plans need to look at all these areas – it is important to be inclusive and create a right balance in what we do to achieve our vision.

Each of these represent a different market can you elaborate on the strategies that will be utilized to align with Aspirations 2022?

‘Aspirations 2022’ has been set on a foundation of our organization’s core values ‘Trust – Awareness- Joy’ overlaid on the TATA values, our parent company. These set of values and IHCL’s leadership code becomes the enablers for driving the culture across all our hotels operating in different markets, which in turn would help us achieve ‘Aspiration 2022’

Multiple initiatives have been planned under three main areas; Re-structure, Re-imagine and Re-engineer. Based on these initiatives annual targets are set for each hotel and plans to achieve these targets are made and are monitored continuously at different levels. There are also target based projects created for hotels and markets to drive results in specific areas.

There are pro-active deviations and changes made to our plans based on circumstances for example post the unfortunate events of April 21st in Sri Lanka, all three hotels Taj Samudra, Taj Bentota and Vivanta Airport Garden reworked all its plans with a completely new perspective. The focus was to promote Sri Lanka as a destination rather than just promoting our own hotels. We forged partnerships with Aitken Spence to promote the country with the ‘Best of Sri Lanka’ packages, which offered great value to guests wanting to explore this country and newer destinations within Sri Lanka.

Under the initiative re-imagine, we looked at driving operation excellence where every process was re-visited and either simplified, changed or even eradicated. This was done with an intent to continue being profitable despite the challenges. Another example where in as part of re-imagining our brandscape, our Gateway Airport Garden, underwent refurbishment of 52 rooms and its ballroom which is now ready in its new avatar as Vivanta, Airport Garden, Colombo. This will help the hotel re-position itself, offer a superior experience to its guests and hence will be able to

command a premium for its room rates, improving the yield per room.

As part of our initiative re-engineer, we focused on the well-being and development of our associates during this period to develop our internal talent through focused capability building programs. Some of our local talent in Sri Lanka got an opportunity to work in other international hotels of ours.

While these are very few examples of what we did as the list is really too large, all these agile initiatives worked very well for all three hotels in Sri Lanka; Taj Samudra came back strongly in Q2 with a 12 percent topline growth. Vivanta Airport Garden almost met its targets and I am confident that with all the measures that we have put in place, Taj Bentota will once again be in green post December 2019.

Maldives is another market, where there is a huge addition of new inventory in the Atoll that we operate in and where we are working continuously with many action plans under the three R's initiative to ensure that we continue our robust performance there. This includes renovation, new approach to sales and marketing, sourcing from new geographies, stylized service design and much more. I feel so proud to tell you that Taj Exotica Maldives was recently recognized and ranked number three among the 30 Best Resorts in the Indian Ocean and ranked number 24 among the 50 Best Resorts in the World in the coveted Conde' Nast Traveler - Reader's Choice Award 2019.

What are your thoughts on the Sri Lankan operations, what more can be done? In terms of food and beverages will you be introducing any new products?

We have a very active board with extremely renowned and well-traveled directors who constantly share constructive feedback with us on our food and beverage operations. As they have traveled extensively and frequent many hotels, they share continuous insightful feedback with us.

Taj Samudra has been extremely fortunate to open many iconic restaurants and introduce new concepts in this country. Golden Dragon our authentic Chinese restaurant offering Szechuan and Cantonese cuisine, Navratna, Colombo's favorite Indian restaurant and Yumi our Japanese resto-bar. I am told that we were advised against opening a Japanese restaurant then as it was way ahead of its times, however since we have opened it, we have never looked back. Interestingly on New Year's Eve at Yumi we plan to do a chefs special 'Omakase' menu - an eight course

Japanese tasting menu. This will be a very unique concept and I am sure our guests who will experience it will be thrilled with what they experience.

Master Chef Shi XiLing, who has worked at our flagship hotel 'The Taj Mahal Palace' in Mumbai for over 20 years was brought to Sri Lanka recently. He is an extremely skilled chef and has introduced a repertoire of his signature dishes. We have received super feedback about him and the food that he makes.

Navratna with its Master Chef Chauhan, who is now a legend in this country has cooked great Indian food and has patrons visiting the restaurant over the years. The Rajasthani food promotion that we did at Navratna in August was a super hit and almost every single night we were sold out. Along with the chefs from our Palaces, we had a local performer. This was a great combination of lively folk music and authentic Rajasthani food.

I was at my daughter's school for a parent teachers meeting and I was pleasantly surprised when one of the professors told me that the best Sunday brunch was at Taj Samudra's 'Ports of Call', our all day dining restaurant. Every Sunday this diner is fully packed and our guests truly appreciate the overall selection and the innovative menus that our Executive Chef Samila prepares for each of these brunches.

It is not always about food but the overall experience that guests look for – music at Lattice, with Natalia performing has enabled the lounge to be busy and buzzing with guests. Our lobby was perceived to be a very quiet one; however, with the success of Natalia's performance we now have different performances through the week. We are also looking at having a unique English high tea at Lattice during the upcoming festive Christmas period, something that we have never tried before.

Oktoberfest was always held at other city hotels for almost three decades and the team at Taj Samudra partnered with the German Embassy and brought it to Taj Samudra for the very first time. Oktoberfest is lively, young and happening, and it attracts a very different profile of guests to the hotel. The hotel has always been perceived to be only for the affluent and those who can afford luxury. The thought behind celebrating Oktoberfest in the hotel was to create a platform to connect with the younger generation and the Oktoberfest gave us just that. We were also fortunate that we had our corporate F&B head – Chef Urban Denk visiting Sri Lanka for a conference in October. It was under his watchful eyes and a day full of hardwork that our chefs at Taj Samudra learnt all the German dishes that we served

during the event. We were absolutely clear right from the beginning that we will do the Oktoberfest authentically.

Our leadership team is strongly thinking of introducing our iconic restaurant 'Bombay Brasserie' to this country at Taj Bentota. Bombay Brasserie is currently present in London, Cape Town and Dubai. We believe that guests from Colombo will travel all the way to Bentota only to dine at this restaurant as it will offer an experience, which is unique and one of a kind.

Banqueting is another important part of our food and beverage experience, as I mentioned earlier we created a state-of-the-art ballroom at the Vivanta Airport Garden recently. We also plan to have a similar state of the art banqueting space at Taj Samudra. These banquet rooms will not cater only to large social events but can be effectively used for large conferences as well.

Minibar as a concept is undergoing a change; we are selectively piloting the idea of a custom-ized minibar, while this reduced inventory and wastage, more importantly the guest has a choice to select his own private bar. F&B is ever evolving and the only constant is change. 'Innovation' and quality both product and service will ensure that restaurants stay successful.

What can you tell us about the Taj Food and Beverage Centre of Excellence?

The Food and Beverage Centre of Excellence (F&B COE), which I lead is the vision of our Managing Director and CEO, Mr Chhatwal. The F&B COE is a team of experienced professionals responsible for managing and reviewing processes, revisiting our product and service standards especially in light of our new brandscape, best practice sharing, cost management and people capacity building.

The power of COE comes from synergies across IHCL properties. This will result in increased quality, productivity and cost optimization. This team will also focus on new F&B concepts as IHCL has always been a pioneer in opening restaurants with new concepts across the globe for example Quilon in London and Bombay Brasserie across three international locations. In fact, the first restaurant offering Szechuan cuisine in India was the Golden Dragon at the Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai. The first Japanese restaurant in India was also when Wasabi by Morimoto opened at the same hotel. Harbour Bar at Taj Mahal Palace, Mumbai was the first bar in the country with its license number being '1'.

We also work closely with Chef Urban Denk – our corporate F& B Head on various aspects of food and beverages starting from the most important guest experience ‘Breakfast’ to other areas like menus, freshness, quality, taste and presentation of food and even discuss cross exposure of our key F&B personnel. We would also re-visit all our SOP’s across different areas and customize them for each of our brands Taj, SeleQtions and Vivanta going forward. These will also be customized to the current generation of associates with more pictorial content versus reading words.

The F&B COE also has two experts – one who focuses on trends in spirits and a sommelier who focuses on the trends in wines. We keep revisiting□ing our master beverage portfolio, incorporating the ones in trend and knocking off ones that are not preferred any more. We also worked on simplifying the overall portfolio of beverages incorporating what was best for our brands. This selection offers great value to our esteemed guests and helps us maintain optimum inventories at all times across each of our hotels.

As I mentioned even earlier IHCL has always been a pioneer in creating new F&B concepts and recently IHCL also partnered with the world’s largest brewer AB InBev to launch a premium chain of micro-breweries across 15 of its hotels over the next five years.



You are experienced in launching new properties, can you elaborate on this?

I have been extremely fortunate to be given an opportunity by my organization to open the Taj Santacruz in Mumbai as its General Manager. This is a gorgeous hotel just next to the domestic airport and very close to the international airport. But I must tell you that this is not at all an airport hotel. It was uniquely positioned as a hotel that redefined the meaning of luxury by creating a distinctive, customized and an exclusive Taj experience in a bespoke personalized environment for its guests. The minimum size of the base category of the hotel room was 580 square feet, which is usually the size of a junior suite at most hotels. Our partners Mr and Mrs GVK Reddy placed a huge amount of faith in us when they asked us to manage and run this beautiful hotel.

Opening a new hotel is extremely challenging as well as offers great learning as you need to start from scratch and without any wfi. What I mean to say is that when you start working at a hotel under construction it is completely different from running a hotel, which is well set and established.

We did quite a few things differently from what we usually would do; for example we had the largest sales team recruited for this hotel to get us to speed in a very short time. We moved really very fast and within the first full year of operations we had clocked occupancy of 60 per cent. Usually most new hotels would do between 25-35 percent occupancy in their first year. The occupancies had crossed 76 percent by the end of the third year. We were the market leaders in our average room rates since the date we opened. The hotel became PAT positive after taking into account all the costs and the cost of interest on its borrowed loan in the third year of its operation. This is extremely rare as usually hotels break even after seven to ten years of operations and a few never.

The reason for our quick success is the experience that IHCL has over the years in managing and operating hotels in India and other parts of the world. The other reasons for our success is our varied brandscape, loyalty and support of our guests, the strength of our brands, the vast distribution platform, our channel partners, our sales teams, the marketing and PR support across India and internationally, our knowledge bank and equally important our committed and talented people.

Being in-charge of Sri Lanka, Maldives and Malaysia, what is the reason for your position as Area Director to be based in Sri Lanka?

Clearly it is the proximity between the countries and the hotels. As you are aware we have three hotels in Sri Lanka and two hotels in the Maldives and it is an hour flight from one country to another. It is hence easy to manage being based out of Colombo and clearly gives me a very close perspective of what is happening across all these hotels. I am extremely fortunate to have an experienced set of General Managers in Ranil, Ranjit, Samrat and Samir at the Vivanta Airport Garden, Taj Bentota, Taj Exotica and Taj Coral Reef in Maldives respectively, who share with me their knowledge and an in depth perspective about both Sri Lanka and Maldives. This knowledge is indeed insightful and helps me in making clear decisions.

Within Sri Lanka it is easy to travel to the other two hotels as the city has great roads. Also travelling to the airport is quick and takes anywhere between 45 minutes to an hour. The other day it took me an hour twenty minutes to reach Bentota, which was very quick. Ease and speed of travel is important, so that I can visit these hotels to conduct periodic performance reviews and also meet the hotel teams in person. Barring Vivanta – Rebak Island, Langkawi where I do a monthly telephonic review, I have been able to visit all the other hotels at least once in two months in case of Maldives and once a month in case of Sri Lanka. While you may

think that visiting Maldives and conducting reviews must be really fun, most of the reviews start at nine in the morning in the boardroom and end up late evening much after the sun has set.

Overall in the tourism sector what more can be done?

Sri Lanka is truly blessed with the richness of beauty in its mountains, its beaches, flora and fauna, and so much more to offer. There is no doubt in my mind that tourism has great potential in this country.

What more can be done? And for me that is a very important question to be answered. First and foremost I feel that more awareness needs to be created of the unexplored places that the country has to offer. While everyone talks about and promotes the 'Yala' national park but rarely anyone speaks about Wilpattu, where the probability of spotting leopards is much more. Similarly, people talk about Nuwara Eliya as the place to visit, however Ella is not promoted with the same breath, which is equally beautiful.

When tourists travel to this country, they will surely stay in Colombo, Bentota, Galle, Weligama and Nuwara Eliya. I feel like this is the entirety of Sri Lanka for most of them, but there are many more places to visit in Sri Lanka, such as Ella, Trincomalee, Kandy, Sinharaja forest, Passikuda and Maskeliya. While these names come foremost to my mind, I am sure that there are even more unexplored places. I am hopeful that I do get a chance to explore this wonderful country during my tenure here. I had a wonderful homestay experience in Ella recently. The location of the homestay was exquisite nestled on top of a hill with a set of two mountains in front and the sun rising between the two of them. Promoting the country and all its unique destinations to the world digitally is something that is easy and can be done swiftly.

To facilitate tourism there will be constant need to upgrade the infrastructure starting from large projects like airports across the country to even basic requirements like cleanliness, hygiene and sanitation.

How can Sri Lanka enhance safari experiences?

The Wilpattu safari experience that I had recently was very good. In India, Taj Safaris (TSL) are very well known because these offer a very rustic experience and the chance to see the tiger. Under TSL we manage and operate four safaris and my

colleague Nagendra heads its operations. Each of the lodges does not have more than 15 rooms. The experience that each lodge provides is also very different from the other. The whole experience starts from the time you are being picked up from the airport, the lodging experience, the dining experience with home cooked food with fresh local vegetables and spices, the knowledgeable naturalists that accompany you on the safari drives, the jungle experience with sightings of beautiful tigers and other animals, the performances of the villagers – everything is personalized and unique. Getting this whole act right is so hard to replicate, many have tried but haven't been successful in doing so.



I was very satisfied with my experience at Wilpattu. The Safari was wonderful and it was organized and managed in the right way. It was not hurried and vehicles traveled at the right speed. The drivers were friendly and made an effort to show the different animals and birds in the park. When there was an instance of spotting a leopard, all the drivers took turns in an organized manner to show their passengers the lovely animal. At no point in time there was a pandemonium and

noise that would scare the leopard away. I am advised that in Mirissa, whale watching is done in quite a competitive and commercial manner. Unless I see it myself I reserve my judgement on the same. However, one needs to be very careful with safaris, over promoting one particular destination may spoil the attraction. Safaris in India work under very strict regulations for example the number of vehicles that can enter the park and speed limit of vehicles. The intent is to conserve wildlife, while providing tourists an opportunity to experience nature closely.

These measures can work well for Sri Lanka. Its safari experiences could be made knowledgeable by including naturalists who can share more information during the drive, and some regulatory measures to ensure sustainability of these natural environments.

It is now that the country has understood the potential of the Indian tourist market. The Government's focus has also shifted. What more can we do?

Indian tourists have loved this country and have visited Sri Lanka repeatedly. India being Sri Lanka's closest neighbour, it is also the easiest to target market. While much work has always been done and was also done post the events of April 21, there is still a great amount that can be done to promote this destination. Like what Taj did by partnering and promoting the destination along with other hotel companies with similar initiatives can be done by other hotel chains. Assistance can be sought from Sri Lankan Tourism Promotion Board to promote these itineraries not just to India but also other countries.

Many countries have created beautiful content showing what they can offer tourists visiting their country. These are aired during prime time in India, I feel SLTPB can also do something similar. Much more needs to be done about creating awareness of all the unexplored and the unspoken destinations that this magnificent country has to offer. This country and many of the key locations offer hotel accommodation at different price points and that works well for a diverse country like India. Communicating key information like this is also extremely important. With the advent of the digital world and social media this should not be too difficult.

Partnering with online shopping sites in India like Amazon and Flipkart with promotional content/advertisements being displayed during their mega sales can be

another way of catching a large number of eyeballs. Now that there are so many new airlines coming to this country such as Vistara, Air India and Indigo Spice Jet, a lot more structured information can be shared through their inflight magazines.

These are just a few of my thoughts and this plan to attract tourists especially from India needs to be a structured, well thought of and methodically executed and I am positive that it will yield great results. Tourism is an extremely important industry and no country can take it lightly as it creates a huge number of jobs directly and indirectly.

Your experience and background?

I graduated from the Institute of Hotel Management, Ahmedabad in 1993, and was only 19 years of age at that time when I started working. I joined Taj soon after as a Hotel Operations Management Trainee, which was pre-dominantly a trainee supervisory position. Subsequently, along with my job, I completed my Bachelor of Arts and my MBA at the Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies in Mumbai.

I am indeed very fortunate to have worked with the four different Taj properties in Mumbai for 26 years. I worked the longest at the Taj Mahal Palace, Mumbai for 14 years. I held many positions there, starting from a supervisory role to being a restaurant manager and finally ended being the EAM – Food and Beverage. There was also a point during this long period that I was the food and beverage manager at the Taj Lands End, Mumbai just for one year. In 2007, I got promoted to President, Mumbai as its General Manager and was its longest serving General Manager for seven years. My last posting in Mumbai was at Taj Santacruz, where I had a wonderful four years stint. I have very fond memories of all these four hotels that I worked in and I really look forward to creating wonderful memories to cherish even in Sri Lanka.

On my personal front I love sports especially cricket both watching and playing it. I can even watch an old cricket match repeatedly. I can just stand to watch a game of cricket anywhere. I also follow the capital markets and invest in them. Our job doesn't permit us too much time but whenever I get time I read about various Indian companies, trends in different sectors and other articles related to the economy. I did not have a clue about this subject till I got posted to a place called 'The Chambers', which is a private business club only for members. Membership to this elite club is only by invitation and is restricted to CEOs of companies and certain key professionals. It was hence imperative to know everything about all its

members and their companies. Our boss would constantly prod us to check our knowledge on the same. I guess this is where my focus shifted from the sports page in the newspaper to the pink pages.

As a person I love interacting with people of whom I think is the most important aspect of our business. Managing relationships with not just our guests or associates but with all stakeholders like our partners, community, shareholders and others is extremely important to me. This requires one to be sensitive and I feel that I had this quality right from the beginning. It helped me to understand proactively our guest requirements, aspirations of my team members and balancing needs of all stakeholders. Experience over the years has helped me even further in this strength.

Lastly my new found passion is traveling. Mumbai as you are aware of is a city, which is extremely professional but hardly gives you time to pursue what you like to do. I am hopeful that in my current posting I can explore Sri Lanka completely and not miss out any of its pristine locations. In the last nine months I have managed to visit Wilpatu and Ella. While Arungambay is the next on the list, I honestly don't know when that will be possible considering these are the peak months for business.

Way forward?

Tourism is one of Sri Lanka's key industries. Other than tea, spices the biggest industry here is tourism. I have said a lot earlier about what can be done to further develop tourism in this country and one thing that I missed mentioning is skill development. Capacity and skill building is as vital as developing physical infrastructure in this country. Talent is surely required to manage the increased inflow of tourists. Creating vocational training institutes and skill development centers would surely help in addressing this concern.

In case of IHCL the way forward for us is to seek new opportunities in form of management contracts for new hotels under either of our brands Taj, SeleQtions, Vivanta, Ginger or even Ama Trails in this country in places like Galle, Kandy and Jaffna in the future for us to expand our foot print and to further expose this country to our discerning loyal guests.

Lastly, while tourism is undoubtedly extremely important it is also essential to ensure that it is sustainable and how it is managed effectively. I feel sustainable

tourism is the only way forward for this island of great opportunities.