

Mount Lavinia Hotel Beyond Expectations

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Mount Lavinia Hotel, which for years, has provided exceptional services and facilities to its guests, begins the new financial year with a positive outlook. With a host of product and service enhancements planned for the coming months, the team at Mount Lavinia Hotel seeks to go beyond customer expectations, says Anura Dewapura, General Manager of Mount Lavinia Hotel.

By Madhushala Senaratne

Photography by Hiranya Malwatta

Mount Lavinia Hotel has come a long way since its establishment, what is your

goal?

We had a very good year last year and our intention at Mount Lavinia Hotel is to focus on getting more business to the hotel as well as for our team members. We have already started programmes on accountability and responsibility. We took our Heads of Departments (HODs) to Kukulegama Resort where we had a workshop, which was all about responsibility. We had a 'Leading your way to Accountability' programme, a three-day workshop. We also plan to train 60 of our middle management to focus on how to be accountable and responsible with their jobs and their day to day lives, it is not only for their work, but also for their personal life as well.

Our goal for this year is to work with the Human Resource Department, to focus on our services and the knowledge building among our team members. This is a crucial time for us, where tourism is starting to bounce back and customer expectations are higher, and we want to live up to that. We have planned many training programmes for this coming year, from the overall team members to the HOD level. Also we have created customer service teams within the group, with the management and the team members involved, to empower them to solve problems themselves. The ultimate goal for us is to provide the service knowledge and technical know-how and also continue living up to our demanding consumers. We have the best staff and I am very proud of them, some of them have been here decades and this is an organisation that runs like a small family.

We have a unique product, which we want to upgrade. We are refurbishing 83 rooms from May 1, 2010, which will be completed within 3-4 months. We have upgraded our colonial wing and we are looking at another new restaurant. We are upgrading the infrastructure within the organisation, our pathways and the beach area. These things will happen continuously.

At the same time, Mount Lavinia Hotel is going green. We have already received the certification and it is my belief that this is essential to be a good corporate citizen. The process is continuing. We celebrated Earth Day and Earth Hour. All our stationery are being changed, we are thinking of purifying our own water. The green programme will be implemented in the rooms as well. This is part of our overall strategy where we want to take this hotel in the direction of an environmentally conscious heritage hotel.

That aside, we want to make Mount Lavinia the best food and beverage destination in this country, and thus an entire range of food and beverage events have been planned for this.

We want to focus on our team members and our product. We had a wonderful year last year. My team needs to be acknowledged here, they did a great job and that is the reason I use this Albert Einstein quote that “once we accept our limits, we go beyond”. We want to create an organisational culture of spirited competitiveness and go beyond the customer’s expectations. The bottom line is to make customers happy regardless of where they come from. We have a large clientele from Europe and also a considerable section of our guests are Sri Lankans from both home and abroad. Thus our clientele is a blend of nationalities.

As noted earlier, Mount Lavinia Hotel is conscious of the environment and adopts environmentally friendly procedures. What are these initiatives and how important are they?

The environment is very important to me and it is going to be part of the organisation.

We have a committee and a group of managers for waste management, energy management, water management and for managing all the purchases. Each group has the responsibility of setting up guidelines and minimising the carbon footprints. We do have an environmental policy at this hotel. We do our own compost fertiliser. All the glasses and bottles, for example, are separated and recycled. Recycling methods have been implemented. We even went further and had a competition among the employees, where we evaluated their gardens and awarded them. We also involved the community.

Our goal is to educate our staff in terms of adopting environmentally friendly approaches, even at home. How important is it to switch off lights? When they find out how much money they save from their salary, there is much that can be implemented with regard to your family life.

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Mount Lavinia Hotel offers a wide-range of dining options and is known for its fine cuisines and the world-class chefs. Can you tell us about these, and your goal of

becoming the best food and beverage destination in Sri Lanka?

We have already set the standards, and we are going in that direction. Through unique events such as 'an Affair with Chocolate', the Swedish Food Festival and by bringing down international guest chefs, we have worked towards this goal. With the help of our environmentally friendly organisation, we started Slow Food, which is the only Slow Food chapter in Sri Lanka.

From August, a new Kitchen Director from Sweden will join us, and this will enhance our kitchen team. He has been working in Europe and in fact he was my assistant when I was executive chef in Europe. He is now executive chef in the Grand Hotel in Sweden. He is going to be fully responsible for European cuisine.

We have our own American chef Leo and we will be hiring another American chef. They will be taking care of South American, North American and Caribbean cuisines.

We have Publis with Sri Lankan food, and we have Sarvanan, the Indian chef who is mainly taking care of South Indian food. He makes the best dosai. I am also in the process of hiring a North Indian chef.

To be the best food and beverage destination in this country, we need to have the expertise. I am not saying that our people are not capable. Yes, our people are capable. But at the same time, we want to create an authenticity. Also, we need to maintain our standards. One of the famous Swiss chefs will join us for the Swiss food festival in July. Former White House chef Walter Scheib will hold the White House State Dinner. In addition, for a week we are going to have the United States of America.

Overall it is an educational process for our chefs as they learn from them and once they depart our people can carry on and do the job. New Year is very promising and we are all looking forward as a hotel to continue progressing. We had a very good New Year's celebrations here and so far it has been a very encouraging year.

The Slow Food events have also gained much popularity. What is the concept of

this?

Slow Food events are held every month. Slow Food as an organisation started in Italy, against fast food. What this organisation did was, they wanted to have home cooked organic food from within the area. What we do here is, we bring farmers who grow fruits, vegetables, and sometimes butchers to the table for a discussion. They talk about how they produce these food. What is featured here are products from Sri Lanka, we do not import anything for this. We do different country themes, but they are all from Sri Lankan produced ingredients. Also, we do not sell tickets to too many, only for around 40 people - it is very much a family style event.

Based on this, we have also put a menu at the Governor's restaurant now. One part of that is Farm to the Table. On the menu, it is mentioned from where these food items come from, for example. This is done to give a guarantee for the customer, because they are becoming more organic and they are concerned about their health.

Can you tell us about the two main events planned for May - the White House State Diner and the Flamenco Dance Troupe?

On May 14, we have Laura Segovia and the Flamenco Group from Spain and also the band La Tuna performing at the Grand Ballroom, which will be turned into a traditional Spanish Bodega. For a reasonable price, anybody can come enjoy the real authentic flamenco dancing and the Spanish music with some Tapas, prepared by Spanish chef, Javier Gracia who is flying in for this event. Flamenco comes from the South of Spain where I worked before, and we have a lot in common with South of Spain. A lot of moors worked there, and Flamenco was inspired by the Oriental people and the Gypsies.

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Then, on May 16, the former White House chef Walter Scheib who has worked for Bill Clinton for eight years and four years for George Bush will conduct the White House State Dinner. The Ballroom will be converted into the Oval Office. This will be a very interesting

and interactive session.

The menu is specially prepared for Sri Lankans, with lamb as the main course. But overall, chef Scheib has done quite a sum of work after leaving the White House, and I happened to work with him in Hershey, Pennsylvania, so I have experienced his food and that is the reason I thought it was a good idea for Sri Lanka – to enjoy some of his food, while at the same time listen to some of the White House gossip, such as what the Presidents liked to eat. Would you believe it, George Bush, liked Barbequed Beef Brisket. Bill Clinton liked his hamburgers.

What are the other unique features or services and facilities that the hotel offers?

We will be having a new Catering and Convention Director joining us, he has been working in the Ritz Carlton in Bahrain for 20 years.

Mount Lavinia is famous for weddings. Our online wedding programmes are popular, especially among those overseas and Sri Lankans who live abroad, and we are focusing more on our local customers. This is the place to get married. We are planning to offer much more facilities when it comes to weddings, and we have our One Stop Shop, which has worked well. Since last year with the launch of the new website, we have become the location for quite a number of weddings.

Also we have special Sinhalese and Tamil coordinators to talk through the respective traditional weddings. We have a Malay person who will take care of Muslim weddings.

We are also focusing on the Indian market as we have a growing demand of Indian guests. We have recruited an Indian sales manager who will take care of this business and will be talking to customers in Hindi so that they feel comfortable when they stay with us.

Focusing on the weddings and catering aspects, new menus, new concepts and themes are being introduced. Beach weddings are a trend now. We already have these facilities and we are in the process of enhancing.

Work on the Lavinia Tunnel, part of the secret love tunnel has been completed and this will be opened soon. It is going to be a private dining location for couples, and groups of up to six.

What are the challenges you have faced, and how have you dealt with them?

We take challenges as opportunities. We have talented people who know what to do, sometimes they do not know their capabilities. In dealing with challenges, our team approach works very well. I do not believe in individualistic approach and if I find this in my team I will personally go and talk to them. That is why we are changing the organisational culture, to bring our employees together as a team and to overcome the challenges. When I arrived the war was still going on, the first four months were very, very hard.

Also, I am a very determined person, I am not a person who likes to lose. We have our budgeted financial numbers and I said, 'we are not going to lose, does not matter what difficulty we are in, we are going to make it'. And how are we going to make it? They all made it happen. I do not believe in cost cutting. But, I told my team to manage effectively and efficiently and they did. For instance, I have an engineering department, who made miracles for me and saved energy, electricity and millions of rupees, because they worked as a team.

To overcome challenges, taking a challenge in a positive manner is one thing, and working as a group and a team is the second - that is the approach we take and I have spread the wires throughout the organisation and it is contagious. So for me, I can say that I am proud of my people who I have worked with and we have set our goals for the coming year 2010-2011 and we want to go beyond.

Any final thoughts?

I, together with my team, we are motivated and are looking forward for this New Year with big plans. We are working as a team to achieve more and go beyond the customers' expectations. That is the theme for this year - 'Together we achieve more'. My goal is to take care of my team and their welfare and also the return. It is a very promising year ahead, and so far it has been very good. We have had the best year in the history of this hotel and we want to raise the bar to get into the next level.

When you come here, the sky is the limit. You neither ever stop improving nor stop learning, you cannot ever stop exceeding customer expectations, especially in this sector. You need to be updated and we need to be current with the world, not just Sri Lanka. Our goal is to educate, provide the knowledge and the know-how to our team members and to do the best in whatever we do.



