

Onwards Through Perseverance

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Finance, publishing, capital markets and tourism. Thus spans the career of Tilak Conrad who is presently the Owner's Representative of Driftwood Maldives. Behind a robust portfolio are the drive to surmount overwhelming challenges and sheer hard work. He reflects on a career that strings together an amalgamation of experiences and accomplishments with each stepping-stone.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara

Born to Sinhala and Tamil parents, Tilak Conrad grew up in the United Kingdom to which he attributes gaining a strong work ethic from a very early age. "I did a variety of jobs and as a young adult I spent some time with a merchant bank and an insurance company," he says of the seeds of his career. In January of 1982, a 25-year-old Tilak Conrad's attempt to return to Sri Lanka was encumbered with obstacles. It was not until early 90's with the introduction of dual nationality that Tilak was able to return and with the help of Rank Xerox began

Copyline with Ceylon Theatres. Copyline gained reputation and became an established name for producing timely documentation for capital markets. Gradually, from first producing corporate communications the company expanded to web development and advertising. "For me it was all about project management, focusing completely on getting the job done on time," says Conrad.

In the year 2006, Tilak Conrad reached a milestone having spent 25 years in England and 25 years in Sri Lanka. "Businesses weren't doing so well including Copyline. My kids were young and I could not see the end of the war," he says of a desire for change that led to selling his interest in the Copyline group under a non-disclosure agreement. It was during this time that a timely phone call from a friend in Maldives presented an opportunity to venture into the hospitality industry. "They were looking for a General Manager for their resort development project, which I had helped them bid for in 2004-2005. This was my way forward. So I said 'how about me?'"

Having sold Copyline in the third week of October 2006, by the first of November Tilak Conrad found himself in the Maldives effectively heading Driftwood Maldives as the General Manager. "I recruited staff, and along with two working directors the whole company constituted of eight people."

The resort project entailed the development of a high-end boutique resort with extreme design and environmental goals.

As the owner and developer Driftwood Maldives remained as the main contractor employing state-of-the-art technologies to meet environmental goals and minimise operating costs. "As we had no construction knowledge our strategy was to keep the company tight and bring in all the experts needed. Thereafter we recruited all the labour and commenced work in December 2006," states Conrad. However, set upon a small 19-acre island, 400kms south of Malé, the undertaking proved to be a logistical challenge.

While 350-450 personnel were required to live and work with minimal damage to the island, suppliers hailed from all parts of the globe, from the US to China. "We hired warehouses in China, Singapore and Malaysia to store cargo in bulk, which we could break into manageable quantities and ship them as and when needed," explains Conrad on working around the limited storage on the island. This demanded careful planning, working around weather conditions and shipping delays, and ensuring cashflows to bring in required items to the island at the right time. The challenge was heightened as cutting down trees was against our principles. "It was a really exciting and fulfilling time," he adds.

Work on the project hit a snag in mid 2008 with the global recession. "It was the biggest recession the world had ever seen. And combined with the construction boom occurring in China, India and Middle East, costs of basic construction material escalated." To overcome this setback a new investor was sought and Conrad's past experience proved useful in presenting the company to potential investors and financial institutions. Consequently the project gained a new investor; a Thai family of repute came in with USD 12 million. Another USD four million was obtained from bankers in Malaysia. "It was no mean feat at the end of 2008," he notes. Finally the 50-villa property was opened in the third quarter of 2009 as one of the best boutique resort properties in Maldives.

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However, the resort did not perform as expected and a change in operator was in the cards. "We had to part ways with our original operator. This move not only incurred a huge cost, there were many legal implications," explains Conrad further adding that, "there is an aspect called tortious interference, which means that while in business with one management company no other management company can even talk to us." Accordingly a mutual agreement was reached with large international law firms on either side. The transition was carried out while the resort remained in full operation. With in-house guests occupying the resort, the original operator ceased operations at the stroke of midnight to reopen instantly as Park Hyatt Maldives, Hadahaa. "Much had to change," he reflects, "this includes nameboards, signage, uniforms, printed material, names on facilities and amenities and it is quite a transition while keeping a 1,000 US dollars a night resort running." And in the capable hands of Hyatt the property is presently maturing and performing well.

Recognised as one of the best high-end resorts in Maldives it is the first in the world to have met the Green Globe Certification for its design, planning and construction. That is, a resort deemed as green from the point of concept onwards. "We broke ground in many areas.

As the island was too small for solar powered operations and wind power was not appropriate, four large generators were installed that to date has only recorded a total down time of a few seconds." Other environmental milestones include the complete exclusion of boilers, a daily production of 300,000 litres of pure water from the sea and a carbon footprint of 49.1kg per guest per night. "With an impressive array of awards for design and environmental achievements the resort remains one of the places to visit," comments Tilak Conrad on the fruits of their labour.