Rising To The Challenge



With over 35 years in the hospitality industry, Ramada Colombo is a name that has sturdily held its ground. This four star city hotel has remained consistent through changing tides upholding its brand status of international standards. The faces behind Ramada’s success Fahmy Cader, Chairman/Managing Director, Imthiaz Cader, Director/General Manager,
M Shanthikumar, Director Operations, Ayesha Hasheem, Director and Prema Cooray, Director, share their views with Business Today on the Hotel’s latest renovation plans as it looks to taken on a future of opportunities.

By Prasadini Nanayakkara | Photography Menaka Aravinda and Indika De Silva

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Can you talk about the journey that led to the Ramada Hotel brand in Sri Lanka?

We started operations in 1969 when the tourist development plan unfolded. We were originally a film company carrying out distribution of American films. However, we wanted to move into the hospitality industry, due to the facilities given at that time. Therefore, the first hotel we started was Holiday Inn. The holding company is Alhambra Hotels. When the contract with the Holiday Inn franchise ended four years ago, we received better terms from Ramada which is also an international brand and we signed up with them.

This is a public company, which is not quoted at the moment, however once we expand we are looking to become a quoted company as well.

Our vision is to create a home away from home for our clients. We are targeting all segments of the market, in particular the corporates, then leisure. With that in mind, we strive to give the best facilities and look after our staff who will carry our vision to the future.

Ramada is a member of the world's largest hotel chain Wyndham Hotel Group. Can you talk about the significance of this?

Wyndham is an international brand and is the mother company of the Ramada brand and includes 15 other brands within that.

We are proud to associate with one of the largest hotel chains in the world. They have 7,250 hotels worldwide. They are expanding at the moment, with over 30 hotels and in 2014, they are hoping to expand to 60 hotels. In Sri Lanka they have two hotels at the moment, about three hotels in Pakistan and they are branching into Bangladesh as well. Furthermore, they are looking to expand here as well not only with Ramada but with other brands.

As Ramada prepares to renovate for a new look, can you talk about the motivation behind the move?

Every hotel has to renovate approximately every ten years. This becomes a necessity in a changing market and also due to the aging of the hotel. We have been refurbishing various sections of the hotel since the inception in 1974. The first major refurbishment was in 1983 where we changed the entire lobby and other

sections including rooms. Once again in 1993 we refurbished the ballroom. In 2007 we upgraded it to an international level.

One of the major refurbishments we did at the time was with the banquet, which is the largest facility in the city. It cost us about a million dollars. This feature is a very important aspect of Ramada as it has generated substantial income over the years. We have laid considerable emphasis on this facility as a result. The banqueting facility helped the hotel to carry on during the bad times and was an important source of income.

The banquet hall can be divided into four different sections and can accommodate 4,000 guests, seated. The advantage we have is that we can hold smaller functions by partitioning as well. As such we have been refurbishing all along according to the market requirements.

Can you talk about the ongoing renovation plans and facilities that guests can experience?

The latest renovation began in April, 2012 and we have just completed the rooms. That is the first stage of a major renovation we have started. The next phase would be to upgrade the lobby. From thereon, we will develop the car park and have an extra 45 rooms, which will make the operation of the hotel much more profitable. Those are in the pipeline.

With the renovation of the 94 rooms that we have done, Ramada has the most spacious rooms in the city. The new rooms at Ramada Colombo are created with the core concept of ‘smart luxury’ where contemporary elegance is coupled with cutting edge technology. These modernised rooms truly cater to a new breed of global travellers for whom business and leisure need to converge.

We are also the only accommodation that provides shower cubicles and bathtubs with regard to city hotels. Furthermore, it has one of the best furnished lounges. We also have many other facilities including conference halls, poolside gym, spa, IP TV, 42-inch colour TV and Wi-Fi. We are famous for Mogul cuisine and also offer Western and Chinese cuisines as well in our restaurants. It must be said that people are drawn to this hotel because of the Mogul cuisine. Aside from our special Mogul restaurant, Alhambra, we have a coffee shop which serves 24 hours. Furthermore, all types of cuisine are also available 24 hours. We will continue to expand and modernise our restaurants in 2014.

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At present we are moving towards the green hotel concept. We are with the Wyndham green programme and the greatest achievement so far is that we have had the most efficient air condition plant installed for the hotel which will reduce our energy cost by 50 percent.

With all these changes and more to come, we are well placed to face the future and the competition, which will be intense. In that respect we are on an even plane.

During the 30-year war, those in the industry were skeptical about investment and development. All this has been possible since the war has ended facilitating development to take place. Till then they were delayed due to the instability of the country.

Can you talk about the successes of Ramada?

Most importantly we have remained franchised with an international brand since day one. That is for almost 35 years. This is in contrast to many other hotels that became stand alone for a few years with the changing times and bad periods and then renegotiated. We have remained with Holiday Inn and then Ramada and that transition happened overnight as well. When the Holiday Inn sign came down at 11:45, by midnight the new sign was put up—there was not a single day outside of an international brand. Brands help to maintain standards to an international level. We have rigid checks done by Ramada incognito, where the inspector checks in as a guest.

We had an audit recently and we faired very well, in comparison to the previous period prior to renovation. We achieved 86 percent, which is an excellent measure.

We must say though that Sri Lankans are very capable. They can manage and run hotels very well without outside help.

When speaking of success our staff is very important. Without proper staff and their satisfaction we would not be able to manage this hotel. Therefore, we are thankful to them for keeping our vision and mission going.

What are some of the advantages that Ramada can capitalise on?

Our prime location at the heart of the city is a clear advantage. This has been a tourist development area that was planned out in 1969. Every hotel is just a 100 metres away. And there are new hotels coming up in the vicinity. We are in close proximity to those developments that the government has planned. Furthermore, most conveniences such as restaurants and shopping areas are easily reachable.

Today Asia is the region where much focus is on development and investment. We must not forget the vision of the Government of increasing and achieving targets. The President's mission is to bring in 2.5 million tourists by 2016 and the industry is working towards that. We achieved 1.1 million in 2013. It is favourable that the government is spending ample money in the emerging markets. In two or three years we will be able to achieve our targets. We are thankful to the government for the emphasis laid on this sector.

Plans for the future.

We have been operating as a hotel company for the past 39 years, and while owning shares at this hotel we are thinking of moving into resorts and maybe to an apartment hotel concept. That is targeting those who wish to stay for longer periods. They can rent an apartment for a period of a month. We are looking for good locations and invite others who are willing to come on board to form a joint venture.

This company's financials are strong and we have a sound balance sheet. We have performed very well in 2013 and we are keen to face the future with the expansion programme that we have in mind.




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