

Service Is Number One



A veteran in the industry bringing experience from leading hotels across the globe, Denis Gruhier talks about his role as the General Manager of Cinnamon Lakeside Colombo. While sharing his views on the opportunity of tapping into the unique industry potential that Sri Lanka has yet to realise, he holds a steadfast view on the importance of delivering an unparalleled service, one that he believes can only be motivated by a passion to serve.

By Prasadini Nanayakkara | Photography Indika De Silva

Could you talk about some of your career highlights prior to your position at Cinnamon Lakeside as General Manager?

I began my career in France and I went around the world working primarily for Hilton International for a long time. I would say that opening the first Palazzo Versace in the world in the Gold Coast, Australia and to have been the General Manager of the Dusit Thani hotel in Bangkok in 1998 when we were ranked amongst the top ten best hotels in the world by the Business Traveller UK are the

highlights of my career. I am very proud of these achievements.

Thereafter I decided that I would prefer to work with smaller but more authentic companies like John Keells.

What motivated you to accept the appointment with John Keells at Cinnamon Lakeside?

Sri Lanka is an exceptional country in an opportune situation right now. It is a country that has just started to develop and move forward. From the economic or business and tourism viewpoints, these developments are of significant relevance to the field of hospitality, making way for unique opportunities. I am very proud to be a part of this adventure as I believe it is an opportunity of a lifetime.

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Moreover, I believe in the John Keells' vision. Indeed this is a company that has a tremendous vision, clear goals and objectives in their drive to help the country grow in numerous fields, one of them being the hospitality industry. We are positioning growth, looking at various aspects of the industry; for instance the city, countryside, beaches and wildlife.

After many years in the industry you reach a point where you also want to get something out of it and I believe that to be a part of this journey in Sri Lanka working for John Keells is a chance to both apply myself and have a rewarding experience as well which is fantastic.

What was your first impression of Cinnamon Lakeside?

First I must talk about Sri Lanka. I had heard much about the country from people who had come here on holiday or on work, but I had never visited myself. I had their viewpoint but no account of what I had heard did justice to what I have encountered here. There are some very specific and inherent qualities that you cannot really describe in words; for instance the warmth and the genuine nature of the people here. You hear that Sri Lankans are very nice people, but what does that really mean? Many are nice but are they genuine? Are they warm, friendly and caring with a desire to truly serve in the hospitality sector? The answer is yes

to all those questions. Sri Lankans are very much in that category and that is what first inspired and excited me when I came here.

Secondly and finally, there is Cinnamon Lakeside. My reaction to being invited to be General Manager of Cinnamon Lakeside can be compared to being asked to manage a hotel in the middle of Central Park in New York. Cinnamon Lakeside is in the middle of this great city with buildings but right by the side of the Beira Lake. Although in the heart of a busy city, it has its own serene and beautiful setting and you can go anywhere without any issue and return to its peaceful relaxation and re-energize. It is everything one can wish for after a hard day's work.

To me, it really is like a jewel that needs to be polished well. That is why I believe I can contribute towards bringing Cinnamon Lakeside to its rightful place in the city, and that is right at the top.

Based on your vast experience in the industry, in countries such as Australia, Malaysia and Thailand what potential do you see for Cinnamon Lakeside?

There is enormous potential. As I said the location of the hotel itself is very exceptional and overall the product as well. If you take a look at the hotel from the outside, no one can ever believe that it is 27 years old. The architecture is ageless. It doesn't appear to be an old hotel like other buildings might look after 15-20 years. It has some beautiful aspects with the pergolas that make it stand out. The best view that I love is from 8° on the lake, the floating venue. From the Beira Lake the view of the hotel is spectacular and it makes me feel very proud to be the General Manager here. It is truly a beautiful product.

Then if you consider the service, this is where I have more interaction and influence to develop further. When I first arrived I found a substantial team here that was very willing and excited, maybe not always armed with the right knowledge for a five star service. We are talking about an unparalleled service and that is where I can contribute with my experience with Palazzo Versace and Dusit Thani. I believe that I hold the ingredients to build the team to that level. They possess the motivation it is only a question of providing knowledge and practice.

I've been here nearly a year now and already we have seen the fruits of our

efforts. We had won the Best Five Star City Hotel Award from the Tourism Board and we just received the award for the Best Luxury Hotel in Sri Lanka at the Business Destinations 2012 Travel Awards. Now it is time for us to aim beyond the national awards, which are obviously very coveted, to the international arena and to be recognised in the global scene. This is still the beginning and realistically we still have work to do. It's not just about dreams. Right now these achievements show that we are on the right path and it is up to us to continue developing our products and services.

Similar to 8° on the lake we aim to give something extraordinary to our guests where people can enjoy their special occasions such as birthdays, weddings and other social events. Furthermore, at this special venue we have a public lunch every Sunday which has been so successful that guests have to book three weeks ahead. In the near future we hope to commence gourmet dinners where guests can enjoy food of a very high standard. It will offer a very specific experience and exceptional food. We have a French chef who has had experience working in Michelin starred restaurants and who can bring that quality here; in terms of presentation, texture and taste that people can truly enjoy. We will have that on a regular basis at the boat venue in the evenings where guests can indulge in a memorable dining experience.

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What is your strategy for Cinnamon Lakeside and what changes have you brought so far?

Service for a hotel is not about standards and procedures that you establish. Every company can have exceptional standards no doubt. There may be a few differences but they all come from one place. The little touches you make create the differences. To have standards and personalise them is easy but teaching them to your team is where the difficulty lies. When we talk about unparalleled service it is not simply the full application of standards. It's quite like an orchestra where the conductor is there to ensure that every instrument is played in tune and coordinated. The music may be good but it is not fantastic - not yet. It is only when you start to feel the music that it can impress.

Service is much the same. Many can apply standards and procedures but are they done with warmth and care? When the guests begin to experience that from the service people of the hotel that is when you know that you are providing something exceptional. This is my goal for Cinnamon Lakeside. To go beyond the obvious that 90 percent of effort can accomplish. You set yourself apart with the last ten percent. It is when the guests come in and know that this is where they want to be and are able to feel at home. When I was at Dusit Thani, and entered the top ten in the world, people wanted to know what set us apart. It is an old hotel and not in the best location. But what makes a hotel the best? It is when you walk in at the reception and they know your name and that you have come before. The view may be able to impress the first time but not for the fifth time. What matters is the service and knowing specific wants and needs much like receiving your family at your house. We offer services without asking. This is what I want to create for this property.

Aside from the enhanced services we hope to create more products like 8° on the lake, which is an excellent example of what we want to do. We have also implemented for the first time not only in Sri Lanka but in South East Asia a trolley-less housekeeping service. When guests walk in our corridors they will no longer see trolleys with dirty linen and so on, instead it will always be clean uncluttered corridors and floors at all times. This is possible with the substitution of the trolleys with an aesthetically pleasing basket system. This is the kind of innovation that we want for our level of service where guests can feel special, and that we care about them. To have guests walk around trolleys - that to me is not five star. That is why we needed the new system.

Then there is the new check-in system for the Executive Floor where guests do not have to check in at the reception they are escorted straight to their rooms and checked in with a wireless tablet and credit card reader. As soon as the guests arrive they can relax. The surroundings have been made to exude a feeling of warmth with no computers or machines but instead flowers or fruits placed on the table. Those are the little things that people appreciate. It is all about the guest experience - you are no longer in a hotel, it is your own home, your salon, your dining room and bedroom. If you can give guests that feeling I believe they will always return. It is about understanding your guest, beyond simple wants and needs and knowing when privacy is needed, providing a discreet service; that makes all the difference. This is what our service is all about. When you

understand that you can deliver it. It really is a passion, and without passion you cannot be in the hospitality service. That is very powerful.

What do you see as some of the challenges that need to be overcome in reaching these goals that you have in mind?

These are the challenges that are inherent not just to Cinnamon Lakeside but to the country. It is a new beginning and there is much to be discovered. We are going through growing pains. The public and private sector must come together and promote the country in the right way while ensuring that everything is in place. Then when people come here for the first time they leave with a lasting impression saying 'I want to come back to Sri Lanka'. When they go back to their countries they will further promote it when they talk positively or recommend a place to their friends. That is very important.

It Is A New Beginning And There Is Much To Be Discovered. We Are Going Through Growing Pains. We Must Have The Public And Private Sector Come Together And Promote The Country...

With regards to Cinnamon Lakeside and hotels of John Keells Group the service aspect is improving rapidly. Service is not something I negotiate with. It is of utmost importance. You must ensure that professional hospitality overrides quick profit making. Hopefully like John Keells, others in the industry can support this direction and enable a professional hospitality that people will remember. Guests do not mind paying, that is not the issue but they do not want to be taken for a ride. If they receive the quality they expect for the price they pay there is no issue whatsoever. That is what we must develop in this country right now.

What segment of tourists does Cinnamon Lakeside cater to?

Due to our location, we are more interested in the corporate sector that represents approximately 60 percent of our business as of now. What is interesting is that corporate guests travel often and have experienced services of top hotels of other destinations such as Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, New York or Tokyo. Thus they are quick to compare and that is a challenge. We have to be able to deliver on what we claim to be five star as these guests are very familiar with what five star is about. Again it is not a question of price, as a five star hotel in any major city is going to cost more. The trick is that you have to deliver.

The tendency is that what you cannot provide in service you give back in room rate drops. Each company chooses what it wants to do. I have made my choice and we are on the same page on this - service is number one. That is what we are about. That is what John Keells is about. You can visit any of our hotels and find that this is so.

Could you talk about some of the management principles you follow?

Whatever the principles one may have I find that, those are refined everyday of your life, with every new job you take. You polish them and improve upon them. But mine is very clear. It's passion. And I do believe everyone in my team should have that. I have this attitude where I find pleasure in serving other people. And everyone must be a part of these solutions and the innovations that you are offering. They must all participate towards the overall growth of the hotel. It is not just about being the boss and giving directives. If you don't communicate beyond this they will not do anything beyond that either. It is really a question of building people, instilling passion and sharing their experience so that they feel that they are consulted, and are part of the life of the hotel. That is how the hotel grows.

All too often we forget that it is the staff who have contact with the guests and would know what the guests want. These employees are not always in the higher positions in fact it's the opposite - the higher your position the more distant you become from the guests. If you forget to communicate with your employees who have guest contact it will not work anymore. That pyramid structure has to be crushed. This is like a family, a big family with 850 members but that is fine, it can be done, it has been done and I am proud of that.

We also concentrate a strong focus on developing tomorrow's leaders. This is where the sustainability of our business lies. We achieve this through a robust succession planning system that we have in place.

What are your thoughts on the direction that Sri Lanka should take in moving forward in the industry?

It is a complicated issue as there are many factors involved. Is there a right direction? This is what I am always asking myself. I have worked in Asia for 15 years and I was in Thailand for some time. When Thailand progressed I was in Phuket and when Phuket developed I was in Samui, which too developed but in a

different way. And, it was very interesting to compare. There are principles that have to be respected and with that in mind I must question if there is a right way and I am not so sure. I think it is up to Sri Lanka to decide. First of all, what category of guests do you want to attract into this country? From there it must be decided what needs to be done to attract people to the country.

I believe development has to be channeled properly and cautiously. Once your position has been made it is very difficult to change. Therefore it is crucial to make sure that we get the right people paying the right price in the right areas. Controlling development doesn't mean we stop building but having strict guidelines that respect the country, its values and assets.

One of the massive advantages that Sri Lanka has is that it is an unspoilt country. Please keep it that way. That is the future of Sri Lanka. Everybody else is building too much with little regard to nature. Although there is talk about it, nothing is being done. If this country can be green certified compelling everyone else to respect it as it is with the richness that it has in terms of nature and cultural assets, then Sri Lanka will really be able to market itself well. Sri Lanka has some beautiful beaches but you get them elsewhere as well. However, not everyone has the wildlife, culture or people you find here. What is more you cannot find this diversity in such a small space anywhere else where you can move from one to another so quickly. That is why Sri Lanka has got it all - it is a question of how we develop and utilise this.

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Final thoughts?

I am going to come back to the beginning by saying that it has been a year since I have been here and if anything my enthusiasm to be in Sri Lanka has grown. I have seen what we have been able to achieve at Cinnamon Lakeside, growing from being a relatively good five star hotel to now a prominent five star hotel in the city and in the country.

It is also about being a part of a company that is looking positively towards the future, taking the right steps with the right vision to help develop the country. John Keells offers hotels of top quality products and services. The arrivals to our

hotels is another sign of our success and we are very proud of that.

We will continue to help develop tourism in the right way by offering exactly what people expect while respecting the many assets that are there in this country. That I believe is crucial.



