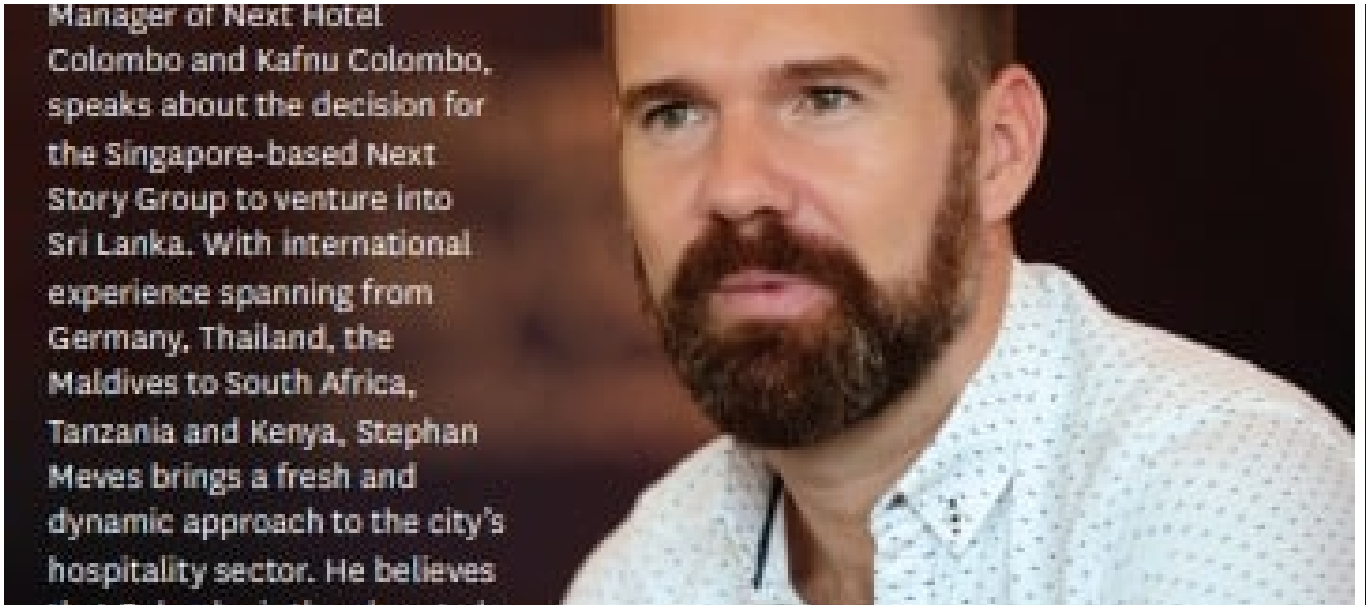

Manager of Next Hotel
Colombo and Kafnu Colombo,
speaks about the decision for
the Singapore-based Next
Story Group to venture into
Sri Lanka. With international
experience spanning from
Germany, Thailand, the
Maldives to South Africa,
Tanzania and Kenya, Stephan
Meves brings a fresh and
dynamic approach to the city's
hospitality sector. He believes

WE CAN DO IT!



Stephan Meves, General Manager, Next Hotel Colombo.

Why did next Story Group decide to come here, to Sri Lanka?

Next Story Group currently owns, manages and franchises 37 hotels in Australia, Thailand and Laos which bear the brands that includes Next, Sage and LinQ. It also manages five Kafnu properties in Hong Kong, Taipei, Bengaluru, Sydney and Ho Chi Minh City, which offer the best elements of a boutique hotel, shared workspace and a social community. With a portfolio that is primarily in Australia, the Group is keen to grow its footprint in South Asia and South East Asia, especially in emerging markets such as Sri Lanka. We have great confidence in the Sri Lankan market and we know that its resilience will help put the country back onto the list of Asia Pacific's top 5 destinations. In addition, Sri Lanka has a lot to offer to tourists with its fascinating culture, stunning flora and fauna and exciting activities. We are

excited about Colombo where we will open our first Next hotel outside of Australia. It will also be the first Next hotel to incorporate a Kafnu space. We are deeply committed to Sri Lanka and we look forward to growing in tandem with the country and support its national agenda on tourism.

What about the location?

Next Hotel Colombo is perfectly located, in the iconic Colombo City Centre, a premier lifestyle destination in Sri Lanka that is a result of a joint venture between Next Story Group and Abans. The hotel provides guests with direct access to its upscale mall. Guests staying with us will have breath-taking views of the city and the Indian Ocean. Our restaurant also offers views of the Bere Lake and Seema Malakaya. We have the major sites in the neighborhood which means you can simply walk everywhere including the National Art Gallery, the National Museum, Town Hall and Galle Face Green ocean[1]side park. One of the most prominent temples, the Gangaramaya Temple and the beautiful Seema Malakaya are situated right at our doorstep. It is a must visit place in Sri Lanka. The temple organ[1]izes the annual perahera which is very popular with visitors.

What is your target market?

In terms of international arrivals to Sri Lanka, our focus will predominantly be on the leisure market. There is a growing number of business travelers coming into the country which will ap[1]preciate Next Hotel’s business facilities and ser vices. Looking at the domestic market, we will be focusing on the corporate segment for the hotel. With our Kafnu brand, we hope to attract the next generation of creators and entrepreneurs who seek to co-create and collaborate with like-minded individuals.

> **We Are Deeply Committed To Sri Lanka And We Look Forward To Growing In Tandem With The Country And Support Its National Agenda On Tourism.**

can you elaborate on the international experi[1]ences that the group will bring into Sri Lanka? What are the synergies?

We have a strong team of very experienced hospitality specialists from all over the world. They bring with them knowledge and expertise in their respective fields from

sales and market[1]ing, brand management, to human resource, fi[1]nance, IT and operations. Next Story Group has an effective global infrastructural support to ensure that the hotels we manage are successful. This will complement the local team who has a deep understanding of the Colombo market and its local nuances. I have worked in different countries around the world and I recognize some similarities between Kenya and Sri Lanka. While they are more focused on local and national happenings, they are also very open to new ideas. I believe that Sri Lanka and especially Colombo is venturing into a new era and the people in the hospitality sector are beginning to be open to new experiences. Everyone is craving for novelty, inspiring designs and great places to go to. We want to introduce a very stylish, trendy and a young brand to the country. Hopefully this will get people more excited about Colombo being a great place to be.

What is next Hotel colombo planning to do here, in Sri Lanka?

Sri Lanka can expect a very vibrant, contem[1]porary and welcoming space in Colombo. Guests will arrive at the hotel on Mutthia Road and take the elevator to the ninth floor where the lobby is. A long corridor will showcase a large selection of art by Sri Lankan artists, whom we are very sup[1]portive of and would like to provide with exposure. Each room corridor will also feature different art pieces. Our main restaurant “Nava” will also be on the ninth floor with views of the Bere Lake, the city and the Indian Ocean. Our Food & Beverage concept is quite unique to Colombo and will cater for any palate with seasonal and local produce and various themed days and weeks. Something to really look forward to!

As a special and a quite unique feature we will be offering sleeping pods. The sleeping pods are complimentary for our guests to use for a few hours to rest. This is ideal for pre-arrival and post-departure in case their flight is departing after check-out time or if they arrive early. Guests will be able to start or continue to enjoy all fa[1]cilities of the hotel. We will also have a fully equipped gymnasium and a yoga room offering yoga classes. We will have an outdoor deck with the swimming pool.

I am personally very excited about our Kafnu brand. It is an urban village, where like-minded people get together to exchange and to create, to start a journey together, driven by creativity and connection in order to thrive. We have named it after a small village in the Himalayas where peo[1]ple get together to prepare for their climb up the mountain. It is a meeting point. It is a starting point. It is a community. A Kafnu member could be anyone: an entre[1]preneur to CEO or simply

someone who wants to connect with other individuals with shared passions and interests. What they all should have in common is the yearning for more. Kafnu provides the plat[1]form for them to meet and to start to collaborate and co-create. Kafnu Colombo would be the new[1]est addition to their network in Asia Pacific.

What about the available human resources for the hotel?

It is challenging but promising. In the past, many qualified Sri Lankans went overseas for employment. They went to Dubai, Doha, Maldives, Europe, UK and such other countries to join large hotel chains. They have gained knowledge and experience and would love to come back home. That is a great opportunity for us because we need people with international exposure as the country seeks to grow its tourism industry. Many of them with overseas experience will have the opportu[1]nity to share their experience and knowledge with others who did not have the opportunity. We are also recruiting local Sri Lankans at various levels and are providing training to those who are keen to develop a career in hospitality. Sri Lankans are very friendly and warm in their approach. Sometimes they are a little re[1]served. But you have to get to know the people and the culture. You have to identify the chal[1]lenges and work together to resolve them. We have to understand what we want to deliver, to the country, the business, our guests and ourselves.

> **We Believe In The Resilience Of This Country And Are Confident That It Will Overcome Its Challenges. We Are Invested In Sri Lanka And Are Committed To Growing Its Tourism Agenda.**

Sri Lanka faced a major setback recently. are you, confident about Sri Lanka?

I have lived in countries that have faced chal[1]lenges such as terrorist attacks, health threats and natural disasters. But people learn to deal with it. We also know that terrorism is an international problem and people need to understand that there will always be the fear of the unknown, but if we only fear and hide, we will never be able to expe[1]rience life. We need to live. My experience in Kenya for instance was that after every incident we had, it took many months to return to nor[1]malcy. Sri Lanka already is in the process of re[1]covery. People must simply say no, we will not accept this! We want to travel, and we want to be free. We need to work

together to recover from such incidents and stay vigilant. We believe in the resilience of this country and are confident that it will overcome its challenges. We are invested in Sri Lanka and are committed to growing its tourism agenda.

What more needs to be done in the tourism sector in Sri Lanka?

I have been in Sri Lanka for only six months now and I am exploring as much as possible. It is very easy to access information on where to go and what to do. The island has many beautiful areas and is full of flora and fauna. We need to do a better job at managing our tourist attractions as part of our commitment to sustainable tourism. The long queue to climb Lion Rock at Sigiriya can take away the beauty of the sight. Luckily our hotel employees suggested that I climb Pidurangala instead, which is less crowd[1]ed and provides beautiful and better views until after sunset and I had the chance to visit the adjacent temple as well. I have lived in Africa for many years, and,when you leave your house, within 30 minutes you are surrounded by giraffes, elephants, lions and various other animals and you learn how to re[1]spect nature. The promotional video that had been done on Minneriya National Park was fan[1]tastic but when you go there, all you see and hear are noisy jeeps, hundreds of them. There is no control. We should consider access control in the national parks and major sights so that these treasures can be preserved and well maintained for more to enjoy.

Sri Lanka has much to offer to visitors. We have a rich culture, diverse food, different eth[1]nicities and communities that generate great We believe in the resilience of this country and are confident that it will overcome its challenges. We are invested in Sri Lanka and are committed to growing its tourism agenda. businesstoday.lk JULY 2019 BUSINESS TODAY 97 interest. There are beautiful sacred places across the country, with colorful history and wonderful nature of all kinds. The road system in Sri Lanka is really very good, even the farthest corner is accessible on tarmac roads, and they are nice and clean. There is so much here, so let us promote what we have.

Can you tell us about your career?

I am 40 years old now, and I was born in former East Germany, which is a country that basically no longer exists. I was brought up in a small city, one hour from Berlin. As a child of about six years my parents used to take me on holiday every year to the mountains and we stayed in a small holiday resort. I made friends with the head waitress there. I always wanted to help to set the tables and help around

the restaurant. That is when it all started. After completing my education which in[1]cluded a Hotel Management School in Germany, at the age of 18 I moved to West Germany. I started my career in sales and marketing for hotels because I heard that it would be the fastest way to reach General Management level. I worked very hard. I worked a few years in Cologne and then moved to Berlin. My first overseas assign[1]ment was with Anantara Hotels and Resorts. I opened the first of their M-Collection properties in Maldives known as Naladhu, which is a six-star property and was their second hotel outside of Thailand back then.

From there I went to South Africa for several years and later moved to Kenya. I spent nine years in Kenya and a big part of my heart is still there. I worked for Elewana Afrika in Kenya and in Tanzania for many years, which are also part of the M-Collection and later built my own 5-star boutique hotel in Diani Beach, which is south of Mombasa. I was then asked to manage a larger design hotel in Nairobi which I did for three and a half years. And now, I am here in Sri Lanka.

You have a very different outlook. Can you tell us about your management style?

I believe in people! I also believe that my employees and my team always come first. It is a very simple rule, if you make your employees happy, they will make your guests happy. If the guests are happy then everyone is happy because happy guests will return and ensure healthy profits and job security. You really need to focus on your team.

> **…Always Ask Yourself, How You Can Make A Difference In A World That Has Everything. The Answer Is Simple: By Listening To The People…We Provide Novel Experiences, And We Welcome Everyone Also Here To The Next Hotel Colombo.**

When you are at the helm of an organization, you must show your employees where you began. I started by cleaning rooms and working at the bar. I have done everything that I am expecting from my team. I still work with them and we clean rooms together. I stand behind the bar if it is needed. I am always there. I never have a closed door, my office is always open for everyone, housekeepers, gardeners, managers, they can always come and meet me. Guests of course as well! It is only normal that guests have expectations, but you must never over

promise and always ask yourself, how you can make a difference in a world that has everything. The answer is simple: by listening to the people!

In general, I appreciate and recognize indi[1]viduality. We do not want everyone to be the same and be pushed into uniformity. We want our staff to be themselves because when they are comfort[1]able, they also do well at work. Your clothing, your hair and other preferences indicate who you are. When guests walk in, they are amazed how you can combine your personality with professional[1]ism. It is a great combination. Throughout my career I was always allowed to be myself. I worked in sales for a long time and I made sales because I was me and I was interested in the others. What is your need? What can I give you? We just be who we are and I think that is what brought us the biggest business. If you go too much by the book, people will get bored of it. If you build personal relationships, if you are honest even if you failed someone, and if you do not give any false promises, people will always return. There is a market for everything and there is a different approach for everything. Next Story Group reflects my personality, that is why we are a great match. We are very creative yet professional and organized in our approach. We provide novel experiences, and we welcome everyone also here to the Next Hotel Colombo.

Can you tell us the future plans for your brands?

We hope to establish a deeper presence across Asia Pacific with our key brands – Next, Sage, LinQ and Kafnu. Our focus will continue to expand our portfolio in this fast-growing region and to create thriving communities and deliver memorable experiences for our guests. Right now, we are very focused on opening Next Hotel Colombo and Kafnu Colombo and make them successful and draw more international visitors to Sri Lanka. Look out for our opening at the end of 2019!