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Saturday April 5, 2008

From humble lotus to a prized bloom

THAI TAKES
By PHILIP GOLINGAI

Turning hospitality management concepts upside down, hotelier Deepak Ohri turned a struggling Bangkok hotel into a five-star luxury brand.

WHEN hotelier Deepak Ohri told his management team that he would turn a struggling Bangkok hotel into a five-star luxury accommodation, they laughed at him.

“They thought that Khun Deepak (Mr Deepak) had gone mad,” recalls the 40-year-old CEO.

“At that time our hotel rate was cheaper than Holiday Inn Silom’s, which was charging about US\$60 a room, and I was telling them that in two years we would be charging US\$200 a room.”

That morning – 9.45am on Feb 1, 2006 – Deepak’s team took over a Meritus-managed hotel and rebranded it as lebua at State Tower Hotel.

And without any modification – except for changing the mattresses to Sealy Spring, the pillows and duvets to 80% goosedown, bedsheets to 330 thread count Egyptian cotton, and using Bvlgari bathroom amenities in all suites – lebua increased its rack rate from 2,400 baht to 4,200 baht (RM242 to RM423).

Immediately following the price rise, the hotel’s occupancy fell by 20%.

But lebua persevered and nine months later won its first of many awards – Business Asia Magazine/CNBC Asia Pacific’s 2006 Best Business Hotels in Asia Awards on “Best New Hotel”.



Personal faith: Deepak believes lebua will one day become Bangkok's most iconic hotel.

In February 2007, the hotel made international headlines when it hosted a one-million-baht (RM100,900) per head dinner that included *creme brulee* of *foie gras* washed down with a bottle of 1990 Cristal champagne.

Now, the room rate of the Thai-owned hotel – its interior refurbished – starts at 10,240 baht (RM1,033). And recently TripAdvisor ranked it number six in the Top 10 Best Luxury Hotels in Asia list and number 47 in the world's Top 100 Luxury Hotels list.

How did lebua metamorphose from a struggling hotel to a high-end luxury accommodation?

“We created a concept where when a man intends to buy a Bvlgari necklace for his girlfriend, he and his girlfriend will think twice; whether buying it will bring them more satisfaction than staying in lebua,” explains Deepak, lebua's chief executive officer.

How does lebua create a hotel stay that is more satisfying than a Bvlgari necklace?

One way for the hotel, which has a 45% guest return rate, is to acknowledge that the customer always comes first.

“We had a guest who checked in at 3am and he called the concierge to order Maine lobster with spaghetti. At that time our restaurants offering fresh lobsters were closed, so the concierge called a chef who had gone home,” relates the rapid-talking CEO.

“The chef returned, opened the kitchen and prepared the dish and it was ready at 4am. The guest was so delighted that he left a US\$400 tip.”

The 65-storey luxury hotel's success is also due to its non-textbook management style. In fact, Deepak proudly reveals, the creation of lebua was completely the reverse.

"Usually, a hotel's F&B (food and beverage) business is created out of the hotel brand. What we did was create a hotel from our F&B business," he explains.

He is referring to The Dome, located on the top floors of the State Tower (one of Thailand's tallest buildings), which opened in 2003. Its breathtaking dining concept includes Sirocco, the world's highest *al fresco* restaurant.

The success of The Dome inspired the State Tower owner to take a leap of faith and replace Meritus, which was managing its hotel, with its own brand – lebua (which means "the lotus").

In early 2009, the hotel will implement another of its non-textbook ideas – a behavioural pattern software (similar to that used by the US armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan).

"Just say you like oranges, and when you come to our hotel we give you an orange. But what is the big deal, as at home your servant knows that you love oranges and will give you one?" Deepak asks.

"We will input your likings – such as you like oranges, your style of dressing – into the software and it will predict that you also like almond. And when you check into your room you will find almond and you will say 'wow!'"

The hotelier believes by mid 2009, lebua will be the city's most iconic hotel.

"People will say don't leave Bangkok without visiting lebua," predicts Deepak, with a grin which says that it's not a laughing matter.

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