

HOSPITALITY

Photo courtesy: Outrigger Mauritius Beach Resort



TAKING BABY STEPS

Outrigger Mauritius Beach Resort opened its doors last year in April, and we catch up with General Manager Pieter Van der Hoeven who talks us about the hotel's potential to reach higher levels despite challenges

ASHNA DABEE
ashna.d@expattimes.mu

Tourism is undoubtedly a major contributor to the island's economy and overall development; and for its part, has itself undergone tremendous progress especially through the hospitality sector. Outrigger Mauritius Beach Resort had opened in April 2014 and has completed its one year of operation recently some two months back.

"It's been interesting," says Pieter Van der Hoeven, General Manager of Outrigger Mauritius Beach Resort, in regards to the hotel's first year on the island. "I think that now we understand the market and even Bel Ombre as a destination. It's just growing and growing constantly. We had a year better than we expected."

Nevertheless, while Van der Hoeven shows satisfaction on

the progress of Outrigger on the island, at the same time is practical in his expectations, considering that the resort is still the newbie on the grounds. "The initial response was as we expected. We are in the place and we understand that it takes time to get where we need to be but that's okay. We have not even operated for long," he avers, confident about the direction the resort has taken. Outrigger, he shares, is very conventional in its approach in the sense that when the company invests in real estate, it tends to be for the long term. "We were not looking to run seventy percent in the first year," he continues, "We were looking to position ourselves as the premiere beachfront property in this region and I think we have achieved that goal. Financially it was as we expected that year. We have not seen any big bumps in the Mauritian trading environment except per-

haps for Russia that has been trading down a bit. Otherwise it is where we see ourselves."

The only setback the beach resort had encountered came in the guise of a flood in March. "The hotel was closed briefly because of some flash flooding in this area. Apart from that it has pretty much gone according to plan. We are growing and getting better, so we are excited about the years to come." He reassures, clearly optimistic towards the future of Outrigger Mauritius on the south-east coast.

The resort, for that matter, has been able to reach 50 percent occupancy in their beginner year, a commendable thing for a newly introduced brand; which has to compete with several well established and successful hotels and resorts on the island. "We positioned our rates so that we are competing with hotels such as the Westin and Sofitel," he avers.

It was not on a whim that Mauritius was chosen as the destination for one of the Outrigger Beach resorts. In fact, the island was strategically chosen after considerable research and analysis of the market as well as per availability. Considering that the Outrigger Enterprises Group already owned a significant portion of the hotel business in Hawaii, the company realized it was finally time to expand their horizons and risk the outside world. "About nine years ago, Outrigger worked with a company to do a study of where we should expand," Van der Hoeven explains. "So, we chose about 11 to 12 destinations that we wanted to operate in." The list made ought to match the different criteria required for the Outrigger brand. "We always must be absolute beachfront and we had to be in iconic destinations and we wanted to own our hotels eventually in those destinations," he avers.

"Mauritius, Maldives, Seychelles, Thailand, Phuket, Malaysia, Philippines, Australia were among what we selected. Then we started looking for what was for sale and this one was for sale some four years ago. It fit our requirements since it was a destination we had identified and we wanted to be in and the hotel had absolute beachfront, which is a criterion for outrigger."

Having access to the beach



An outside view of the resort's Plantation Club



Pieter Van der Hoeven

was an imperative factor for the resort brand, a fact that the general manager emphasises on. "Every Outrigger has to be on the beach. No road in between. It has to be on the beach, that's our strategy."

"So, this one came to sale, and here we are." As simple as that. Outrigger Resorts is a Hawaii based, family run business with a story that has started some 67 years ago during the Second World War: It was founded by Roy and Estelle Kelley. The idea to run a hotel occurred to Roy after he reached Hawaii and saw the number of aeroplanes that were going to and fro the state because of the war.

quick takes

CURRENT CEO OF INTERNATIONAL GROUP: David Carey

NO OF HOTELS WORLDWIDE: 41

COUNTRIES PRESENT IN: 8

TOTAL NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES IN MAURITIUS: 328

YOUR FIRST JOB, FIRST SALARY: Pot washer, \$3 an hour

BEST THING ABOUT YOUR JOB: The opportunity to meet so many people, the different cultures.

ALTERNATE CAREER: I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

"Previously, Hawaii had just been a cruise ship destination and all the luxury hotels were only servicing the cruise ships when they stopped over," Van der Hoeven narrates. However, Kelley saw the possibilities of this changing and foresaw the great potential of Hawaii as a destination for mass tourism, especially with the promises of flights coming to the island. As a matter of fact, the island started gaining recognition and people became more aware of the state and what it could offer as vacation spot, as correctly estimated by Kelley. Being an architect and entrepreneur of Irish background, the 'father of mass tourism', as Kelley tagged, designed and made a reality of what was the first deluxe hotel in the state, says the Mauritius branch General Manager.

Now, the privately owned company is into the third generation of the company and the current CEO is the son-in-law of the previous chairman, Richard Kelley. There are currently 26 hotels in Hawaii and 2 in Waikiki under the Outrigger name and the rest run by Outrigger's secondary brands. Seven hotels in Waikiki are beachfront.

The Outrigger Resort in Mauritius consists of 181 rooms of six different categories and each one offering sea views or absolute beach

frontage. It features four swimming pools and three restaurants that cater for all tastes from Asian to International and fine dining with a relaxed dress code at all the dining outlets. The main restaurant, Mercado is an interactive area with the hustle and bustle of an international food market concept offering different cuisines.

The club, designed in a French colonial style even houses a tea library that tales the story of the island's tea culture. There is also a supervised kids club that offers spa treatment for kids. The Navasana Spa, for adults, is an 1800 sq. meters relaxation area with a Jacuzzi, hammam, sauna and solarium offering different spa treatments Jeeten, the assistant spa manager and professional spa treatment master. The initial investment for the hotel had amounted to over 60 million dollars including the purchase and refurbishment costs. The Outrigger brand also offers what it refers to as the 'authentic Outrigger hospitality'. "We come from an island... We have a Hawaiian mentality to hospitality which is to welcome someone to your home and to a unique place and we understand that. That's what we are trying to offer here. We came here and learnt from the Mauritian team on what is the authentic

HOSPITALITY



Mauritian hospitality," explains Van der Hoeven. He says that it is an initiative which is different and takes effort but which works.

According to him, it is important to maintain the sense of the place despite being a global company. "We are very much about bringing our hospitality experience but maintaining the Mauritian style of experience for the guests. In everything we do, we try and make it a Mauritian experience," he elaborates.

Another fact is that Outrigger is "a pure beach resort company. So our service is based on people relaxing. We also understand that you are on holiday, it's your money. That's an emotive decision. We make sure that we give them the very best tariff and work truly hard," he says.

Among the challenges met by the hospitality in general, he believes that more flights should reach the island but he is optimistic regarding the matter. "We have new flights coming from Germany, more with Emirates from Dubai. So we see that the government is definitely working hard to bring the tourists here."

Mauritius's biggest competition as a destination is the Maldives, says Van der Hoeven and thus, Mauritius has to make people see it has more potential. He may have been appointed as the General Manager for Outrigger Mauritius Beach Resort in January 2015, but his journey with the Hawaii-based Outrigger Enterprises Group goes a long way back till 2008.



Van der Hoeven had first started as the General Manager at Outrigger Hotels and Resorts during the chain of resorts first foray in Asia. "I joined Outrigger when they first started their expansion out of Hawaii and my boss is someone I had worked with for ten years previously in another hotel. So I joined as general manager for Thailand hotels that they were opening." Following this, he moved on to shouldering different other roles within the Outrigger brand till he became the Vice President of Sales and Marketing, Asia Pacific for Outrigger Asia Limited, a role which led to his first trip to Mauritius. "Actually I was here, as part of the team that purchased the hotel," he shares. "I fell in love with Mauritius when I first came here for my first visit." Something that would come in handy some time later.

As it is, being a father of three, he realised that his post as the Vice President of Sales and Marketing was keeping him too busy and he was missing out on a lot on his kids'

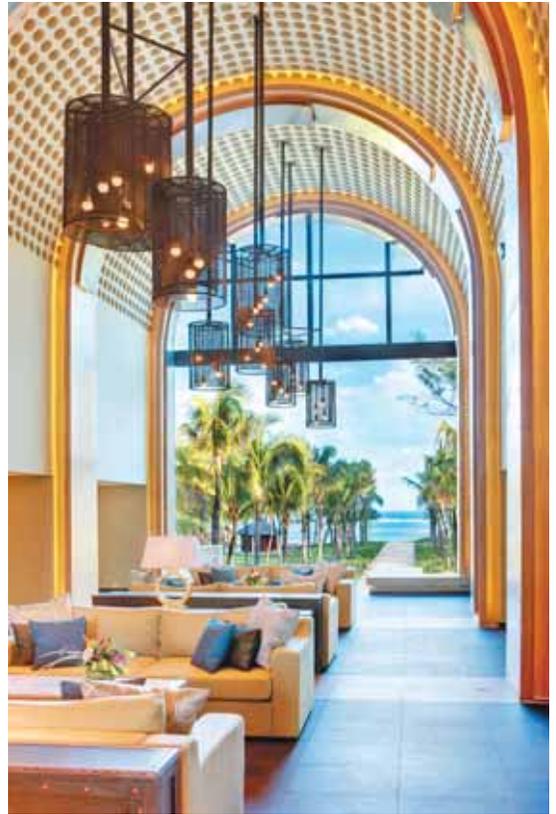
About OZONE

OZONE (Outrigger Zone), is a global conservation initiative centred on protecting the health of coral reefs and the oceans surrounding the iconic beach destinations of Outrigger Resorts. In Mauritius, Outrigger signed on June 3 a MoU with the NGO Reef Conservation and on Monday June 8, for World Oceans Day, we organized with them a beach cleaning session in Riviere des Galets (with the help of a local school) along with education sessions to raise awareness on those issues."

Current rates:
Rs 7,500 Deluxe Seaview Room

Rs 8,800 Deluxe Family Seaview Room (up to 2 children under 17)

Rs 8,500 Beachfront Room



childhood, a matter he wanted to rectify. "I was travelling a lot. I have three children. I was travelling about 200 days a year. I did not want to miss the growing up of my children and there was not a General Manager job post available in Outrigger at the time, so I went to work with Raffles, a beautiful hotel company in Cambodia," he explains about his decision to leave Outrigger and shift to somewhere else in search of more stability.

So be it, after the brief hiatus outside the Outrigger realm, when the slot was available for the general manager post, he was remembered as the appropriate candidate.

"The general manager here wanted to move to something else and since the company knew I loved Mauritius and wanted to be General Manager...here I am!" He laughs. "This is because my father was an hotelier," he explains. "I was born into this industry. I grew up within hotels, and loved it. I could not have it any other way." Thanks to his father's profession, the general manager of Outrigger

Mauritius Beach Resort was able to travel to a few countries. However, despite his passion for the hospitality sector, this did not end up as his course of choice at university.

"My father was a wise man. When I got to University and I have been working in hotels since I was 15- he told me, "Don't do hotels at university" since I had grown within that," he puts forth, reminiscing of the important piece of advice shared to him by his father.

Darren Edmonstone, Outrigger MD, Asia Pacific, on Van der Hoeven's appointment as general manager had stated that his role would be to "make the Outrigger Mauritius Beach Resort one of the most popular and sought after beachfront resorts, not just in Mauritius but the whole Indian Ocean," and Van der Hoeven plans to do just that.

Six months within his role as the head of the resort in Mauritius, he has a clear head about what is ought to be done to reach that level, which is to provide guests with innovative and unique concepts. ■