

LUXURY**A CHAT WITH THE CHIEFS OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST CHAIN OF HOTELS — BEST WESTERN**

Pictures by Anindya Shankar Ray



Yes, we do have one in town — Vedic Village Spa Resort is in a marketing and technical alliance with Best Western International. A t2 chat with CEO David Kong (picture below) at Vedic Village...

You brought in some of the industry's firsts like online booking and virtual tours on your website. What are the hospitality trends that India needs to look at?

I think social media is a trend that's going to continue at a very reckless pace... just like in China, India's going to have its social networking clients. It's an area that anyone in our business should pay attention to. Also, the loyalty programme is gaining popularity in Asia — it's already very big in Europe and North America and over time, it will be in India. Also, booking channels not just on the Internet but mobile devices — Best Western has been a pioneer in that area. So we can help the hotels here to enable mobile booking.

Best Western is the world's largest hotel chain. How do you stay Number One?

(Laughs.) Well, we've been around a long time. We have a strong presence in North America, which is a mature market, and we're very excited about Asia and South America and even Africa. We have different development strategies for different parts of the world — in some it is to grow in quality, in others quantity.

What is it in India?

Quantity (pauses) and quality. But you know, you look at a hotel like this (Vedic) and you just get so excited.

How many hotels are you looking at in India?

We set a goal to have a hundred hotels here by 2017. And that's a very aggressive plan. Because we have only... I say only but we have 26 hotels that are open. And we have eight that are signed and in construction. In many ways, it reflects the trust we have in this country's future opportunities.

What kind of strategy works where?

A lot of it is driven by econom-

"WHEN ABHISHEK AND AISHWARYA BACHCHAN STAYED WITH US IN 2009, WE REALISED WE NEEDED A ROOM WITH TWO BATHROOMS SO THEY COULD GET READY FOR THE MORNING SHOOT. SO WE INTRODUCED THE ZAMINDAR SUITE (PICTURE ABOVE) JUST IN TIME FOR JULIA ROBERTS (INSET), WHO THEN CHANGED HER PLANS AND DIDN'T SHOOT FOR EAT, PRAY, LOVE IN CALCUTTA. SOON AFTER, IN 2011, AAMIR AND KIRAN STAYED HERE FOR A DAY THEY WERE VERY IMPRESSED WITH THE PLACE!"

— MICHAEL ROBERTSON, CEO, VEDIC VILLAGE SPA RESORT



ics, supply-demand and a growth in commerce. We just broke ground, a couple of weeks ago, in two hotels in Iraq. And you think, 'Iraq! I mean that's a war zone. Why would you open a hotel in Iraq?' The reason is there's a huge influx of foreign investment, real estate is booming and there's a tremendous shortage of hotels.

How does the loyalty programme work?

The primary reason to join the programme is to earn free nights. And what we've done, for example in North America, is also offer different redemption options like gift cards for merchandise. More importantly, if you think about why so many companies are getting into the game, it's because they understand that with a loyalty programme, they're creating a database. The airlines have really perfected it. So we know your staying behaviour, the locations you go to, how many nights you stay, what kind of rate you pay.

Sudhir Sinha, president & COO of Best Western India, on plans closer home...

A brief background to the alliance with Best Western Premier Vedic Village Spa Resort...

That was around two years ago and Vedic Village had just completed their next phase of construction. It had everything we were looking for in a premier hotel. After we came in, there has been a 20-25 per cent increase in the number of foreign clientele coming here, especially from Europe and Southeast Asia.

Was the arson attack a window to step in?

No, I don't think we used that as a window. In fact, we had already tied up before the incident happened. We gave them the confidence. We gave them enough time to breathe through the whole thing and that's what made our relationship strong.

What were the goals you had set? How much have you achieved so far?

I think we've achieved a great deal. We're looking at promoting Vedic Village as a medical spa resort. A lot of new customer generation has happened because of the branding. We're also looking at Calcutta's biggest convention centre (15,000sq ft) that's coming up at Vedic Village, a money-spinner that will attract a lot of corporate clients.

How do you plan to take forward David's views on emerging trends like social media?

Social media is picking up now in India in a big way. We're on Facebook, Twitter for around four months and we're getting huge response. Ask the front office manager, and he'll tell you it's (the bookings) all coming from the Net. And we're getting the high-end guests who are willing to pay and use the spa.

What are your Calcutta plans?

We will open a 150-room property near City Centre New Town in a year from now. It will target not only the IT sector but being one of the first hotels after coming out from the airport, it could also be a transit hotel.

The other two properties are a 100-key hotel in Siliguri (business and leisure) and an 80-room hotel in Durgapur (business). We also want to take ayurveda — the Sanjeeva Spa at Vedic Village — to our other properties.

Karo Christine Kumar