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Zuri MD Bobby Kamani on how his brand is going beyond anyone's expectations

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Cover Story

Young Turk

Having outshined the likes of Taj and Oberoi in popularity, Zuri Group Global is a powerful new brand that is taking the hotel industry by storm. *Hotelier India* catches up with the man to watch out for - the dynamic Bobby Kamani, Managing Director of the group

By Simona Terron

It's no mean feat to trump classic hotels such as The Oberoi Mumbai, The Taj Mahal New Delhi, The Oberoi Amarvilas and ITC Royal Gardenia, yet the two-year-old Zuri Hotels and Resorts has done just that; appearing 10th on the TripAdvisor's Travellers Choice Awards list and pipping to the post the aforementioned properties.

With a name that means 'Far Beyond Expectations', Zuri has carved a niche for itself in the burgeoning Indian hospitality industry, standing out as bold, dynamic and poised for incredible growth.

At the helm of their India operations is Bobby Kamani. Having taken over as Director of the Zuri Group's India operations in 2005 at the young age of 23 years, Kamani comes across as someone who was particularly groomed for the role. With a Masters Degree in International Management and a Bachelors Degree in Business Management from the renowned King's College in London, Kamani began his career by joining Zuri Group's global office in

₹200 crore

Zuri's next venture is a 150 room, 5 star luxury hotel in Bengaluru at Devanahalli, close to the new international airport

Kenya to learn the ropes of the family business. An internship with the hospitality division of Knight Frank London followed; a stint which helped shape the group's foray into the hospitality sector.

From roses to hotels

The family business was one that began operations in 1960 in Kenya with a trading business by Kamani's grandfather Chaman Lal Kamani, the founder of Zuri Group Global. This was followed by in-roads into the business of floriculture that earned the reputation for quality roses across the world in a short span of time. The group then forayed into the hospitality segment spearheaded by Kamani's father and uncle, Deepak Kamani and

Rashmi Kamani, the vice chairmen of the group, before they ventured into the Indian market with Kamani and his brother, Abhishek Kamani as the group MDs on board.

Zuri Group Global began its India operations in 1999 with three hotel properties, all under franchise agreements with leading international hotel brands. The group launched The Zuri Hotels & Resorts brand in March 2008 with a chain of luxury hotels and resorts in India and overseas. All existing properties of the group previously operated under franchise agreements, were also brought under the Zuri brand umbrella. Today, headquartered in Bengaluru, India, the group has business interests in hospitality, floriculture, realty and green energy and operates across India, Kenya, Middle East and the UK. The Zuri Hotels and Resorts currently owns and operates five luxury hotels in India and two international properties in Mombasa, Kenya and Liverpool, UK. They recently launched their new property in Sikkim, which is their

first adventure resort and are also closely working with owners in places such as Mysore, Chennai, Kolkata, Jaipur and Chandigarh to take over more properties under the management contract.

As a new player in the already burgeoning hospitality market in India, the brand Zuri had its work cut out for it. "The main challenge was one that was obvious - fighting tough competition against the bigger and well established hospitality giants," mentions Kamani when asked about the same. "The biggest advantage though is being a young brand because we are not burdened by perceptions or expectations. We are free to blaze our own path and that is something we really cherish. In fact that is one of the core differentiators of our brand. We have a bunch of young people working with us and as a result we've witnessed our teams to be hotbeds of innovative and creative ideas that are constantly nurtured. This has resulted in some great campaigns, which incidentally have attracted a lot of attention as well as competi-



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The Maya spa at the Zuri Kumarakom, Kerala.

tion! Our designs and interiors are also very trendy, hip and chic. As a brand, we are very bold and are never afraid to experiment," shares Kamani with not a modicum of doubt. Believing that they have been successful in creating a niche that did not exist in the Indian hospitality industry before, Kamani declares that this has worked to their advantage.

Blazing a new path

Surprisingly early on in its innings, the brand decided to go in for a complete restructuring of the business and categorised their hotels according to what they call the P-L-C model; The Platinum, The Lifestyle and The Comfort collection. The Platinum Collection incorporates the luxurious Diani Reef Beach Resort and Spa, Kenya and The Zuri Kumarakom Resort & Spa, Kerala to offer world-class comfort and convenience. The Lifestyle Collection will have The Zuri Whitefield Bengaluru, The Zuri Whitesands Resort & Casino, Varcas, Goa and The Liner, UK and will emulate the lifestyle of clients who are patrons of certain brands and Zuri will fit as their preferred brand of hotels and resorts. The Comfort Collection will offer comfortable rooms and amenities that are comfortable on the guests' wallets as well. The Retreat by Zuri, Benaulim, Goa is a part of this collection. "With brand restructuring, we believe we will be able to create a benchmark for others whilst we heighten brand value and achieve greater proximity to our customers," says Kamani.

Speaking about their rapid growth plans in the hospitality sector, Kamani outlines the group's

roadmap for the future, sharing that they have devised a multi-pronged approach to expand in India. "As an extension to our expertise in comprehensive professional hotel management services, we have identified Management Contract and Asset Management as the key drivers of growth for brand Zuri in India. While acting as a de-risking model, asset management will help us in faster penetration in the market. We are currently aiming at facilitating the setting-up of 10-15 properties in the next five years. While management contract and asset management is the primary route for our expansion, we will continue to look at organic growth through investments in owned properties for the next five years."

With an initial investment of INR1200 plus crore, the group has already started work on building

two 5-star deluxe properties, one each in Nairobi and India within the next two years, having invested INR 450 crore towards this. Besides this, they are planning on growing their real estate business with Zuri Palms – the first-of-its-kind luxury villa project, with an investment of over Rs200 crore. They are also actively in talks with owners of properties in south India, particularly in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. These regions are major centres of economic growth, home to Fortune 500 corporations, financial hubs, and are witnessing expansion in the industrial space.

What is also making news is the group's plan for their next property which is an INR200 crore, 150 room, 5 star luxury hotel in Bengaluru at Devanahalli, making it the closest hotel to the new international airport. They have also begun construction of a shopping mall with serviced apartments in Nairobi, Kenya called Zuri Living.

When asked if the group has plans to go public, Kamani elaborates, "We hope to raise private equity funding by selling a 20 per cent stake and could be listed by 2013. We are looking for PE partners who have expertise in the hospitality industry and prefer PE partners who can add more value than simply money to the company. If it is a large international or domestic player who has interest in the hospitality sector, it will have

On TripAdvisor's Top 25 hotels in India, Zuri Kumarakom at 10th place beat:

Umaid Bhawan Palace Jodhpur – 12th
Oberoi Amarvilas – 13th
Taj Exotica Goa – 15th
Taj Mahal Hotel Mumbai – 17th
The Oberoi Udaivilas – 20th
Oberoi Mumbai – 24th
Vivanta by Taj - Kumarakom, Kerala – 25th

preference. The plan for IPO is still in the boardroom, but for a company of our size, it is one of the most suitable options to raise money."

Wooing the ideal Zuri customer

While it's all very well to talk about plans for the future, one wonders about whether their offerings will have any takers. Kamani asserts that their target customer for each property is very different. "The ideal Zuri Whitefield, Bengaluru guest is the young and sharp entrepreneur with a chic and stylish outlook who probably prefers vodka/Bacardi over brandy and whiskey. The Zuri Kumarakom, Kerala Resort and Spa caters to the up-market family crowd looking for relaxation and rejuvenation, with a focus on the spa and the pool



The first floor of the Zuri Whitefields, Bengaluru



A pool villa at the Zuri Kumarakom, Kerala



A corridor in Zuri Whitefield

villas. The target guest here is the elite clientele with high spending power. On the other hand, our properties in Goa scream fun all the way! Housing the biggest casino, The Zuri White Sands, Goa attracts the fun loving crowd including many international travellers. The Retreat is an all-suite family hotel that is also light on the wallet."

He shares that the group works with 360 degree promotions and campaigns, and that besides the broadcast and print media, they have a very pro-active sales team and GDS, along with word of mouth publicity and the assistance of large tour operators and travel agents with a focus on digital and web marketing too.

Not surprisingly, Zuri has successfully managed to put one of its properties on the map with the Zuri Kumarakom Kerala resort and spa having won several awards such as the World Travel Awards for India's leading resort, the Today's Traveler Award for Best Luxury Spa Hotel and being featured in multiple categories in TripAdvisor's Top 25 Hotels in India, Top 10 Luxury Hotels in India, and Top 10 Hotels for Romance and Top 10 Relaxation/Spa Hotels in India.

Speaking about this success story, Kamani points out that the resort and spa is the only Indian property under their Platinum Collection and it remains Zuri's flagship property in India. The five-star deluxe spa resort is set on the shores of the famed Vembanad Lake and besides luxury rooms, also has lake facing individual villas with a private plunge pool and garden. The resort is spread

across 18 acres, of which five acres are occupied by a man-made lagoon in the heart of the property, giving it the feel of an island. The highlight of the resort is the Maya Spa, our signature brand of spas which offers therapies encompassing the Ayurvedic, Western and Oriental systems of healing and rejuvenation. Only about 30% of the total land has been developed for the resort. The rest of it remains pristine and this adds to the allure of the property.

Going green

Not one to fall off the 'green' bandwagon, Zuri considers itself as a very pro-environment hospitality firm. Besides taking great care to avoid any form of environmental damage through their hotel properties,

they are in the process of aligning all their hotels under the 'Ecotel' certification. Kamani outlines that the brand seeks to achieve less dependence on non-renewable sources of energy and wishes to pursue business that is more sustainable. The Zuri Group Global has also made a foray into the renewable energy sector with Zuri Green Energy, whose tagline is 'Preserving Today, Empowering Tomorrow'. "Zuri Green Energy is at a very nascent stage at the moment in India. We currently have over 20 windmills in Tamil Nadu, with plans to expand further. Besides that, we are also in the process of expanding our presence into solar energy and waste to energy in India. While outside India, Zuri Green Energy is currently pursuing

geo thermal energy projects very aggressively," adds Kamani.

The young, suave Turk is the perfect embodiment of his brand: trendy, contemporary and bold, with a brand that is unafraid to rewrite the rules of hospitality and chart new paths, making it perfect for outgoing young entrepreneurs who have reached some place in life and believe in doing business in style and luxury. ■

“The biggest advantage... is being a young brand because we are not burdened by perceptions or expectations.”



The facade of the Zuri Kumarakom, Kerala