

KENYAN CONNECTION – G2
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HAKKASAN'S CULINARY JOURNEY FROM UK

**A PRECIOUS
LEGACY**

SHALEEN SHAH
UMRAO JEWELS, JAIPUR

FESTIVE GLITTER
MODERN AESTHETICS AND
TRADITIONAL DESIGNS

**WARDROBE FOR
WEDDINGS**

RITU KUMAR
NEETA LULLA
JATIN VERMA
PAYAL SINGHAL
PARVESH AND JAI

**KENYAN
CONNECTION**

BOBBY AND ABHISHEK KAMANI,
ZURI GROUP OF HOTELS





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Kenyan Connection

Zuri in Swahili translates as far beyond expectation. And that is what The Zuri Hotels and Resorts Pvt Ltd symbolises — not just in terms of its phenomenal growth but also in terms of the service it offers its guests. Pritti Kumar meets Bobby and Abhishek Kamani, Managing Directors, Zuri Group Global that owns and operates six luxury hotel properties in India, Kenya and the UK

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Pritti Kumar meets Bobby and Abhishek Kamani, Managing Directors, Zuri Group Global that owns and operates six luxury hotel properties in India, Kenya and the UK

Tell us how it all began

Bobby: My grandfather was from Rajkot and migrated to Nairobi when he was 19 years old. When we turned 16 we went to London to study. From there I moved to Kenya and Abhishek moved to Dubai. We moved to Bengaluru six years ago. Our corporate office for the hotel division is based there. But our home is still in Kenya. Our family business in Kenya was initially agricultural equipment that then progressed to rose farming. Our core business is still rose farming and we have around 150 million roses exported annually. Ten to twelve years ago we ventured into hotels. The first hotel we started was in Liverpool, UK. In 2001 we built White Sands in Goa which was followed by Whitefields, Bengaluru. Our family had already entered the hospitality space before we joined the business. When we joined we had two hotels and now we have six.

Did you look at hospitality as an investment or as an industry you wanted to be a major player in?

Abhishek: Initially we looked at the hospitality business as an investment. Both our fathers were hesitant about entering this industry as we had no experience in it. But family members convinced them that all we needed to do was get the best professionals to run the hotels. But I think the more you get involved in the industry the more committed you get to it. We purchased the hotel at Liverpool but created Goa one hundred percent. All our hotels in India are built from scratch from buying the land to getting the licenses to construction and eventually managing it ourselves. Goa still holds the record of being the fastest built hotel — from land recce to building. That was an achievement that gave us the confidence to construct more hotels instead of merely buying constructed properties. Kerala took much longer to be completed because of local issues related to how the state operates. It took us five years.

What are the factors that you look at before you start a project?

Bobby: First and foremost we concentrate on creating luxury space. Luxury has a different definition today. Affordable luxury is something that provides value for money both for domestic and international guests. There was not much luxury on offer when we first came to Goa. Once Goa turned out to be a success we decided to concentrate on the luxury and upscale hotel division. Since we were not hoteliers we needed the support of a brand and



Primarosa, Kenya

initially tied up with Radisson on a franchise agreement. Once we gained the know-how of the hospitality business we decided to operate on our own.

What hurdles did you encounter when you started your own brand?

Abhishek: The first hurdle is the mental one. Even though we knew we had been managing and constructing hotels, it was now about launching our own brand. In the initial two years we were fortunate as no other hotel companies were being launched so we got the best possible rates for advertising, promotion and marketing. People are always looking out for something new. As we were already managing the hotels, our teams were extremely competent and so the actual switch over was not very difficult. In fact, it happened overnight. Within a year of giving up the Radisson franchise and using the Zuri brand, our revenue went up by 35 per cent despite the recession. Zuri got to be seen as a boutique brand.

People have certain expectations of luxury. As you said, luxury is a word that is loosely used. How do you define it?

Bobby: Even before launching the brand, we realised that hotels in India like



Bobby and Abhishek Kamani at Infinity, The Zuri Whitefield, Bengaluru

the Taj and the Oberoi had already established themselves in the minds of consumers. From our own experience we liked certain aspects of certain brands but knew that there were a lot of things which they did not cater to. Luxury for us is creating a brand and an experience where our guests get world class service, fantastic food, a good ambience, comfortable rooms etc. Every aspect had to be new, fresh and inviting. Our philosophy of luxury is finding out what our guests consider luxury and giving it to them.

How difficult is it to staff your hotels?

Abhishek: Investing in staff is more important than advertising. In India because there are so many competing brands you can't hold on to your colleagues unless you provide them with more than just a salary. You have to provide them with a career. We literally overhauled our entire HR policies. We sat down and asked our staff members why they would like to work with us? And we introduced a lot of changes in traditional HR policies by empowering them so that they do not ever feel that they are just cogs in the wheel.

Bobby: Let me give you an example. I was in Dubai six months ago and went

for a coffee to a well-known five star hotel. I met a waiter from Kerala who had worked for us. He told me that what he had learned at Zuri and the relationship he had with the team he did not have there. He has since come back to Kerala and is working with Zuri again.

Abhishek: A lot of big brands forget about the investment in people. In smaller brands like ours you can give your team the importance they deserve. We are accessible to all our staff. We treat them as professionals who know their jobs. We encourage them to experiment and do things in new ways.

Bobby: This is the advantage of being in a mid-level company which is still very much a family-operated concern. This means individuals can play vital roles and mould the way a company is shaping which works to our advantage and we enjoy it.

Why did you decide to start operations in India?

Abhishek: India presents a big opportunity for business. Besides we had a presence in India in terms of having family in Gujarat. We had a furniture factory which didn't work out. Most importantly, it had been our



White Sands Goa Resort and Casino



The Zuri Kumarakom Kerala Resort and Spa

Zuri Properties

- The Zuri Whitefield, Bengaluru
- The Zuri White Sands, Goa Resort & Casino
- The Retreat by Zuri, Goa
- Diani Reef Beach Resort & Spa, Mombasa, Kenya
- The Liner at Liverpool, United Kingdom



The Retreat by Zuri Goa

grandfather's wish that one of us would come back to India and start something. India is very close to his heart. It is a matter of pride that he left at an early age and the third generation of the family has, in a sense, come back. He loves the fact that we are so settled in India and love India. At eighty, he is not into the strategy of business but into charity and enjoying his grandchildren and great grandchildren. He is really a great man.

What was the catalysis for Whitefield?

Bobby: When we bought the land, there was nothing here but ITPL. However, a lot of IT companies were moving in and the closest hotels were a distance away. So we thought if Bengaluru is a city run essentially by the IT industry it would be a massive opportunity. And that is exactly how it turned out. We opened our hotel and another five star hotel opened during the same month but there was enough business for both. The other reason for its success is that there is a very large population in this area that now has access to facilities like banquet halls, a spa, pool, coffee shop etc.

Would it be correct to say that you are more into resorts than hotels?

Bobby: That is how we initially started out. We felt Goa needed a resort. After resorts we also started concentrating on business hotels. Another course the company has taken is that we are looking very actively into investing in Africa. Opportunities are booming there and we also have land. We have a project coming up in Nairobi — a five star business class hotel with a high-end retail mall attached to it. We have already started construction and it should be completed in about 15 months. We have tied up with Shapoorji Pallonji for construction. We are planning other projects of this nature in key cities of East Africa in the next two to three years. In India, we are also looking at putting up more five star hotels.

In your plans for expansion, do you plan separately for hotels and resorts? Do you consider some geographies suitable for either hotels or resorts but not both?

Abhishek: The two are distinctly different. There are few locations where



Bobby and Abhishek at The Zuri Whitefield

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you could either build a business hotel or resort. In East Africa our projects are city based so resorts are not suitable. You cannot buy that kind of land.

What has been your success in management contracts? How do you see this market growing?

Bobby: We currently have a management contract in Sikkim and are looking at further opportunities. Though a lot of projects have come our way, they did not fit in with our brand. We don't want the consumer to feel that one Zuri is different from another. The experience should be the same. The advantage we have is that a lot of new hotel developers want their hotels to be managed but they feel international brands will be too stringent for their policies and procedures. What they need are mutually beneficial agreements where owners can be flexible as regards their operations. This is not possible with a big brand. We have an additional advantage as we have sat on both sides of the table with our hotels being initially franchised by Radisson.

Abhishek: At Zuri we know exactly when a brand is asking for something that is reasonable or not. Everything has to be location specific. For example if you have a management contract in Goa, circumstances specific to that state have to be taken into consideration.

Do you see a bright future in India for apartment hotels? If you do, do you intend to be a part of it?

We do definitely. In Kenya there is a huge potential in apartment hotels but we don't want to get into too many in India.

What support have you received from travel agents?

Abhishek: The travel agents have been a great support to us in promoting our resorts for family holidays. With business hotels, it is company bookers who go online to get their clients the most competitive rates. In Bengaluru, our business is primarily from IT companies and so we work with them and not travel agents.

Bobby: When the global recession took place, the hospitality business in India did not receive such a blow because of the huge domestic market. That is where we really saw the support of our travel agents because the amount of business they gave us between March and October 2009 was commendable. For those six months, the business hotels suffered because our main business is from American IT companies. The resorts, however, were not really affected. ☺

Photographs: Prasad D



The Zuri Whitefield



The Liner at Liverpool, United Kingdom

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Abhishek and Bobby Kamani with Pritti Kumar

Good news for our international community and iPad user! G2's iPad version is now available on the landing page on Magzter.com <http://www.magzter.com/IN/lokmat-group/Global-Gujarati/Lifestyle/>

Dear Reader

When I went to Whitefield Bengaluru to meet two young businessmen, Bobby and Abhishek Kamani, who had set up the Zuri chain of hotels, I was pleasantly surprised at their zest, energy, farsightedness and above all the thorough knowledge they had of their business.

As sports enthusiasts both were injured at the time of the photo shoot but they handled even that with stylish charm and dignity hiding their injuries from the intrusive camera. Their pride in their Gujarati legacy and the customs and traditions of Gujarat, which their grandfather inculcated in them, brought them back to India from Kenya after academic stints in the U.K. The family's core business is still rose farming in Kenya and they export 150 million studs of roses annually.

Though the family ventured into the hospitality industry just over a decade ago, they now own six properties and have plans for many more in Africa and India. The Zuri Hotel at Bengaluru has a unique ambience with touches of African décor and a sommelier at hand guiding us through some special wines from South Africa too.

With the wedding and festive seasons around the corner, this issue is a jewellery special that gives you a round up of edgy and stylish designs from leading jewellers of India. We also help you plan unforgettable buffets for the host of wedding functions with chefs from leading hotels.

Home décor projects are inevitably taken up in anticipation of the festive and wedding seasons. We take you into the home of the Sagar family, owners of Manubhai Jewellers, whose residence reflects their exquisite style seen in the jewellery available in their outlets.

At every Hakkasan around the world, Cantonese cuisine with its fabulous flavours and textures is served and the Mumbai outlet offers one of the best Chinese meals too. A meal there is worth any price they charge and it will not be considered expensive

F1 fever will grab everyone this month as it arrives in our country for the first time. Do read the Luxury column and check out how the association between the brands and the racing circuit makes for an interesting tie-up.

And finally, do keep writing in. We enjoy hearing from you.

Pritti Kumar, Editor