

Much ado about branding

Asian travel experts get together in a roundtable discussion to examine the value of branded hotels versus the independents in the age of millennial

Fast-track development

Lombok is racing to cement its position as a sports and entertainment destination, with major infrastructure development in the pipeline

Flying the Nepal flag

Chaudhary Group chairman Binod Chaudhary wants to plant Nepal on the travel map by building a global hospitality empire



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With sexual exploitation and modern slavery still rearing its prevalent head in Asia-Pacific, authorities are joining forces with the tourism sector to stem the tide of human trafficking.

By Rosa Ocampo



Up in arms against human trafficking



Flying the flag for Nepal

Binod Chaudhary, Nepal's sole billionaire, plays the role of entrepreneur, industrialist and philanthropist in his country. The chairman of Chaudhary Group (CG Global), a multi-dimensional conglomerate spanning hotels, real estate, banking and food businesses, tells **Rohit Kaul** why through building up a global hospitality empire, he seeks to bring the world to Nepal, and Nepal to the world

CG Global has a vast number of companies and brands under its portfolio. How is your hospitality business growing?

Our hospitality business, which is housed under the aegis of two arms, CG Hotels & Resorts and CG Hospitality, has done extremely well. One deals with our hard asset investments, the other deals with operating capabilities on our own or in partnerships.

Recently, we opened The Fern Residency in Bharatpur, Nepal, an iconic asset with tremendous reviews. We brought the Taj brand back to Nepal after a spell of over 20 years, as Taj Hotels & Resorts had to stop operations in Nepal during the Maoist insurgency. Meghauli Serai, a Taj Safari Lodge in Chitwan National Park, opened last year, and Vivanta Kathmandu, opened earlier this year.

At the moment we are working towards Taj Dubai, a very prestigious project for us. Hopefully, it will open in October this year.

After the buyout of The Farm at San Benito in the Philippines, what is your expansion strategy for the wellness brand?

We have a well-thought-out expansion strategy for The Farm brand. We want to introduce The Farm in other destinations like South and

South-east Asia, the US and Europe. We have already almost finalised our presence in Phuket through a joint venture.

We are exploring the possibility of an appropriate location in Europe, some place within a one-hour flight time from major cities in the continent and yet highly flexible in terms of providing top-notch services. We zeroed in on a region called Istria in Croatia, and we expect to have The Farm in Europe in 18 months' time.

We don't want The Farm to be in every nook and corner like other wellness brands. We want to be selective. We are happy if we can have five properties under the brand in five different destinations across the globe.

Do you think the market sees you more as a hotel investor, rather than someone who has played a key role in establishing brands owing to your association with names like the Taj, Fern and The Zinc Journey?

That's not really true. Our role in the growth of the hospitality industry is reinforced by the prominence we get at trade events. We are considered perhaps as one of the most versatile hospitality groups which has its own investment arm, owns properties, and has its own management com-

panies across the business, economy and upper-midscale segments. We own and operate globally known brands like The Farm. We also take pride in our partnerships and joint ventures with globally acclaimed names like the Taj.

Investment is a very important part of our strength. Most operators don't want to invest. We are happy to invest if we see the opportunity. We are ready to have skin in the game. To an investor or a developer that is a very good news that there is somebody who is not just happy to manage a property but also ready to invest.

You had plans to expand your portfolio of hotels under The Zinc Journey brand. Can you tell us more?

The Zinc Journey is going through a phase of consolidation. We have three Zinc Journey hotels in Sri Lanka, two in China and one in Nepal. We are opening one in Bhutan. We are in the process of taking the brand to the next level through standardising the offering and then presenting it on a much bigger scale in the market. Once that happens we will open this portfolio for joint ventures, co-investment and co-development.

We will also put together a very

high-end management team. At present these properties are managed by different partners. We want to create a new version that is younger and vibrant in its approach while also making money.

We are working to have three properties in Rajasthan to create a Zinc Journey circuit. I see potential for an experiential brand like The Zinc Journey in markets like Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar. Asia offers immense vast experiences from culture to adventure. I view many Asian destinations well placed for a brand like The Zinc Journey.



Nepal can create brands and entrepreneurs that are recognised worldwide. I am showcasing Nepal as a high-end tourism and hospitality destination by opening world-class products like Meghauli Serai, A Taj Safari.

You have spoken about the potential of inbound tourism and your plans to enter this market. What are you doing on this front?

Our interest in inbound is presently confined to our partnership with &Beyond South Africa. We used to have a majority stake but now we have a stake of 26 per cent in the partnership. The company handles high-end inbound business as well as conference business. They are doing a great job.

We have been trying to associate with an inbound tour operator with a presence in key source markets of the Indian subcontinent. At one point we were talking to a Turkey-based tour operator but that somehow didn't materialise. We are not going to (earn billions) by having an inbound operation but we are going to make our properties comfortable. Inbound tour operators can at times open unexpected new avenues and new channels of distribution.

How are you helping in the development of Nepal's tourism sector?

I call myself a very small man from a very small country. The only thing I had was a big dream – and that's what helped me. I should not say I am helping Nepal. Nepal is my name, my identity. People know me as Binod Chaudhary of Nepal. I want to see Nepal as the most prosperous country in the region; it is not though, but it has the opportunity to be one.

Nepal can create brands and entrepreneurs that are recognised worldwide. I am showcasing Nepal as a high-end tourism and hospitality destination by opening world-class tourism products like Meghauli Serai, A Taj Safari. Our conglomerate of businesses spread across the world has also brought global attention to Nepal and help to grow corporate travel in some way.

We are working together with Melinda Gates Foundation to provide opportunities to youngsters who have ideas but no capital. We have also created a spiritual destination in Nepal with Shashwat Dham where already 2.7 million people have visited.

10 NEED TO KNOW'S ABOUT BINOD CHAUDHARY

- **Who's in your family?** I am blessed with three competent boys, all grown up and married with two kids each
- **What do you do for fun?** I play golf and travel
- **Your ideal vacation?** I am a trekker, not a city person, so I like mountains and the countryside. The places I visit need to have some kind of energy that draws me, so I like places like Rajasthan, Sri Lanka and the Balkan region
- **How do you book your own leisure trips?** My team manages my bookings
- **What are you reading right now?** *A License To Steal* by Benjamin J. Stein
- **How do you stay healthy?** I work out whenever I get time
- **Favourite food?** I like Thai, Indian and Sri Lankan food
- **A bad habit you cannot kick** I expect a lot from everybody
- **Your pet peeve, something that never fails to annoy you** When people promise and not deliver
- **Most people don't know...** that I am very spiritual

