



The ardent hotelier

Puneet Dhawan, Senior Vice President of Operations - India & South Asia, Accor, avers that hospitality is a people's business; whether it is about guests or colleagues, making them count will be what success means

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

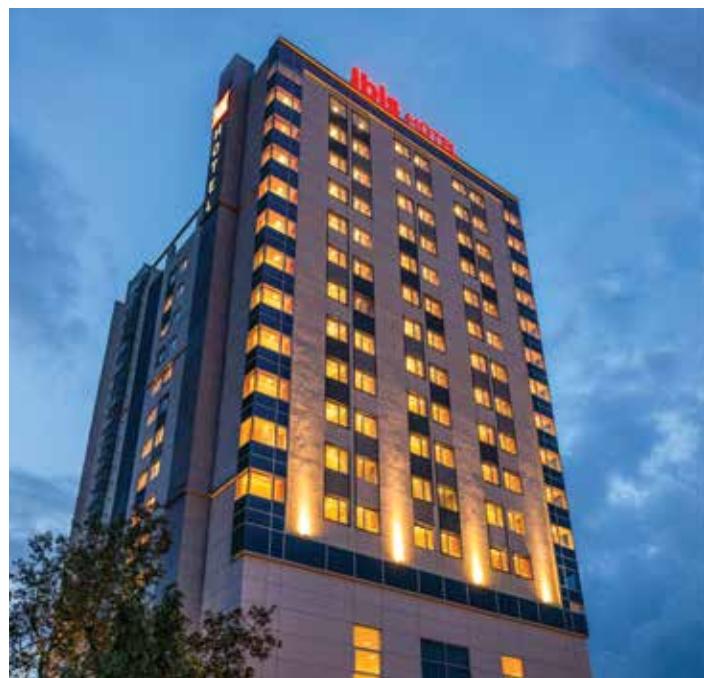
Puneet Dhawan, Sr. Vice President of Operations - India & South Asia, Accor, is a hotelier who believes that it is essential to stay patient and explore various aspects of running a hotel and the only limiting factor is your imagination. He hopes that people who aspire to be hoteliers never lose sight of the fact that a lot of hard work goes into making things successful in this business.

LOOKING BACK

For someone who started his hospitality career in 1994 with Mandarin Oriental after graduating from the University of Massachusetts, he joined Accor in 1998 as Director of Food and Beverage of Century Wan-chai, now Novotel Century Hong Kong. Post that, he had successful stints in Singapore, Vietnam, Australia, and UAE and proverbially has not looked back and admits his thirst for new adventures continues. "I can still remember my first day at Accor. It doesn't feel like two decades ago, and when I look back, the years are filled with memories and milestones that have shaped me into the professional I am today. Twenty years in retrospect feels like a combination of opportunity and good luck, fresh starts, and reversals. My career represents years of learning, paying attention to the best in class across industries, learning from peers, and constantly remaining humble while trying to do things differently and exploring new approaches. My focus has been on recruiting the best team and ensuring that they work in a motivating environment, with guests' being paramount."

POST-COVID VIBES

The last two years have taught everyone several lessons, as well as shown how resilient and adaptable to change people are. "While we learnt how to survive in these unprecedented times, we also witnessed our team members' Heartists', partners and others in the industry stepping up and doing all they can. We have witnessed significant recovery this year, and the improvement in occupancies and bookings seems to be only trending upwards. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has affected the industry in ways we never imagined. The face of travel has changed completely, priorities have shifted, and while Indians discover their own country, the future of travel relies on the highest standards of safety amongst guests. Our focus remains on delivering the best experiences for our clients as we simultaneously evolve with their expectations and emerging needs." Accor continues to take a renewed approach towards its existing partnerships and campaigns and provides guests with the most memorable



ibis Mumbai Vikhroli.

experiences curated through our lifestyle loyalty program, ALL - Accor Live Limitless. "The pandemic by far outweighs every experience I have had in my life. It wreaked havoc in our sector, and there was no playbook to deal with its impact or to strategise how to overcome it. During those tough years when morale was at an all-time low, the most critical action was to build on team members' trust and display empathy and ensure that everyone was following the highest standards of safety. It was critical to be available on the ground and engage with all our stakeholders, including our partners and asset owners. Later, when guests started returning to our properties, this investment paid off and helped us continue delivering an unparalleled experience at Accor."

SAFETY MATTERS

With guest safety being a top priority and cleanliness and hygiene becoming the standard norm, Accor has led from the front. Accor worked on implementing ALLSAFE, the safety and hygiene label, across its network of hotels in partnership with Bureau Veritas. All the Group's hotels are required to adhere to these standards, representing some of the most operational protocols in the world of hospitality. This program is implemented at all levels, from the food preparation style, the service style, the infrastructure,

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Hotel Fairmont Jaipur.



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and décor. "We are proud to confirm that all 55 Accor properties in India, across brands, including Raffles, Fairmont, Sofitel, Pullman, Grand Mercure, Novotel, Mercure and ibis, have received the ALL-SAFE certification to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our guests and team members as they resume travel," he adds proudly.

FOOD FILES

Accor believes that hospitality is a tremendous social elevator, and this rings true, especially in food and beverage. The COVID-19 crisis has underscored the fragility of the global food system, including the way food is produced, consumed, and wasted. Today, the issue for everyone is identifying best practices to create a healthier world of catering that is more considerate and respectful of resources. "Hyper localisation is one of our key messages, and we are seeing good progress with hotels setting up partnerships with local farmers for specialised and organic produce. We are also working towards establishing micro farms either through traditional methods, where they have availability of land or through vertical hydroponic farming, where they do not. Our mission is to make food and beverage the heart and soul of our hotels by acting like restaurateurs and delivering an experience that is excellent, relevant, and authentic. Doing this helps us create venues that are not just 'hot and trendy,' but rather, essential to the very fabric of the cities and communities where we live for locals and travellers alike."



➲ The grand lobby of Novotel Chandigarh.

NEW VISTAS

As a hospitality brand with several sub-brands, Accor recently introduced the Emblems Collection and is broadening its footprint in the collection brands space. It will look to replicate its success with another of the Group's brands MGallery Hotel Collection. This storied portfolio now counts more than 100 boutique hotels worldwide. Emblems Collection will feature unique hotels emblematic of their designers, demographics, or destinations. "Appealing to the stylish and the smart set, signature elements of the brand's hotels will include luxurious surroundings, Instagram-worthy pools, and vibrant public spaces. Hotels and resorts joining the Emblems Collection will fall into three categories. Emblems Collection Heritage hotels are landmarks of a destination, and the buildings contribute to the character of a city, place, or nation and celebrate the hallmarks of history and classic cultural traditions. Emblems Collection Retreat has resort properties along blissful beaches, bucolic countrysides, or nestled in the mountains, offering spa and wellness experiences with holistic care and enrichment through rituals, serenity, and well-being. Emblems Collection Signature will be design-led hotels embodying an aesthetic universe, an ode to the style and signature of the designers or original residents who contributed to the hotel's unique legacy." The luxury brand is expected to grow to 60 properties worldwide by 2030. Additionally, aligned with Accor's larger philosophy of bringing augmented hospitality to life, Work@ibis an initiative available across all ibis properties in the country, was started to provide an alternative working space to individuals and organisations.

TECH TALK

Accor has adopted technological aids and means at all levels, from operations and management to administration. Accor is well equipped with technological resources to ensure the guest experience is not compromised, from room bookings to check-ins, check-outs, payment procedures, digital posters, and digital menus. Touchless hospitality and innovation brought in by technological advancements have made operations more cost-effective and enhanced guest experience. "To provide a contactless



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and secure guest journey, we introduced Accor Key in our hotels globally, which provides guests access to their rooms without a physical key. We collaborated with Microsoft to launch ALL CONNECT, the concept of a hybrid meeting supported by Microsoft Teams that enables guests worldwide to adapt to the new ways of working. This new offering aids corporate customers and meeting planners combine physical in-hotel meetings with virtual interactions across multiple locations simultaneously."

SCHOOL FOR CHANGE

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is an important aspect of Accor's overall strategy. The launch of School for Change has provided team members with access to a content platform and a training path focused on the fundamentals of climate change. "Aimed at improving the understanding of the causes of climate change and its impact on biodiversity and communities, the programme facilitates the sharing of solutions to create positive change at every level. School for Change utilises our team's talents and capabilities to realise a contributive approach toward promoting sustainable and socially conscious initiatives."

SKILL SET

The hospitality industry has countless different jobs, and while each varies in its specific requirements and expertise, most have certain standard skill sets. An eye for detail is another critical skill that is indispensable in this business, and it is a characteristic that sets one apart and ensures thoroughness and accuracy. "One that stands out to me is the possession of strong interpersonal skills because communication lies at the heart of any hospitality business. It is also essential for them to have precise business understanding, to be able to manage business priorities and strengthen key partnerships. We also believe in investing in our team's professional development through sustained



Pullman Aerocity, New Delhi.



② Raffles Udaipur.

technical training modules and pride ourselves on a workforce that exudes a positive attitude. The Accor Academy aims to drive professional upskilling across our network."

GOING GREEN

Accor is deeply committed to sustainable value creation and plays an active role in giving back to the planet and the community. "We must help spread awareness and collaborate with all stakeholders - guests, team members, communities, and partners. With this collaborative approach to sustainable innovation as our primary focus, we launched Planet 21 - Acting Here, a program that endeavours to act for 'positive hospitality'. The program is structured around six pillars engaging our guests in a sustainable experience, co-innovating with our partners to open new horizons, and working together with local communities for a positive impact." Accor is also committed to removing all single-use plastic from all its hotels globally by the end of 2022.

BUSINESS SENSE

The mid-scale and economy brands, Novotel and ibis, have an extremely high brand recall in India and a strong focus on the meetings and conventions market and the weddings and socials market. The Novotel network of 21 operational hotels forms the largest network of mid-scale hotels in the country, with hotels in key cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, Goa and Hyderabad. Raffles and Fairmont are luxury destinations for global travellers. "Sofitel Mumbai in BKC is in the heart of the business centre and is the first choice for the well-travelled. The wedding and MICE business has seen hockey stick recovery, and we are thrilled to see the FITs segment bouncing back again. We are constantly exploring new destinations for luxury brands, both in leisure and destination locations. With the introduction of Luxury brands like Raffles, which turns one soon and Fairmont, we were able to solidify our luxury position in the country. Staycations and weddings are sought after at these properties, and we strongly believe that in a market like India, luxury and lifestyle hospitality brands will thrive."

FUTURE PERFECT

As of July 2022, Accor operates 55 properties across India and South Asia, with 10,306 keys with 26 more properties in the pipeline. "Over the next few months, we expect to add six new properties to the network. We will also continue to expand our ibis and ibis Styles brand in partnership with InterGlobe Hotels by adding three more hotels, including ibis Hebbal and Thane, opening this year, adding to the existing portfolio of 20. We will also be opening Fairmont Mumbai, Raffles Jaipur, Novotel Jodhpur,



② Club Millésime Executive Lounge at Sofitel Mumbai BKC.

pur, and Novotel Mumbai Airport, amongst others soon."

As one of the leading international hospitality operators in the country, Accor continues to grow its network with its partners on the back of a strong development pipeline. Over the next two years, they have plans to add more than 1300 keys to their existing portfolio of over 10,000 keys. "We recently announced the expansion of our footprint in Madhya Pradesh by signing two Novotel properties in Bhopal and Indore, scheduled to open in 2026. With six properties in the pipeline for the next two years, Accor is focused on providing guests and asset owners with an unparalleled and diverse offering across India. Our key priorities are to double our network of hotels while continuing to provide unparalleled experiences in the luxury and lifestyle space. Along with striving to increase our leisure footprint, we look at foraying deeper into tier 2 and tier 3 markets, discovering newer locations and helping our guests discover them alongside us." H

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