

A pioneer in paradise

By **HUSSEIN AFEEF**

CHAIRMAN, CROWN & CHAMPA RESORTS



HUSSEIN AFEEF studied in Sri Lanka and at the age of 21 arranged, with two friends, the very first visit of a tour group to the Maldives. He worked as the manager of the Kurumba Village, the Maldives' first tourist resort and developed his family company into one of the Maldives' largest resort owning and operating companies. He is recognised as one of the pioneers of tourism in the Maldives and in 2010 was honoured as a State Dignitary of the country. In 2010 he set up a family foundation through which many scholarships have been awarded to the youth of the Maldives for higher education abroad.

The Maldives tourism industry dates back to 1972 when a group of ambitious young entrepreneurs, among them myself as a 21-year-old who had returned from his studies in Sri Lanka, organised the first ever travel group. In those days there were no telephone or radio links between the islands or to the wider world, and the only means of communication was to send messages by morse code to the Maldivian embassy, which would then send a cable to Colombo, in Sri Lanka. In those days, we didn't even think about importing building materials; it was hard enough getting the tourists in. In fact in the early early days of the industry, we literally built our own hotels. The walls were made of coral, the beams of coconut wood and the roofs palm-thatched. Each room had a bed, a wardrobe, a luggage rack and a dressing table. And that was really all. Drinking water was rainwater or from a well. Meals were a repetition of tuna curry, rice, coconut and bananas.

The next dozen years were very much a free-for-all. Passports were still not required at the airport and visitors could travel anywhere if they could arrange either a cargo boat or a fishing vessel. That era ended in 1984 when the government required tourists to stay in a registered resort.

Gradually, we were able to start bringing in building materials and other vital equipment, as well as attracting more and more airlines. Transport between the islands improved: a 12-hour boat ride is now covered in 40 minutes by seaplane.

I set up Crown Tours Maldives in 1985, which shows how deep our roots in the industry are. Crown & Champa Resorts now own and operate nine resorts in the Maldives and two hotels in the Seychelles. We act as local agents for several leading international tour operators, and as handling agents for major tour operators we offer the first welcome to thousands of holidaymakers. We also book and arrange honeymoon holidays and renewal of love ceremonies, and handle cruise liners and arrange day excursions, as well as booking and arranging diving and snorkeling safaris. We can also arrange and handle cruising safaris on live-aboard luxury yachts and boats, as well as organising sightseeing tours of Malé, the island capital of the Maldives.

I am proud to say that successive governments have worked hard to help develop the tourism industry.

Unlike nowadays, in the past doing business in the Maldives was not easy, due to lack of infrastructure, and regulations and laws not being in place. But over the years things have improved. All governments have given their full support to genuine business people, local or foreign. This is very much an open economy. If one is here to do business there are no barriers to stop one achieving success.

I am pleased to say that our initiatives in several areas and our efforts to develop the tourism industry have been recognized both by the country and the industry. We have been awarded several national and international awards such as an award for recognition of our pioneering work in developing the tourism industry in the Maldives. I personally have been honoured by The Government of Maldives with the status of State Dignitary in 2010, something which humbles me and give me great pride at the same time. As the Vice Chairman of the Maldives Association of Tourism Industry, I have tried to play an important role in bringing about greater cooperation and understanding between the various institutions involved in the industry for its ultimate wellbeing.

I hope that our most recent projects will encourage other players in the Maldives to take a more sustainable approach to tourism. Gasfinolhu, a 30 minute speedboat ride from the islands' capital Malé, is one of the world's first tourist resorts to be completely powered by renewable energy. Aside from helping the environment, solar energy makes great economic sense: a 600-guest capacity resort consumes around US\$1 million-worth of diesel a year.

Aside from our efforts in building up the Maldivian economy via our business activities, in 2000, I was proud to set up the AFT Foundation, which has provided scholarships to young people from the Maldives to study abroad, as well as carrying out development projects throughout the islands.

Looking to the future, I can see the tourism industry helping drive new areas of the Maldivian economy and attracting foreign investment. There are many opportunities, like creating back-up industries for tourism, such as in seafood, vegetables, fruit, and foodstuff packaging. There is also huge potential to invest in projects to save or conserve energy and in the areas of transport and waste disposal.