

A wondrous destination

By AHMED SIYAM MOHAMED

CHAIRMAN & MANAGING DIRECTOR, SUN SIYAM GROUP



AHMED SIYAM MOHAMED founded Sun Travels & Tours in 1990 and is the Chairman and Managing Director of the Sun Siyam Group, which now owns three resorts in the Maldives and a property in Sri Lanka and several other subsidiary companies, mainly in the tourism industry. His group employs over 3000 staff. He also serves on the board of the Maldives Association of Tourism Industry (MATI) and as a Member of Parliament for the Dhaalu Atoll constituency where he established his first resort, Vilu Reef Beach & Spa Resort.

How did you begin in the tourism sector?

I started out small, as a travel agency in 1990 with just a few staff and a capital of US\$800. Before that, I had been working in various departments in the resorts; receptionist, reservations, storekeeper to name a few. I suppose this insight and experience helped me when I then ventured into resort operations.

The group currently owns and operates three luxury resorts in the Maldives and one in Sri Lanka, along with other auxiliary ventures such as diving centres, spas, and agricultural farm.

What was the major breakthrough the company achieved to establish its path to success?

It was a dream come true, when the company won the bid for Meedhuffushi island to develop as a resort in 1997. We opened the resort in a record time of less than a year. Since then we now have three properties in the Maldives and three in Sri Lanka, all operating under the same group. With our first resort development and till today I would say, we have gained a lot of experience, both in developing and managing these properties under a 100 per cent Maldivian management.

Having said that we do face challenges, such as labour during the construction phase, logistics etc.

What are the particularities of the Maldives' market, and what are your future plans?

Currently we operate three luxury resorts in the Maldives, all very popular amongst the various markets. We do have lots of projects in the pipeline, three resort developments in the Maldives and one more in Sri Lanka. We have already started on some of them. One of our most ambitious projects till now is also in the development phase now, and this will revolutionise the present tourism offering in Maldives. It will also open up a significant job scope for the Maldivians.

Despite 40 years of tourism and many challenges faced in the past 10 years, we are still regarded as the most romantic destination in the world. And we have held on our position in the Indian Ocean amongst the competition. Why? Because nothing is artificial here, we are a natural product. Having said that, again there is dire and urgent need for more focused destination marketing as I feel that not enough is being done at the moment to keep our name out

there and maintain our world ranking. People need to be constantly reminded of the wonder that is the Maldives and this can only be achieved through strategic marketing.

There has also been a shift in the generator market from the West to the East with China now leading the way. This has been a learning experience for us. We have now understood the needs and wants of the Asian market and have adapted ourselves accordingly. Chinese guests, just like their European counterparts, can enjoy their home comforts including special Chinese cuisine and activities tailored to their interests. It is always about understanding your customer base and delivering accordingly, that is the inherent success.

What advice would you give to other investors considering the Maldives as an investment destination? How does the Maldives compare to other countries in which you have invested?

Since the beginning of tourism in the Maldives, the country has remained an exclusive and a much sought-after destination. For me, I have invested in Sri Lanka, apart from the Maldives, and I would say nothing compares to what you find here. The tropical climate, sun year-round, the crystal clear waters, the visibility under water are just a few, that makes Maldives the perfect destination to invest.

The investment climate is also very favourable now, with more investor confidence in having a longer lease period (99 years), duty exemption for all material brought in for the construction phase and being more open to innovative investment ideas.

What is your message to both potential investors and visitors to the Maldives?

Maldives is a destination worthy of investment, with its unique one island one resort concept. It continues to offer what any other destination cannot. My experience in the industry has taught me that more and more, the traveller of today is seeking an authentic experience, based on love, romance, nostalgia, warmth, intimacy and ultimately memories that they can take away and cherish for the rest of their lives. We should all strive to create this. And work towards peace, harmony and love, as only then can we achieve progress, prosperity and development. E