

PRESTIGE

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Plus
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THE XX
JAIPUR

Exclusive
LAI VOON HON
BUILDING DREAMS



Jolly Good Fellow

It was a joy working with Lai Voon Hon on this photo shoot. Affable and friendly to everyone, the President/ CEO of Ireka Development Management had no airs about him and was game to try out the various poses and facial expressions suggested by photographer, Shawn Lor. He was also a natural conversationalist, making our chat at Nook, Aloft Kuala Lumpur Sentral's bright and airy main dining spot, a real pleasure. One of his long-serving employees, Lim Eai Luan attested to Lai's approachability, calling him "the boss from heaven." The corporate communications manager was not alone in her sentiment about Lai: Ireka has a great reputation as an employer with one of the lowest staff turnover rates in Malaysia, and Lai is a big reason why that is so. ■

BLAZING TRAILS

Former architect and Ireka Development Management President/ CEO Lai Voon Hon has made an indelible impression in the Malaysian luxury property market with a slew of buzz-generating projects. RAINA NG discovers that while experience may have brought him down to earth a bit, it doesn't seem to have put a dent in his ability to dream big

PHOTOGRAPHY/SHAWN LOR
ASSISTANT PHOTOGRAPHER/RICHARD
ART DIRECTION/WILSON TEH & GAN YEW CHIN
STYLING/LIZANNE BAUTISTA
HAIR AND MAKEUP/RAY LIM



SHIRT: HUGO BOSS
PANTS & BELT: GUCCI

JACKET, SHIRT & BOW TIE: HUGO BOSS
WATCH: JAEGER-LECOULTRE



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RESSED IN A stylish suit and his signature round-framed glasses, Lai Voon Hon immediately charms everyone at the photo shoot with his easy-going demeanour, coming off as an all-round nice guy. And it's not just an act that he puts on for the press either. Lim Eai Luan, the corporate communications manager at Ireka Development Management, calls him "the boss from heaven!" without a trace of irony.

Lai is the eldest child of Lai Siew Wah, the formidable founder of Ireka Corporation Berhad, and he credits his father for moulding him into the man he is today. "My dad worked very hard, and he still does," says Lai, 48. "He instilled in me good work ethics and to always strive hard for what I believe in."

The senior Lai, 73, had to quit school at 10 to support his family after the death of his father. Taking on machine repair work in remote plantations that nobody wanted to do, Lai eventually earned enough to buy a tractor that allowed him to venture into the earth-moving business. He started Syarikat Lai Siew Wah, the precursor to Ireka, in 1967 and gradually built a reputation as an experienced earth-moving contractor for open-cast tin mines all over Malaysia, earning the moniker *lai wong* (a play on his surname that also translates to mean

"earthworks king" in Cantonese).

Lai described his father as quietly encouraging to his children. "The thing about my dad is that he actually recognises your passion and encourages you to go for it. That was how it was with me; I wanted to do engineering to help in the family business but he knew that I loved art and drawing. So he had a talk with me and said something about how one should always pursue one's passion. Thanks to him, I ended up doing what I loved, which was architecture," says the graduate of Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London.

Lai landed his first job at Michael Squire Associates, an architecture firm in London. Later, he moved to Hong Kong to join an international Japanese firm, S'international, where he was part of the team that specialised in designing luxury hotels. He left in 1992 to pursue an MBA and returned to Kuala Lumpur two years later to finally fulfil his wish of joining the family business.

One of Lai's first major projects at Ireka was the i-ZEN brand of luxury properties in the upscale residential neighbourhood of Mont Kiara; its various residences from the hilltop Kiaraville to the sublime Tiffani by i-ZEN have since become some of the most sought-after properties in the city.

But he is perhaps best known for building The Westin Kuala Lumpur, which made headlines in 2006 when it was sold for RM455 million (about RM1 million per room), a record price that still stands to this day. This popular luxury abode along bustling Jalan Bukit Bintang was commended for its innovative design that beautifully compensated for the tight space of a small plot of land. Lai adds: "Its interior design has stood the test of time despite being the first modern contemporary hotel design in the country."

The Westin KL is one of Lai's proudest achievements for a number of reasons but perhaps none more so than the fact that it was successfully completed and opened during the Asian financial crisis and SARS epidemic in 1997.

More recently, Ireka unveiled Aloft Kuala Lumpur Sentral. Developed and owned by Aseana Properties Limited, an associated company of Ireka Corporation Berhad, the 482-room Aloft is the trendy younger sibling of the hip W Hotels. Lai is especially proud of the free-flowing design concept that gives the hotel a decidedly young and vibrant energy.

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"Every little detail was infused with the DNA of the acclaimed W and we went the extra mile to inject some local accents courtesy of artworks by Antares, Yusof Gajah, Tony Twigg and Lam Le Siang. To me, Aloft is yet another testimony of Ireka's ability to continuously innovate and match the best in the world."

Up next is The RuMa Hotel and Residences, which is being built on Jalan Kia Peng in the financial district. Collaborating with Shanghai-based Urban Resort Concepts, this property is poised to set new standards in bespoke hotel services in the city. "It will be uniquely Malaysian in essence but its bespoke luxury concept and design will place The RuMa among the best in the world."

Lai is quick to confess that he was an idealist in his younger days. "When I was younger, my dreams were much bolder because everything seemed possible. I had this desire to change the world!" he laughs. "But then reality sunk in and I learned that there were limitations. As I matured, I became better at not feeling too disappointed

when an idea did not work in the beginning; instead, I started searching for practical ways to execute the idea."

It hasn't stopped him from dreaming big though. "The key is patience. I'm constantly thinking about what I can create. I always look for new things, fresh perspectives, and different possibilities."

He travels to get inspirations. "Reality can be demoralising. When that happens to me, I travel to get out of my comfort zone. I find that travelling often triggers creativity and ideas." He cites books as another source of inspiration: "Reading opens up your mind too."

It is no secret that the Lais are a close-knit family. "I'm very much a family man and I believe that the continuing success of Ireka is very much dependent on this factor," notes Lai, who has one son and two daughters. This is most evident in his relationship with his sister, Monica who is the chief financial officer of Ireka Development Management. He quips: "She's the practical one! We balance each other out, each of us bringing our own strengths to the table so that the company can continue to be financially strong and innovative."

As for his professional goals, Lai wants to keep making bold decisions. "I intend to continue bringing innovative concepts to Malaysia. The biggest challenge for me is not to lose my ability to dream. One way of doing that is to continue engaging young minds and keeping abreast with trends around the world. This is how I plan to keep Ireka forward-looking."

Being young at heart, apparently, works too. Throughout our conversation, Lai displays an energy level and an unwavering positive outlook that belie his age, leaving no doubt that there will be bigger and bolder things from him in the years ahead. ■



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