



URBAN RESORT

A new roof awaits as **The RuMa** greets travellers to Kuala Lumpur with its own brand of warm hospitality. **Datuk Lai Voon Hon** shares with **JUSTIN NG**

MALAYSIA TRULY ASIA - a tagline that perfectly encapsulates our diversity and one that helps entice tourists who arrive in droves from all corners of the world. The country as a whole welcomed 25.9 million visitors in 2016. Capital city Kuala Lumpur was the 10th most-visited city on Earth in 2017, according to Euromonitor, with

12.3 million international tourist arrivals.

The thirst for wanderlust helped fuel cranes that dot the ever-skyward Kuala Lumpur skyline. Four Seasons Place Kuala Lumpur has the distinction of being among the tallest hotel buildings in the world. In the past couple of years, the city has seen The St. Regis, Sofitel, Element by Westin and Hotel Stripes operating in the upper echelon of the hospitality industry. Joining their company this year are the W,

Banyan Tree, Allia, Hyatt House and Pavilion Hotel. Next few years, we will witness and get to experience SO Sofitel, Park Hyatt, Jumeirah, Fairmont, Kempinski and Crowne Plaza.

Despite 44 percent of hotels in Kuala Lumpur reside in the upscale segment according to HVS, a hospitality consultancy,



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Datuk Lai Voon Hon remains unperturbed. "The number of new hotels opening in the city also speaks of optimism in terms incoming tourist arrivals and corporate clientele. While The RuMa will of course compete for a share of the tourist arrivals, The RuMa and Urban Resort Concepts' (URC) approach in general is to look internally to focus on the guest experience, making sure we meet our guests' highest expectations with The RuMa's unique culture of Hostmanship." Lai says in an exclusive interview with *Prestige Malaysia*.

His brainchild first announced in 2013 is set to open its doors on Jalan Kia Peng. The RuMa Hotel and Serviced Residences Kuala Lumpur is a joint-venture project between UK-listed Aseana Properties Ltd (ASPL), which owns 70 percent of the project, and locally-listed Ireka Corp, which owns the remaining 30 percent. Lai is presently Ireka Corp's group managing director. Ireka Corp also has a 23.07 percent stake in ASPL.

Lai experienced first-hand the unique Hostmanship by URC in one of its properties during on a trip to Shanghai. Apart from The RuMa, URC also manages The PuXuan, Beijing; The PuShang, Xiamen; and The PuLi, Shanghai, which Lai stayed. The fantastic experience etched an unforgettable impression on Lai, which led him to approach the group when time came for laying the groundwork for The RuMa.

"The team at URC are all about raising the bar, and we wanted to work with them to do this with The RuMa. I feel confident that The RuMa is going to set another benchmark in Malaysia," Lai enthuses.

The RuMa upon opening will be the only hotel in the city to be a member of the Leading Hotels of the World (LHW). LHW is a collective of more than 375 hotels in 75 countries, whose membership is subject to the discretion of its committee. Established in 1928 by several influential and forward-thinking European hoteliers, LHW started with 38 initial members. Today, inspection reports, based on hundreds

of separate, stringent criteria, are filed with its executive committee whose members then vote for acceptance or rejection of a hotel to be a part of LHW. Hence quality and service are adhered to the highest of standards.

URC's Hostmanship concept extends beyond conventional luxury as it emphasises on crafting personal experiences unique to each individual traveller. For that, as Lai puts it, we will "weave local design influences with the contemporary in order to craft a cultural revival of Malaysian heritage in the heart of the city - a bespoke hotel that draws inspiration from the locale."



"At The RuMa, you will find interesting evidence of seamless works of local craftsmen and renowned artists, each telling a story of the city's culture and origins. For example, from the central showpiece designed by renowned local designer Dato' Sri Bernard Chandran to the Kelalai hand-woven walls on the sixth floor, The RuMa traces the city's history until present-day Malaysia – and invites guests on a journey of discovery," Lai elaborates.

The RuMa is targeting a mix of leisure and corporate travellers from around the world. "This segment could potentially range from holidaymakers and high-profile celebrities, to newlyweds who are on their honeymoons, or business expatriates who are temporarily based in Malaysia," Lai says.

The hotel is sited within a 40-storey development that includes residences from levels 19 to 37, totalling 200 units, while hotel rooms and suites span levels seven and 18. The entire project is estimated to have a gross development value of RM635 million.

Housing 253 guest rooms and suites, the hotel's interiors will exemplify URC's hallmark design principles in collaboration with Shanghai-based design firm MQ Studio. The interiors integrate



luxurious and understated metaphorical approaches amidst a modern setting with touches of cultural influences, as previewed by Lai.

All rooms and suites will come with flexible 24-hour check-in check-out, complimentary breakfast anywhere in the hotel, including in-room dining and a complimentary stocked minibar with daily replenishments. On top of that, the hotel is also home to Atas, a modern Malaysian restaurant that escorts diners on a culinary voyage of the Malay Peninsula, with a seasonal menu that highlights the unique flavours of the freshest, locally-produced and

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heirloom ingredients. True to being an "urban resort", guests can also elect to pamper themselves at the hotel's UR Spa that strikes a balance between treatments born of modern science and ancient healing. There are a 24-hour state-of-the-art gym, Seven lobby bar and lounge, Verandah alfresco dining, Librari library lounge, Santai

pool bar and lounge, a meeting space and barber services by Truefitt & Hill.

Although tourism is thriving, there is reason to be wary. The country missed out on the 30 million international arrivals target set for 2017 and the occupancy rate for hotels in the city hovered around 66 percent in 2017, according to Howard HTL and C9 Hotelworks, between 2007 and 2016, however annual demand for luxury hotels has outpaced supply in Kuala Lumpur. That bodes well for hospitality players, including The RuMa.

"Malaysia has been seeing a steady flow of tourists, at least 25 million per year since 2012. Last year, Malaysia recorded a total of 25.9 million tourist arrivals that have contributed RM82.2 billion to the country's revenue. We are also ranked third in terms of the most-visited country in Asia Pacific, just after China and Thailand. We are confident these numbers will continue to improve, and of The RuMa's ability to attract the right audience as well," Lai says. "The location of the hotel, in the heart of Kuala Lumpur's Golden Triangle, is second to none and ideally suited for an urban resort."

Looking ahead to the future, Lai is confident. He feels the lofty targets of achieving 36 million international arrivals and RM168 billion in tourism receipts by 2020 set by the government are achievable. The ringgit being undervalued will encourage foreign tourists to spend more.

"According to statistics, ASEAN, the short-haul market dominates with a 75.1 percent share of total 19.47 million tourist arrivals to Malaysia, medium haul (19.1 percent) and long haul (5.9 percent). In this regard, the strategic planning and execution of policies from the government and industry stakeholders that can boost the



tourism industry is important, particularly to target tourists from the medium- and long-haul market segment," Lai says.

Speaking on the disruption brought upon by Airbnb, he is of the opinion that it bears a larger impact on budget hotels than luxury hotels. "We expect the outlook for occupancy rates for the luxurious 5-star hotels in key locations such as The RuMa Hotel's to remain positive, while old and poorly-managed hotels are likely to face pressures in terms of occupancy rates due to rising competition from home-sharing facilities such as Airbnb," Lai says.

Is he concerned about homeowners of The RuMa serviced apartments listing their units on Airbnb?

"They are expected to strictly adhere to the guidelines imposed on this matter by the management office. We understand that the government will be announcing new guidelines on home-sharing business soon where the likelihood is that they will prohibit daily and very short-term rentals." □

