



The image shows two men standing on a modern staircase. The man on the left is wearing a blue suit and glasses, while the man on the right is wearing a dark suit. The background features a series of vertical light tubes that create a dramatic, high-contrast lighting effect. The overall atmosphere is sophisticated and contemporary.

Redefining Malaysian hospitality

Ireka Corp group managing director Datuk Lai Voon Hon and
Urban Resort Concepts co-founder Markus Engel prepare to
launch the inherently local hotel, The RuMa

A NEW VOCABULARY IN HOSPITALITY



REDEFINING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MALAYSIAN HOTEL, THE RUMA OFFERS A FAMILIAR BRAND OF WARM HOSPITALITY WRAPPED IN SUBTLE NODS TO OUR STORIED HISTORY AND DIVERSE CULTURES. **PETRINA FERNANDEZ** LEARNS ABOUT ITS UNIQUE CONCEPT OF 'HOSTMANSHIP' FROM IREKA CORP GROUP MANAGING DIRECTOR DATUK LAI VOON HON AND URBAN RESORT CONCEPTS CO-FOUNDER MARKUS ENGEL.

Instead of wondering why the caged bird sings, I am trying to imagine what sort of feathered creature would have called this massive birdcage home, fashioned from interlaced naturally finished and glazed terracotta. It would be something mystical, most likely, but this flight of fancy is just that, a passing whimsy. In reality, a handcrafted bronze fountain acts as the base, ready to release jets of water in rippling welcome.

This dramatic installation sits in the centre of an antechamber that separates the porch from the foyer proper of The RuMa Hotel and Residences. You would be hard-pressed to guess that you are a mere stroll away from the Petronas Twin Towers. The entire city — sights, sounds and mayhem ubiquitous to any bustling metropolis — has been effectively shut out with this clever bit of architecture.

And clever is the guiding philosophy throughout this bespoke hotel, springing from a desire to give Kuala Lumpur a luxury hotel that is inherently Malaysian. Ireka Corp group managing director Datuk Lai Voon Hon is a practised hand at adding an original signature to the hospitality industry, driving the vision behind The Westin KL and Aloft KL Sentral. The former was the benchmark to beat when it joined the luxury hotel scene in 2003, while the latter was the stylish, first-of-its-kind offering for tech-savvy travellers when it opened in 2013. It remains the world's largest Aloft Hotel to date in terms of rooms.

While both excel at what they do, as do many other hotels in the city, there did not yet exist one that celebrates its very locale. A common downside of global chains extending their reach to KL and local boutique hotels aspiring to those standards is that interiors have started to become somewhat homogenous — no matter where you are, the five-star hotel you are checking into on one continent seems indistinguishable from another half a world away.

The result of a collaboration with Shanghai-based design firm MQ-studio and premier hotel management company Urban Resort Concepts (URC), The RuMa, from the Malay word "rumah" for home, is a study of Malaysian heritage in more ways than one. Aesthetic, of course — some design cues are immediately recognisable, such as the birdcages, lamps and copper-tiled ceiling evocative of our mining history, or the grand double stairway reminiscent of the staircases in colonial houses. Other cues might take some thought to work out, such as the dark slabs that pave the wide foyer.

"These are century tiles, the same ones used in the Chinese emperor's sleeping chambers in the Forbidden City in Beijing," says Lai. "They were included to tell the story of how Malaysian culture has become so rich in heritage and colour, told through the materials sourced from China and India, among others. Malaya was central to the trade routes and would receive goods from all over the world. Those who lived near the port in Melaka would get first pick of fine marble and stones, still seen in old houses there. We did not want to restrict ourselves to the obvious, we wanted to tell a bigger story."

Beyond the tales that write the book of its design, The RuMa, which opens at the end of this month, celebrates another Malaysian legacy. The spirit of hospitality is a thread that winds through all of our cultures here, and placing that at the forefront of the The RuMa experience is URC. Co-founder Markus Engel brings more than two decades of hospitality experience to the hotel management company, having done stints at The Dorchester in London, The Datai in Langkawi and The Peninsula Hotels in Beijing and Chicago.

He was in the US when a friend called him about the restoration and renovation of the former American embassy next to Tiananmen Square



Bernard Chandran's *Kebyaku* for The RuMa

in Beijing, a huge lifestyle project that involved retail and food and beverage interests. It was here that he met the owners of The PuLi in Shanghai, who convinced Engel and his partners to manage operations at the luxury hotel.

"That turned out to be a good decision. The financial crisis meant that many of our projects overseas were getting into difficulties while China proved more resilient than the rest of the world. Our success at managing The PuLi generated quite a bit of traction in China and we expanded organically from there," Engel says. URC now manages The PuXuan in Beijing, The PuShang in Xiamen, with The RuMa the newest entry in its portfolio.

"The seeds of URC were actually sown in Malaysia when I was working at The Datai 23 years ago," says Engel.

"When we met Datuk [Lai] for the first time and were presented with the idea of a collaboration, we were, of course, ecstatic. I have always had a special affinity with Malaysia, but beyond that, it has also been my belief that there wasn't a hotel product in KL consistent with the sophistication of travellers and Malaysian customers. The industry was like vanilla ice cream when it could be more attuned to the city's urbane style. KL deserves to be at the forefront of innovative concepts; the market is ready for it and Datuk was the first person to appreciate that, I think."

Engel first met Lai in Shanghai when the latter checked into The PuLi. Lai, who had been an architect before joining the family business and initiating its hotel development arm, had acquired a piece of prime real estate in the heart of Bukit Bintang in 2013. Adamant that his new venture must be something distinctive, he went through a list of potential partners and noticed that The PuLi — a name unknown to him — boasted a string of accolades and awards. He went to Shanghai to experience the hotel for himself, contacted Engel and the two hit it off immediately.

"That was where we first met, in Shanghai, wasn't it?" Engel asks Lai, who nods. The two could not look more different, the lanky Engel towering above a sharply dressed and bespectacled Lai. They are sitting side by side on a two-seater in the half of the foyer that will act as the reception area. Its identical counterpart on the far left is the bar. The entire space is bathed in the metallic sheen of the copper-tiled ceiling, the soft corners of which remind me of a train carriage. The RuMa is weeks away from opening and workmen are still hammering and drilling in the background. Only the large furniture has been set up, the finer details to come. The grand staircase, which splits into separate spirals on either side of the landing, awaits a central showpiece designed by Bernard Chandran.

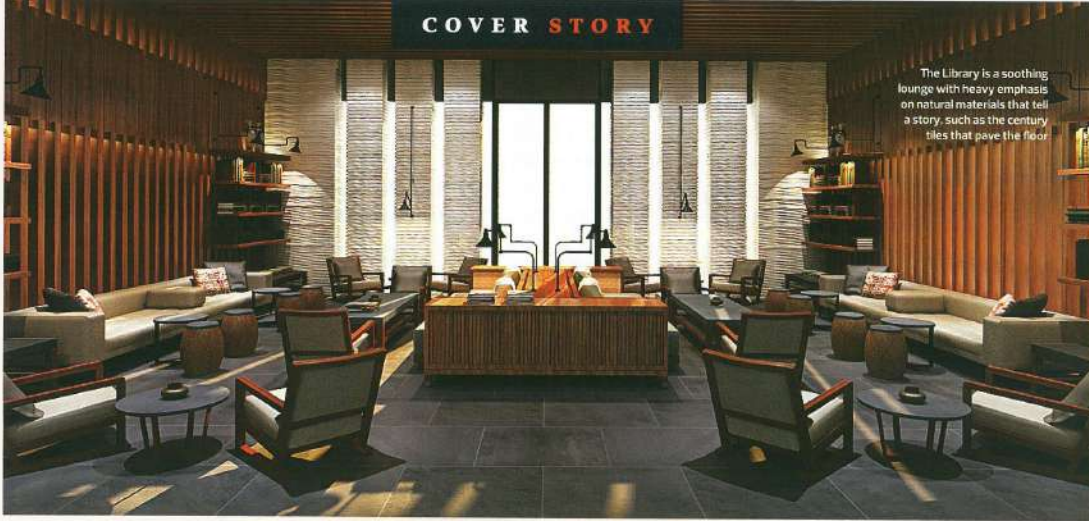
"I think what made this work was the mutual trust between us," muses Engel. "The type of hotels we develop and ultimately manage cannot operate in a merely contractual relationship as is the case with many hotel management companies. It was apparent from our first meeting that we were two kindred spirits with real chemistry and a mutual understanding of what the end goal would be."

Although Lai holds the title of developer and Engel will oversee operations, they made all major design decisions together, ensuring this a genuine collaboration.

"We are always mindful that our hotels are contextual and I hope we have been respectful in adapting and contemporising some of the design elements while honouring old artisans and traditions," Engel continues. "Datuk provided invaluable knowledge and access on this front, such as securing a partnership with Bernard Chandran for the stunning *Kebyaku* showpiece."

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COVER STORY



The Library is a soothing lounge with heavy emphasis on natural materials that tell a story, such as the century tiles that pave the floor.

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"It helps that we are a standalone entity, not confined by brand standards or parameters you have to fit into," says Lai. "Our prerequisite — that The RuMa has a Malaysian identity — is what a luxury hotel should be. We have the freedom to be individual, nothing is uniform. Look at the woven elements around the hotel, in the seats of the chairs and Kelarai-woven walls on the sixth floor; there is nothing standard about them, each is unique. The best part of this partnership is not just creating an environment guests would love to return to but also being assured by the financial viability of this plan. When you create something artistic and ambitious, it is easy to overspend on things that might not commensurate with value. Markus and his team understood which areas to invest in."

"We did see that as our ultimate responsibility, returning Datuk's investment," replies his partner. "Yes, we wanted to bring in something new and disruptive on some level, but we are also responsible for the financial performance of the hotel and the returns for all stakeholders. The key to achieving that is an immaculate and innovative product, and hopefully you will feel you are in a quintessentially Malaysian hotel as soon as you walk in. We were mindful of creating a contemporary interpretation rooted in the DNA and heritage of a rich culture while not employing pastiche or clichés. But more than a physical product, there is the guest experience."

As per its innovative premise, URC has invented a word that best encapsulates the experience it strives to deliver: hostmanship.

"It is a word that doesn't exist but describes everything we want to express. It is a return to the origins of luxury, something crafted with intention. It doesn't just happen," says Engel. "We have seen an evolution of the physical product in hospitality over the past few years but there has been a steady decline in the quality of guest experiences."

The two are quick to identify trends that translate into greater efficiency for operations that compromise the guest experience, though they are fair in defending the motivations and compensations of these. Automation, for instance, means guests can self-check-in and settle in without ever having to liaise with hotel staff, and doing away with the front line is a more cost-effective approach, with the savings ideally transferred to guests.

"Mechanisation and automation will help hotels in many ways and there are spaces for them, such as business hotels like Aloft, and this is reflected in the price — that is their model," says Lai. "Large chain hotels have no choice but to standardise. You are in every city, catering for volume, and you need a consistent identity and service across the world. But when you are paying top dollar, your experience should not be compromised. We are trying to bring back the true pampering of a hotel stay."

Hostmanship, the art of hosting guests and making them feel at home — strengthened by the name RuMa — does away with all the "petty charges, undue bureaucracy and idiosyncrasies that you encounter on a daily basis in hotels", as Engel describes them.



Just as the materials and designs tell the story of Malaysia's heritage, so too does the view outside the window, overlooking the Petronas Twin Towers and other iconic landmarks

"How often have you stood at a reception desk at check-out and been asked what you had from the minibar, only to then stand there waiting, after listing the items, while the receptionist has housekeeping run to check and verify that you are not lying?" he asks. "The next evolution of luxury, we feel, is doing away with these petty things to make the guest experience as intuitive, human, engaging and inclusive as possible."

The RuMa is equipped with large heated swimming and wading pools, a Jacuzzi, sun deck, pool bar, gym and spa, offering a holistic collection of experiences for a truly relaxing stay. Check into any of the 253 rooms spread across 12 floors any time you like — your room is available as early and for as long as you need it, no questions asked, and is ready for you upon arrival, even if that means coming straight in from the airport at 6am. In-room dining is available 24 hours a day and complimentary amenities include breakfast anywhere you like,

the minibar, laundry and pressing, concierge and valet services as well as the use of facilities such as meeting rooms and local phone calls.

"I don't think anyone is doing this yet, but that's really the minimum you should expect from a luxury hotel and I think it is going to be game-changing," says Engel. "Many of these things don't cost much or even cost anything to do; you are being charged for the extra effort. It is purely convenience on the part of management companies to simplify operations as much as possible. I am confident that people are happy to pay a premium for this experience, so what we are doing is not a gamble. I was just reading an article about hotels investing heavily in service technology and I have one word for you: analogue. To me, that is what luxury is, personalised care and attention."

Lai proposed the name The RuMa and Engel loved it immediately, pronouncing it to encapsulate the very experience the two had in mind. It would be akin to staying in a friend's home, being treated not only to the hospitality of someone who cares, but also has local knowledge of the city.

"Brands are yesterday," says Engel. "You walk down KLCC and how many branded bags do you see in an hour? Too many. The currency of luxury is knowledge; the best places to stay, the best tailor, spa, chiropractor. It is social capital, these personal referrals or recommendations that are much more valuable and important today than displaying your affluence with standard things. The audience we are targeting understands and appreciates that we are truly playing host to our locality with our services and experiences."

And to welcome stakeholders to the Kuala Lumpur home away from home they have created, Lai and Engel are eschewing the typical grand opening event in favour of a series of intimate dos with curated guest lists.

"We don't want to pack a few hundred people in here and say the minimum to everyone," says Lai. "We want to greet you personally, have time to sit and chat with you. It will be done with small groups so we can show everyone around and spend time with our guests."

"It's the difference between speed dating and taking the time to get to know someone," quips Engel.

Starting as they mean to go on sets a promising tone for The RuMa, this oasis of one-of-a-kind interiors and inimitable service just metres from KL's grandest landmark. The Petronas Twin Towers across the road can be seen stretching to the sky from certain windows and The RuMa carries that same height of ambition and national pride within its equally impressive structure. For all its splendour, it is remarkably comfortable and friendly, just the place you want to return to after a day in the city.

"We want people to feel like they are being welcomed into a home, coming home," says Lai.

"We want them to leave in tears — in a good way," laughs Engel. "I think we have built a beautiful stage set but it will come down to the play and the acting. We can't wait for it to start."

The RuMa will open officially on Nov 30