



It has been quite long since Vishal Kamat, Director, Kamat Group had given an interview to the hospitality trade media and Hotel Connect was fortunate in that. Vishal sounded a thoroughbred hotelier, well versed with the industry and it was great to understand from him as he passionately shares more about his work, the hospitality sector and tourism aspects of the country.

By Prashant Nayak

“IT’S MORE CHALLENGING TO MANAGE A FAMILY RUN BUSINESS”

Kamat Group is a leading player in the hospitality and food service industry in India. Vishal Kamat oversees the company’s operational functions, management portfolio and overall performance at corporate and property levels. A graduate from the prestigious IHMCTAN Mumbai, he has over 15 years of experience in the hospitality sector. He has now become a seasoned hotelier in a short span of time with significant expertise in national and global hospitality.

He leads the team of industry professionals to spearhead Kamat Group of Hotels’ flagship brands - ‘The Orchid’ Asia’s first 5-star Ecotel Hotel, ‘Fort Jadhavgadhi’ Maharashtra’s only fort heritage hotel and some other brand like Lotus Resorts along with

‘Vithal Kamats – Original Family Restaurant’ chain spread all across India. Vishal is responsible for the company’s fund management, human resources, acquisitions, structuring and strategic business planning. Armed with a vision, right approach and strong leadership he has infused dynamism to enhance the group’s image in the industry.

Born and brought up in Mumbai, Vishal began working at his family restaurants at the young age of 13 and continued to work till his graduation. Being actively involved at grassroots level, he learnt the nuances of business from the senior staffs, which eventually ended up becoming a passion for him. After graduation he expanded his culinary horizons with his first stint at ‘Vithal Kamats - Original Family Restaurant’. He



spearheaded the standard designing of the kitchen, centralisation, standardisation and execution to re-establish it as one of the most revered restaurant chain brand in the country, under the guidance of his father Dr. Vithal Kamat, a living legend in the hotel space.

Vishal speaks, "It has been an interesting journey but my challenge was to work in a family run business rather than a professional one. Our group was already successful and The Orchid Hotel was an industry bench mark with its Ecotel concept. We have a strong legacy in hospitality. My biggest challenge was how to grow more."

Under his leadership Kamat Group of Hotels set up Maharashtra's only heritage hotel 'Fort Jadhavgadh' in Pune. Maharashtra's first and only heritage hotel Fort Jadhavgadh is a grand hotel and a retreat located on outskirts of Pune which has been restored and opened for guests. Weddings are a big attraction here and for the special day they offer you personalised wedding planning services which include themed decoration, menu selection and catering options, and even wrapping of the wedding gifts. They can arrange for everything including an elephant, camel or an entourage of royal turturi players for your baraat to get that royal feel. Jadhavgadh has a total of 58 rooms comprising of three suites, 39 rooms of various types, 12 royal tents and four neem cottages are spread across the fort's three wings, with interiors which are a mix of old world charm and contemporary luxury, making it an ideal holiday resort near Mumbai.

Vishal further shares, "As we are a believer in the concept of '*Athiti Devo Bhavo*', we greet and write to everyone with the '*Namaska*'. This aspect is not common now as greetings are more of hellos and good mornings. Greeting in traditional ways are accepted all over the world. Countries like China, Japan and Thailand take pride in welcoming guests in their own traditional styles. I am at loss to understand why we adopt or are moving towards western cultures when they infact are awed and impressed by our way of life."

Having overseen completion of various projects, he is known for

bringing innovative approach to planning and implementation. He has also been actively liaising with various state tourism boards to set hotel properties at leisure destinations and promote tourism in the region such as Odisha. In fact, Vishal is impressed with Sanchi and Puri in Odisha. He says they are world class and a delight to the eyes. He is proud of the Government and OTDC in keeping the place immaculate and up to the mark.

Trying to invoke emotions in people, Vishal ponders and says, "Why can't we all keep every tourist place, every monument, and every heritage place neat and clean? Who is stopping us? Why blame the Governments? If we people have good civic sense, respect each other and follow the law, then things will be certainly better. We complain of infrastructures but we are the ones to destroy it. It is a bad sight at many of our monuments and religious places. How are we keeping and maintaining them? If our mindset improves then definitely we can expect great results in tourism. We generally are good people and our country is safer than many others considering the population. Some media blow up things out of proportion and of course there will always be some bad and negative elements in the society which needs to be weeded out from the start."

Regarding the debate of fewer footfalls of international tourists to India, Vishal feels that presently it is good time for tourism and that the country has enough attractions to lure the foreigners. What's missing is that we don't emphasise and promote the way we should. Every vertical of tourism works in India. May it be leisure, religious, educational, medical or wellness, we have a fantastic belief system. Like our education system which is the best in the world even with the flaws. Yet, we have the best doctors, scientists and professionals across the world. Likewise, if we put beliefs and efforts in our tourism products then things are bound to change considerably. Other than that Vishal feels, since Indians are travelling and looking at domestic options too, the time is not far off when we won't be requiring international tourists to depend upon but of course they are surely welcome.

An active and engaged hospitality industry leader, Vishal has been associated with various travel industry trade association, hospitality federations and has been invited for guest lectures at premier institutes and colleges. His immense reputation and leadership quality has earned him numerous recognitions including the 'Young Achiever 2013 Award' from the Maharashtra Chamber of Commerce and Industry, among other accolades.

Regarding the food aspect for which their group is famous for, Vishal elaborates, "Our food is, no doubt popular all across India. We try to make it from the heart like a mother prepares with the ingredient called love. It is the same way Chefs who are passionate about food will always go an extra mile and put in more magic ingredients which will always stand apart. So on our side; we make no compromise on the quality and content of our food."

In India, there has been a rise of room inventories and Vishal feels it is purely demand and supply and demands need to be catered to popularly. It is up to individual preferences where one wants to stay. So, if 5 stars or 2 stars are cropping up means there is certainly demand for them. As an example Vishal tells, "During a World Summit you can't expect the delegates to be accommodated in 2 star hotels. Here, the demand for a 5 star property will be definitely there."

On the tax structures which are regularly impacting the hospitality industry, Vishal lightly comments, "My only advice to the tax makers will be to: milk us and not to kill us. We are the golden goose of the economy as we are one of the largest generators of jobs and wealth. It's better to enjoy the omelettes than kill the goose."

It was also wonderful to know that Vishal has seen a great part of India than many of us put together. All these ventures have basically come up during his work where he used to take extra effort to go and visit nearby places and know about the local lingo, culture and food. Thus, he has covered most of India in this way. Besides travelling, Vishal is fond of watching movies and to read whenever he can.