**Foreword**

My Life is a Wave: From Germany to the World

My name is Bella. I was born and raised in Germany in the 1960s as a worker’s child. I studied economics and worked in a handicraft store, living a modest, predictable life—until one fateful carnival joke in 1985 changed everything. It propelled me to Switzerland, where I worked in a small family Beiz (restaurant).

To my amazement, I earned four times more money while working half the hours I had been putting in back in Germany at a department store. Beyond the financial rewards, I met wonderful people, laughed endlessly, and discovered the joy of adventure.

My “temporary” one-month stint at the Beiz stretched into six months. Afterward, I found myself in an unlikely role—working in an underground mushroom factory, all thanks to a lunch guest at the restaurant.
It was a smelly, one-year experience, as the mushrooms were grown on horse manure, but it set the stage for my next leap.

I transitioned to the Hotel Terminus in Brugg, a bustling spot near a train station. There, I met a guest from Spain, who convinced me to move to Spain to keep his German speaking mama company at her villa near Alicante. However, his promises were far from reality. His "lonely mama" didn’t speak German and had an older son who was searching for a wife. That wasn’t the adventure I had signed up for, so I made a quick escape and found work in a nearby pueblo.

Picture this: a blonde German woman working in a Chinese restaurant, falling in love with a Spaniard from the ice cream parlour next door, and writing menus for retired Brits opening a pub. This was the 1980s—unconventional even then.

The British pub owners led me to London, where I spotted an ad in Caterer magazine: an opportunity in the Cayman Islands. With just one U.S. dollar in my pocket and a pink suitcase, I crossed the Atlantic with Richard Branson’s airline, Virgin Atlantic, starting a whole new chapter.

In the Cayman Islands, I met Heidi, another German nearby from my hometown. She had the hospitality background I dreamed of, but she despised it. Our friendship flourished, and we built memories worthy of a book.

Men also entered my life, but my journey felt like a giant wave, sweeping me from continent to continent. Most men couldn’t hold on to the intensity and unpredictability of my life.

After the Cayman Islands, the cruise ships called. Later, Asia beckoned, and Heidi and I parted ways, each embarking on our own paths. In Hong Kong, I worked as a Bar Manager from 1992 to 1993, then became the F&B Manager at the Mövenpick in Beijing from 1993 to 1994. The wave carried me back to the Love Boat, the M/S Berlin, where I served as a Housekeeping Manager.

In South Africa, I found myself at the Lord Neethlingshof Wine Estate, where I had the honour of meeting Nelson Mandela.

In 1996, love brought me back to the Cayman Islands, where I worked as the F&B Manager at Morritt’s Tortuga Club and completed my hospitality degree.

After the millennium, I moved to Egypt, a halfway compromise as Asia’s economy struggled. Following the events of September 11, Egypt’s economy faltered, and I moved on to Jordan, leaving just before the Iraq war erupted.

Another stint with Carnival Cruise Line took me to Hawaii, Canada, and Alaska. At the end of that contract, a call came from Thailand: Koh Samui and the Central Group offered me a position. Saying no was not an option—even I couldn’t resist this opportunity. To this day, the origins of that call remain a mystery, but Thailand marked another unforgettable chapter in my life.

From Vietnam to Australia and Beyond: My continued Adventures in Hospitality

In 2006, I received an offer to become General Manager in Vietnam. Honestly, it didn’t matter where it was—Timbuktu, Mars, wherever! The position itself was the dream. After years of being an assistant, I was determined to climb the ladder and take on the challenge.

The people of Hue were baffled by the idea of a five-star hotel charging $100 per night for a room, let alone having a female German at the helm. They secretly gave me three months to last. Well, I outlasted their expectations and stayed in Hue for almost 4 years.

In 2010, I left Hue, following my family’s advice to “come back to the real world” and find a husband.

So, I ventured to Australia, where I took a role with Accor Asia managing a small hotel on Norfolk Island.

What I didn’t know was that the hotel was bankrupt. I was moved to Kalgoorlie, a miner’s town in the red center of Australia, and from there to Ibis Sydney. After 20 months, though, I realized I couldn’t adjust to the “real world,” so I took up an offer from a Scot based in Goa, India.

At first, I said India was a place for traveling, not working. But after six months, on the last day of my probation, with the Scot gone, I packed up and moved on to Myanmar.

Two and a half tumultuous years followed in Myanmar, where I managed two hotel openings. By 2015, I returned to the south of Vietnam, where I worked in Long Hai for Fusion. After my contract finished, I moved into the corporate world in Hanoi-Halong Bay, but in 2019, I returned to Central Vietnam to “retire” (or so I thought).

I could write 50 stories about my time on the cruise ships, but I’ll spare you the details and keep it brief.

Living in Danang, enjoying the food, the waves, the vibes, and reflecting on my journey, I realized I wanted to create something more. I hope this book provides entertaining tales of hospitality that anyone in the industry can relate to and maybe even inspires others to join the field.

Let me be clear: this book is not meant to insult, criticize, or belittle anyone. It’s not my intention to make anyone feel small or incompetent. I am not a racist, I have no political opinions, and I don’t vote.

If you find yourself in this book, don’t be upset—be proud to have shared a part of my journey.
If you recount your experience with me was different – then it is because I am getting old and see things different.

I’m just a simple girl from the Black Forest, recounting the stories of my life in hospitality.

A heartfelt thank you goes to all my friends who accompanied me on this journey and who want to be mentioned here, too many to list everyone. I am deeply grateful to my employers for putting up with me, and I apologize for any inconveniences you had to suffer through during my wild professional ride.

I also want to thank those who had the patience to teach me and saw something valuable in me.

This is my personal journey, and above all, it’s meant to entertain and provide a glimpse into the world of hospitality. For those outside the industry, I hope it intrigues you enough to consider a job in hospitality.

So lean back and enjoy the ride—because, believe me, it was one wild ride!

1. My first Serve
2. The Business Card
3. “Ein Wiedersehen” in London
4. Which one is Grand Cayman in the Channel Islands?
5. Crossing the Atlantic
6. Vienna Pirouette
7. Lost Labour of Love
8. Who doesn’t love American Guests?
9. Please don’t stop because of me!
10. A Queen says ‘Good Day’
11. What the heck - let’s go out and see New York!
12. Yes, you are on Ice Duty!
13. And the winner of the multinational beer drinking contest is…
14. One beer or two?
15. A Life of Entertainment: Tales from Behind the Bar
16. Culture shocked Germans
17. I’ll do it ‘my way’
18. Beer pouring explained
19. The unseen Side of Hospitality -a Brush with the Chinese Mafia
20. Freeze! A Picnic at the Great Wall of China
21. On the Radio
22. Genders upside down
23. What’s in a Name?
24. The Love Boat
25. Vineyard Weddings
26. Back to the Tropics - A tough Schnitzel
27. Help – my Boss is a Woman!
28. Who gets the Booze?
29. Rescues in the Red Sea
30. Football Fanatics
31. Indecent Exposure
32. Ali Baba and the forty Thieves
33. Get me out of here – NOW!
34. Banquet Battles
35. A “Lanna Wedding”
36. Zico’s botched Mardi Gras Parade
37. A Slap in the Face
38. Drunken Crows
39. A measly Thousand Dollar Cat
40. The Tsunami in Phuket
41. Where is the Car?
42. A Side Trip into Retail: Revitalizing a Boutique Shopping Arcade
43. Too much Rain is a Pain
44. Battling Interior Design Wars
45. Amazing Races - Teambuilding Adventures like No Other
46. Get the Dog out of my Walk In Fridge!
47. A Master Class in Manipulation: Handling the Worst Guests
48. Medical Emergencies
49. Mutiny of the Reservation Team
50. The Big Hiring Party
51. Girl Power in the Spa
52. The first “Man” in Hue
53. Black or White?
54. You have got Talent
55. Long Fingers and Creative Minds
56. A Prize to the overnight Laundry Champions!
57. State Visits & Celebrities
58. Danish Royalty in Hue
59. French Diplomacy Meets Hue’s Bureaucracy
60. Tricky Diplomacy
61. Hollywood & Politics High-Profile Guests: Balancing Privacy and Publicity
62. Crisis at Full Occupancy: The Spa on Fire
63. Norfolk Island – on the Receiving End
64. Expiry Dates
65. A short Action Movie
66. HiSo in Thailand
67. The Snake Expert
68. Temples and Monasteries
69. A Whirlwind Renovation in Hue
70. Monastic Luxury at Inle Lake
71. Tamarind Jam anyone?
72. The Cloister Bar - Rhum Arrangé, from Madagascar to Myanmar
73. With the Go-Kart to Taunggyi
74. Welcome back to Vietnam
75. A blue Christmas – Reinventing Traditions
76. A New Year’s Eve Story – The unprofessional Saxophone Player

**My first Serve**

***Restaurant Warteck, Leibstadt, Switzerland, 1985***

In 1985, I found myself working at Restaurant Warteck, a cosy, family-run establishment nestled in Leibstadt, a small Swiss town near the German border. Warteck was a quintessential local restaurant with about ten tables, known for serving hearty, traditional one-dish meals. The husband manned the kitchen, whipping up dishes with practiced ease, while his wife was the heart of the front-of-house, charming and entertaining guests. How I ended up there is a story in itself. A friend and I decided to double our fun by attending Carnival celebrations twice—first in Germany, and then in Switzerland, where the festivities happen a little later. During our time at Warteck, the waitress casually asked if I’d like to take her job. At the time, it seemed like a light hearted moment, but just two weeks later, destiny had other plans—I found myself accepting her offer and stepping into her role. This particular chapter was one of my first—and most memorable—experiences in hospitality.

**A Window to the Kitchen**

Like many small restaurants of the time, Warteck had a simple setup. Behind the bar was a window through which the kitchen passed food to the wait staff. From this window, I could see the owner bustling about in the kitchen, while the wife managed drinks and conversations with the guests. My role started behind the bar, serving beers, coffees, and the local favourite, Stange—tall glasses of beer. My early days were a comedy of errors, filled with spilled drinks and sheepish apologies as I wondered whether this job was truly meant for me.

Eventually, I mastered drinks like the "Café Fertig," a tall glass of black coffee with schnapps, and felt confident enough to graduate to taking food orders.

**The First Order: Schnitzel and Pommes**

My debut food order seemed straightforward enough: a classic Schnitzel with pommes frites (French fries). The owner cooked it to perfection and handed it through the kitchen window. Holding the plate firmly in my hands, I carried it out to the table. Everything felt like it was going smoothly—until I attempted to set the plate down. What happened next is burned into my memory. As I lowered the plate, the schnitzel and pommes decided to defy gravity. They slid gracefully off the plate and arranged themselves in an almost artistic circle right on the table.

**A Frozen Disney Princess**

Time seemed to stand still. I stared at the plate, the guest, the table, and even the ceiling, cycling through these points as if searching for an escape. I was utterly paralysed, unsure of what to say or do.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the owner observing the spectacle from the pass-through window. Without missing a beat, his little beer belly bouncing slightly, he stepped out of the kitchen, scooped up the schnitzel and fries with his bare hands, plopped them back onto the plate, and apologized to the guest. “I’m so sorry,” he said with disarming sincerity. “I’ll get you a fresh one.”

The guest, however, surprised us both. Smiling, he took the plate from the owner’s hands, set it back down on the table, and replied, “That’s okay, I’ll eat it.”

As for me, I remained frozen like a Disney ice princess, unable to utter a single word. My cheeks burned with embarrassment, and I silently wished for the ground to swallow me whole.

That day, I learned two invaluable lessons: first, the importance of resilience and recovery when things go wrong; and second, the incredible generosity of spirit that some guests bring to the table.

It was my first food serve in Switzerland, and it remains one of the most unforgettable moments of my life.

**The Business Card**

***Heladeria San Juan, Alicante, Spain 1986***

In 1986, the EU didn’t exist. But there were pueblos—small Spanish villages with a sunlit square filled with shops, bars, and restaurants. Life was punctuated by the peso, the siesta, and the fiesta. For a German accustomed to precision and routine, it was an entirely unbelievable way of living.

Back then, my days started at 7:00. Breakfast at 7:30. Work by 8:00. Lunch at noon. Dinner at 18:00
Sleep, rise and repeat. Efficiency defined us Germans. Spaniards, however, had other ideas. They’d roll out of bed around 10 AM, indulge in a luxurious breakfast of tortillas, coffee, or hot chocolate until noon, and then take a well-earned siesta—after all that rich food one is exhausted. Work resumed leisurely around 16:00, followed by a long-awaited fiesta of mucho tacos and vino.

Naturally, my rigid 8-to-6 regimen lasted all of two months before I succumbed to the Spanish wave.

Forty years on, my memories of that time blur in some places. I can’t recall the names of the Chinese restaurant I worked at, or the pub of the British people. What I do remember is this: the pueblo was San Juan near Alicante, the ice cream shop was La Heladería, and my boyfriend’s name was Juan, like many Spanish men.
And indeed I had a wonderful time in between siesta’s and fiestas, learning to roll around the Spanish way.

I’d taken on several odd jobs to stretch my Swiss savings, even waiting tables at a Chinese restaurant.

It wasn’t unusual to me, but most guests found it hilarious—a German girl serving Beijing Duck and Tequilas in Spain. Yet, the place was always packed for one simple reason: it was dirt cheap.

The Chinese owners were smart. They knew they couldn’t compete with Spain’s beloved traditional cuisine. Who eats Chinese food in Spain, anyway? So they found a niche—ridiculously low prices. A plate of Beijing Duck was only a few pesos, and a shot of tequila? Just 20 British pence! Naturally, the restaurant became a hotspot for budget-conscious Brits on holiday.

**Enter Tom**

That’s how I met Tom—part of a group of five lads from London on a five-day spree. They spent their evenings knocking back tequila shots at the “China Man” in San Juan’s pueblo, delighted to have found a waitress who spoke their language. Generous tippers, they soon became my regulars during their brief stay.

I told Tom I might soon move to London for a waitress job at the Swiss Centre in Leicester Square. On their final evening, Tom handed me a business card. “Look me up,” he said.

Now, you have to understand—I was a girl from the Black Forest. I’d never seen such an elaborate thing.
A small white card, embossed with elegant gold lettering that announced an address for a toy factory in the UK. I stared at it, puzzled. I twisted it this way and that, half-expecting something magical to happen.

When nothing did, I smiled politely and tucked it away.

After a year of sun, siestas, and fiestas, my relationship with Juan fizzled out. The pace of life— late nights, long siestas and fiestas—was just not enough for me. I wanted to see, live and experience things.

London called, and Juan did not want to leave Spain, he was not an adventurer like me.

I packed my bags and left for London, eager for a new adventure.

Before I left while packing, I stumbled upon that little card again. By then, it had become just another trinket in my suitcase, bothersome and unnecessary. Without a second thought, I threw it out.

Little did I know that it wouldn’t make a difference?

 **“Ein Wiedersehen” in London**

***Swiss Centre Leicester Square, London, 1987***

The Swiss Centre once stood proudly at the edge of Coventry Street, London, where it met Leicester Square—a showcase for all things Switzerland. This 14-storey landmark was more than just a building; it embodied Swiss charm and commerce. Inside, visitors could find a Swiss bank, a tourist office, a chocolate and souvenir shop, and a Swissair ticket office. A café and several Swiss-themed restaurants occupied the basement, offering an authentic taste of Alpine life in the heart of London.

By 2008, however, the Centre was no more, its purpose outgrown and its charm misplaced amidst urban redevelopment. Yet, Swiss heritage persists in Swiss Court, where two totem columns stand: one is bearing the insignia of the Helvetic cantons, and the other, a carillon clock with 23 bells. The chimes, last played on September 21, 2007, are an echo now only in memory.

For me, those echoes resonate vividly through my time at La Rendezvous, the café where I worked behind a large round white bar counter. It was there I served cakes crafted from authentic Swiss recipes, each slice a small homage to the land of precision watches and alpine vistas.

Our team was a motley crew, a bustling community of young dreamers, transient workers, artists and those wanting to become an actress, singer or flight attendant. Most of my colleagues were under 25, from all continents, studying English and dreaming of careers with Lufthansa. Others, like the dishwashers—plucked straight from the streets—found stability in the kitchen’s relentless rhythm. We earned £24 a week for 44 hours of work.
A weekly Tube pass cost £3, leaving little room for indulgences, but we somehow scraped together funds to see musicals like Grease, Cats, and other quintessential London experiences.

Life behind the scenes was chaotic. The kitchen was sweltering, loud, and perpetually alive with the sharp voices of temperamental chefs and the hum of 150 staff from at least 30 different nationalities. The “better staff” worked in the Chelsea Fine Dining Restaurant upstairs, but I had my share of culinary indulgences.

At the fondue restaurant, we scraped the melted remnants of cheese from pots, savouring them in stolen moments between serving guests. It didn’t take long to settle in—mainly because there wasn’t much time for that. There was no training, no orientation, just a whirlwind of necessities handed over: a uniform, a code for the cash register, a float, and the menu. Trial by fire, as they say. Yet somehow, it all came together. Within two months, I found myself manning the bar counter of Le Rendezvous all on my own.

**We meet again**

It began like any other day, with coffee cups to fill and cakes to serve, but a commotion in the basement caught my attention—a strange movement, a noise, a shadow. Distracted, I brushed it off until a tall, broad figure emerged from the chaos and stood before me at the bar.

“There you are,” he said.

I froze. It was Tom.

Tom, the Tequila drinking Brit from the Chinese restaurant in San Juan, a small Pueblo near Alicante, Spain. Tom, whom I had lost touch with after discarding his contact details on a scrap of cardboard. And yet, here he was, having walked into the Swiss Centre to find me.

From that moment, my life in London took a wild turn. For the next six months, Tom became my guide to an entirely new side of the city. Together, we ventured into places I could never have afforded or even imagined existed. From £1 dim sum feasts at 3 AM to pubs where rock bands played, every outing was an adventure. One night, in a fit of youthful mischief, we even attempted to use a shopping trolley as a taxi substitute, an escapade that landed us in more trouble than we bargained for.

Looking back, my time at the Swiss Centre feels like a mosaic of tastes, sounds, and faces—a slice of London life as vibrant and fleeting as the chimes of the carillon clock. Though the building is gone, its spirit lives on in the stories it nurtured, and in my memories of that extraordinary chapter of my life.

**Which one is Grand Cayman in the Channel Islands?**

In the rambling canteen of the Swiss Centre, where I worked, magazines were often left lying around.
During one lunch, I stumbled upon an issue of The Caterer. Flipping through its pages while eating, an advert caught my eye:

“Chefs Wanted – The Wharf Restaurant, Grand Cayman.”

Without hesitation, I grabbed a knife, ceremoniously cut out the ad, and stuck it onto a piece of borrowed A4 paper using my thumb and some spit for adhesive. Inspired, I scrawled in big, bold cursive:

“If you are looking for cooks, you will also need waiters.”

I folded the masterpiece, stuffed it into an envelope, spit onto the stamp for good measure, and sent it off to a PO box on Grand Cayman in the Cayman Islands.

My co-workers watched in amusement and doubt and everyone forgot about this ridiculous episode.

Three months passed. Life carried on as usual. At 3 AM one night, the phone rang in the Willesden Green staff house, which is nothing unusual with all different nationalities living there. I shared a room with a Swiss pastry chef. The unusual was a co-worker knocking on our door shouting “phone for you Carmen”. First I didn’t want to get up, thinking it was a mistake. When I took the dangling receiver and put it on my ear saying a grumpy alo; an urgent voice with an Austrian accent asked me: “Hello? Are you Carmen? Do you schpeak Englisch? Before I knew what was happening I had agreed to a waitress position at the Wharf Restaurant in Grand Cayman, just like this, at 3 AM over the phone with no contact whatsoever, just a PO box and a voice with a strong Austrian accent on the other end saying, “Come over.”

**A Geography Lesson at the Pub**

I was ecstatic—and bewildered. I needed to find Grand Cayman, fast. In those pre-mobile phone days we relied on printed maps. And there was no Grand Cayman to be found. When I finally caught up with Tom, on one of the “Tom evenings”, I blurted out, “I can’t find Grand Cayman on the map—none of the channel islands is called Grand Cayman. I got a job there!”

Tom looked at me as if I’d announced I’d discovered Atlantis. With a look mixed between amusement, compassion and amazement, he sat me down in the nearest pub, ordered us drinks, and kindly explained that Grand Cayman was nestled between Miami and Cuba.

 “It’s tax-free and British!” I exclaimed. “Sure,” Tom chuckled. “And it is also on the other side of the Atlantic”

**From Dreams to Double Shifts**

My excitement dimmed when reality set in: there was no way I could afford a transatlantic flight on my weekly wage of £24. Totally devastated, I confided my dilemma to Tom. “How could I possibly make it over the big pond?”

But Tom had a knack for making the impossible seem just within reach. Excited by himself he took me to the Cayman House, located in a fine district in London on a top floor of a high rise building. Here I was eagerly assisted with information and the entire visa process. Then, as if on cue, Richard Branson’s Virgin Atlantic began offering flights from London to Miami for just £99—a fortune, but achievable.

Determined, I worked nonstop double shifts at the Swiss Centre for one month, fuelled by coffee, ambition, and the promise of adventure. By September 1988, I stood at Heathrow airport in London with my pink suitcase, one single U.S. dollar in my pocket, and a one-way ticket to Grand Cayman; saying good bye to Tom, my co-workers and London.

**Crossing the Atlantic**

***The Wharf Restaurant, Grand Cayman 1988***

So how did I land the job as a waitress in Grand Cayman? It wasn’t through a polished résumé or years of experience in hospitality. In fact, my “application” was a single sentence written in cursive on a plain sheet of A4 paper, sent by slow mail. The friend who had arranged the job, Gilbert was an unreliable fellow. Hurricane Gilbert, the most devastating storm of the 1988 season, which wreaked havoc across the island had delayed the restaurant’s opening. Many waiters had abandoned ship, waiting too long for the opening and potential income. By the time I arrived, staffing was a desperate need.

**The Journey: From Miami to the Cayman Islands**

Changing planes in Miami, a bustling and intimidating airport at the time, I was enchanted by the quaint Cayman Airways plane and its cheerful staff offering free alcohol. Sitting next to four lanky American men, determined to make the most of the in-flight drinks, provided unexpected entertainment for the two-and-a-half-hour flight.

When we landed, I was greeted by the island’s humid heat, customs officers in knee socks, and the emptiness of an airport that closed after the single daily flight had landed. The lads said their goodbyes and disappeared, leaving me alone with my pink suitcase, feeling overwhelmed and jet-lagged.

As I sat by the exit, unsure of my next move, a weathered US Army jeep packed with passengers screeched to a halt nearby. One of my seatmates from the flight leaned out and asked if I was okay. Near tears I admitted that I was stranded, supposed to be picked up by someone from The Wharf Restaurant.

He asked me for the address, I nervously stammered that I only had a PO Box; and he gave me that incredulous look. I mean, who flies over the Atlantic with a PO Box only? To my relief, the driver said he recognized the address and offered to drop me off. At 5 PM, they left me and my suitcase at the restaurant’s entrance.

**An Unprepared Arrival**

The restaurant was buzzing with activity, full of wait staff and cooks making final preparations for the evening. However, no one had heard of me or my arrival. With a single dollar to my name and no clear plan, I waited until the owner, arrived around 7 PM. He threw up his hands, admitting he had completely forgotten about me.

Despite the chaos, I was handed a blue shirt and marine Bermuda shorts, and by 10 PM, I had completed my first shift as a waitress on Grand Cayman.. Exhausted and disoriented but grateful, I was provided a spare room at one couple’s apartment, a chef’s and bartender’s home. After almost 24 hours of travel and work, I collapsed into what felt like a coma.

For the next 7 days I did nothing but work, declined all invitations to go somewhere or do something and sat put, until I received my very first, high pay check.

**Reflections on an Unforgettable Start**

What a whirlwind introduction to island life. My journey from a one-line “CV” to securing a job and a place to stay was as unpredictable as the hurricane that delayed The Wharf’s opening. But it was also a testament to the kindness of strangers, the resilience born of necessity, and the strange magic of starting over in a new place with nothing but hope, determination—and a pink suitcase.

**Vienna Pirouette**

Established in 1988, The Wharf Restaurant & Bar has become one of the premier waterfront dining destinations in the Cayman Islands. Whether you choose to dine in air-conditioned comfort, under the stars overlooking the mystical Caribbean Sea, or at our picturesque Oceanside bar—'Ports of Call'—there's no shortage of scenic views to enjoy.

At our grand opening in September 1988, we had 350 dining seats, serviced by 12 waiters, one bartender, and a team of 10 chefs in the kitchen. This meant each waiter and chef was responsible for approximately 35 guests, serving iced water, beverages, bread and butter and an à la carte menu. Despite voicing some concerns about being short of staff and not being able to give great service before opening, our Maitre D', a seasoned professional from Austria (nicknamed “der alte Hase”), reassured us with his experience, saying don’t worry, the restaurant won’t be full and everyone will be lucky to have 10 guests.

And while we didn't worry, we certainly ran—and fast!
The doors opened at 6 PM and all tables filled up in a matter of minutes, and most of the evenings we had a second seating at 8 PM, every waiter served between 50 – 100 guests one night.

With heavy oval trays in hand, we rushed from the kitchen to the deck, across the beach, and back. Whether in stormy weather or under sunny skies, we had to adapt on the fly, especially when guests abandoned their tables during rain showers, leaving us to clear, recook, and serve all over again.

It was chaotic—but we survived! From 4 PM to 10 PM, in 6 measly hours, we polished silverware and glasses, prepped the dining area including tedious napkin folding, took orders, served food and drinks, presented bills and cleaned up—all without runners, helpers, or any clear organization. Our Maitre D, with his charming Austrian flair (kiss the hand, Madam!), was adored by guests, but for us, the team, it was a whirlwind of Irish, Canadian, Hong Kong, Austrian, Italian, and German chaos.

Through it all, we bonded. No matter how hectic the nights were, we managed to pull together. One lanky 2-meter-tall waiter from Austria, was often stationed at the beach due to its distance and steep steps. His constant attempt to charm guests—and in particular one of the waitresses—became legendary. With his trays of food and drinks, he would twirl and perform, always trying to impress.

But the highlight came one busy evening when he, loaded with a full tray of dirty dishes, after doing one of his pirouettes, collided with the wall near the kitchen. In a stunning moment of grace (and perhaps defiance of physics), he fell, with arms, legs, and broken plates flying everywhere. The restaurant fell silent, and then—like a true showman—he picked himself up, bowed dramatically, and collected the broken dishes; like this was a special performance and part of the dinner.
The crowd erupted into applause, cheering and laughing. It became one of our most memorable and hilarious moments.

Over the years, there were many more chaotic moments: whipped cream fights between the kitchen and service staff, unexpected falls, and spontaneous performances. But nothing quite topped this Austrian waiter’s grand finale in the middle of a packed dining room with 300 guests.

**Lost Labour of Love**

At 4 PM, we would arrive for our shift at The Wharf Restaurant, ready to tackle the preparations for the night. The first task was polishing silver, glassware, and plates—meticulous work that we would continue until it was time to set the tables. The floor had already been mopped the night before, so our focus shifted to the linens. Each tablecloth was ironed directly on the table, a small but essential touch that set the tone for the evening.

Next, we carefully set the table for three courses, placing freshly polished silver, a bread plate with a bread knife, and an intricately folded napkin between the silverware. Wine and water glasses were placed above the dinner knife, and a small vase with fresh flowers completed the setting. Setting a table was more than just a task—it was a labour of love, and we took pride in it. With ten waiters working together, we scrambled to prepare 350 seats before the Maitre D’s dramatic entrance at 6:55 PM. He would swing open the door, greeting each guest with a charming “Kiss the hand, madam.”

As the guests filed in, our sections quickly filled up, and the real action began. In true cowboy style, we’d rush to each table, practically tossing menus at the guests while sloshing ice water into their glasses—all in one swift motion. As soon as the drinks were served, we’d sprint to the kitchen to grab a basket with bread and butter, hoping to return before the guests had a chance to settle.

But, more often than not, we’d return to find the entire table we took so much time to set up cleared, the silverware hastily shoved to the side, and the napkins tossed on top. Guests, now comfortably seated with both elbows placed on the table, would eagerly wait to order drinks. Despite our best efforts to sell an elaborate cocktail, the answer was often the same: “Give me a Heineken – no glass.”

In an instant, the carefully set table—our labour of love—was swept aside, replaced by the straightforward demand for a cold beer.

And that was just the beginning. The main course fork would often be used for the appetizer, and by the time the entrée arrived, guests had no qualms about using whatever silverware happened to be left on the table. For good measure, they'd throw the dessert fork and spoon onto their plate before we could clear the main course. And then, if they ordered dessert, there was, of course no silverware left on the table.
If we had time, we'd quickly set up a fresh set of dessert utensils; if not, the guest would impatiently ask, "I need a spoon with that" just as we were about to serve dessert.

For 350 guests, this meant polishing silverware for 700 people every single day. It was a never-ending cycle!

**Who doesn’t love American Guests?**

During dinner at the restaurant or while working on the cruise ship, there wasn't much time for small talk. Yet, guests always found a way to satisfy their curiosity, at the beginning leaving us speechless with their questions.

On Grand Cayman, some of the most memorable inquiries included:

"Is the island round?"

"Do you sleep on the island?"

"Do you eat on the island?"

"Ordering turtle schnitzel: Is this turtle meat?"
"Are there any crocodiles? "
"Are the pirates real? (During Pirates week) "

And on the cruise ship, after many curious questions and after explaining that we had a six-month contract:

 "Do you get to eat on the ship?"

 "Do you sleep on the ship?"
 “Does the ship move?”
Even going as far as “where are we headed?”

When asked, "Where are you from?" and we answered, "Germany," (lucky for us, most Americans were familiar with Germany), the next standard question was always, "Ah, you must be from Munich?"

It seemed that, in the minds of many, Germany was made up of just one city—Munich, the capital of beer and Oktoberfest.

Just recently, a colleague of mine from the industry, also commenting on guests, asked at a spa,
"How many therapists does it take to do the eight-hands massage?" I couldn’t resist replying, "How many hands does one person have?" Welcome to the club of silly questions!

At times, these questions made you want to respond with something like, "Yes, we don’t eat for six months," or, "You see those helicopters up there? They pick us up after work and fly us back home to Germany, a whopping 8,365 kilometres away."

Of course, we never did answer like that. All we could do was clench our teeth and hope it looked like a polite smile.

**Please don’t stop because of me!**

***QE2, Cunard, Around the world cruise 1989***

Working as a room attendant on the QE2 made for some unforgettable stories.

First off, we didn’t exactly plan to end up on the QE2. We had initially signed up in Miami at an agency to work on a Greek ship, Regency Cruises, but unfortunately, it sank.
I like to think it wasn't because we were on board.

After that, we signed up for the MV Sagafjord, a smaller, more luxurious ship. But thanks to my German best friend, we ended up being transferred to the QE2. We didn’t know exactly what that would entail, but the name QE2, Queen Elizabeth, and the idea of serving 1,000 passengers around the world, certainly sounded grand.

And at first, it was grand. We were flown in from Zurich to Osaka, Japan, where the ship was docked for a month as a floating hotel. The flight was a dream—free alcohol and amazing food—and upon arrival, we were greeted by the company representative and whisked off to a five-star hotel. The room had a remote control for the curtains, the TV, and even the toilet. We were impressed, to say the least.

But then, a day later, after boarding and changing into our uniforms, the shine wore off pretty quickly.

We were room attendants and assigned on the Five Deck, the lowest deck with the most inexpensive cabins. And honestly, we liked it that way. It was less demanding and stressful than working on the upper decks. But cleaning 20 cabins with bunk beds in just four hours every day was no small feat.

We were on a transatlantic crossing from New York to Southampton, always fully booked because passengers could bring their entire household with them for free. (Ah, those were the days!)

So there we were, knocking on doors: Knock, knock, knock—“Housekeeping!”

If no one answered, in we'd go.

I’d sweep through the cabin like a whirlwind—empty the trash, make the beds—and then throw open the bathroom door with a flourish... and oops!

There, sitting right in the middle on the throne, was a (very large) lady.

I retreated instantly, stumbling over myself with a flurry of apologies. How could this have happened?

She was so sweet about it. “Oh, never mind, dear. Please continue, just clean around me and take no note.”

I smiled politely, but in my head, I was thinking, "I don’t think so..." and promptly ran.

**A Queen says ‘Good Day’**

As I mentioned before, I was working on the QE2, the super cruise liner with 1,000 cabins and 2,000 guests on board. I was a room attendant on the 5th deck, the lowest, most crowded, and least luxurious deck, which housed the cheapest cabins. Every day, we were tasked with cleaning 20 cabins with bunk beds.

There were about six of us servicing one corridor, paired with a male laundry runner who picked up the dirty linen. For Cunard's 100th anniversary, the company announced that Queen Elizabeth II would board the ship in Southampton for a lunch. While it was an exciting event and big news, it also caused some headaches for the crew.

In the days leading up to the event, we had to surrender our crew passes. We couldn't leave the ship, had to do bomb searches and security drills, and were given strict security measures. Back then, there were no briefings, social media updates, or details—just the vague instruction, "The Queen is coming."

On the day of her arrival, we were told she’d be arriving by helicopter. There were plenty of theories about where she might enter the ship, and one rumour was that she’d come through the 5th deck's luggage door.

With cameras in hand, most of the room attendants and waiters—who could sneak away from their duties—headed to the decks, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Queen or snap a photo.

But one of my Filipino colleagues on my corridor and I decided to stay on our deck, working away, blissfully unaware of the commotion. We didn’t mind, though—without everyone else around, we were able to clean the cabins much faster than on a normal day.

Around 11 AM, my colleague was vacuuming the corridor carpet in front of his section, and we were finishing up on the eerily quiet deck when suddenly the luggage door swung open, and there she was—Queen Elizabeth II, stepping onto the 5th deck.

He froze; vacuum in hand, his jaw dropping. The Queen smiled at him and said, “Good day,” before marching off with her security team in tow. He was completely stunned, unable to answer or move.

I was standing a few meters behind him, also in shock but trying to stay calm. Back in those days we had no mobiles, no cameras or anything to capture this moment, but we just soaked it up and felt so good.
Ten minutes later, the room attendants, waiters, and guests all returned, and the corridor came alive with a hustle and bustle. Nobody had spotted the Queen or had any idea she'd been there. Everyone scrambled to clean cabins, preparing for the upcoming lunch with Her Majesty.

Just before the lunch break, everyone began to notice my colleague. He stood there with a dreamy look on his face, still processing the encounter. He had met the Queen, and she had said “good day” to him.
He couldn’t stop smiling, and neither could the rest of us stop smiling at him!

**What the heck - let’s go out and see New York!**

On the QE2, one deck had two corridors, and each corridor had six cabin stewards. Most supervisors managed two corridors, and like many room attendants, new or promoted staff started on the lower decks where the service requirements were less demanding.

Our supervisor on the 5th deck was new, eager to please, and from the UK—her name was Rosemary.
We six room attendants, from all over the world—Germany, Austria, Ireland, and the Philippines—were young, full of energy, and perhaps a bit too self-assured. After a few months, we thought we knew it all.
We were selfish, creative in innocent cheating, and, let’s be honest, a difficult crew to please.

On our deck, there were only two people in our team we considered "weak," and in true team spirit, we covered for them. The rest of us ran like clockwork, capable of making up 100 bunk beds in two hours, swishing 50 toilets and emptying a hundred bins at the same time.
And thus naturally, we didn’t think we needed anyone to supervise us.

One particularly busy day in New York, just before we were about to finish up at noon, the short, eager new supervisor on the five deck, was scurrying around the corridor looking for something to fix, manage, or complain about. But we were in no mood for it. New York was just outside, and whenever we had a chance to go off the ship in an exotic location, we seized it—no matter how tired or hangover we were.

All of us were tidying up the pantry, washing dishes, vacuuming the floors, and stowing away the rubbish, eagerly awaiting our time off. As I was cleaning up the leftovers in the corridor, I saw the supervisor standing silently in front of the linen cabinet, just staring at it, not saying a word. I walked past her, and with a quick, unintentional push, I heard a soft click of the key bolt as I continued strolling down the corridor. I wouldn’t know how she ended up in the linen cabinet or how long she was stuck inside.
But amazingly there was no drama, no story, no warning and no aftermath. No one ever mentioned it. I kept quiet and lay low, like any good devil would.

**Yes, you are on Ice Duty!**

When a cabin stewardess is new, the other cabin stewards on her deck will offer support and guidance. When a cabin stewardess is sick, too slow or hangover, the team steps in to help.
But when a cabin stewardess is arrogant, slow, and insists on knowing everything better than everyone else, she might find herself assigned to ice duty.

In the U.S., many people over 70 years old choose to live year-round on a cruise ship, and why not? Compared to a retirement home, it’s often cheaper. Plus, there’s 24-hour medical care, housekeeping to clean your cabin, wonderful food, entertainment, great companions, and you get to see the world.

Every year, passengers pass away on cruises, and cruise ships are well-prepared for such situations.
There’s a specific code of conduct to follow when a death occurs on board.

On our deck, in an experienced cabin stewardess section, a guest passed away in his sleep. Normally, if a guest hasn’t left their cabin by noon and there’s no "Do Not Disturb" sign, we knock the door and check on them. The cabin stewardess, who was from Austria, did just that. At noon, she knocked three times, announcing “Housekeeping,” and entered the cabin where the guest was peacefully lying in bed.

Without panicking or big emotions she called the bridge, and the doctor was dispatched. Once the doctor confirmed the death, a number code was announced over the ship's speakers. We have different codes for different situations on board, for safety and security reasons. You necessarily don’t want to announce “Stretcher team, stretcher team please go to cabin 511 and pick up a dead body” and create a panic on board. The body was then picked up by a dedicated team and taken to the morgue in the bottom of the ship. Once the ship reached land, the necessary paperwork was filled out, authorities were notified, and the body was debarked and sent to the home country.

We had a new cabin stewardess on our deck for about four weeks, but things hadn’t been running smoothly. Normally, four weeks would be plenty of time for a newcomer to find their rhythm, but she was slow. And slow can be also OK, but her long red fingernails seemed to be in the way to get a bed made up and we had to help her out all the time. And there were more matters than getting a bed made, her permed curls straightened fluffy from the humidity in the bathroom, and her makeup often ran, giving her the appearance of a melting doll. And this was no good if prince charming would appear on a white horse in the corridor – as this seemed to be her mission, to meet a charming captain at sea who would sweep her away. As a result, she was always lagging behind in cleaning. Additionally, she wasn’t a team player, and her constant questions felt more like challenges than inquiries.

When she heard that a guest had passed away on our corridor, she panicked and asked me about the process for handling the body. I explained that the deceased would be taken to the morgue and that room attendants on the deck where the death occurred would be responsible for applying ice to the body several times a day until debarkation. Without thinking much of it, I went outside to enjoy a few hours off.

However, once everyone was aboard and the ship set sail, I was summoned to the bridge and questioned by the staff captain. The questions were detailed: Who is responsible for putting the ice on the body?
When is it done? How is it done, and why?

With big, round, innocent eyes, I responded, “What are you talking about? Who died, and why? Me? I said what? Why would I say a thing like that? I don’t know anything about this.”

Perhaps new crew members have vivid imaginations, but I certainly wouldn’t make up something like that. Luckily for me, in the 1980s, there were no cameras, motion detectors, or high-tech surveillance, so my innocence remained unquestioned.

**From Chocolate Truffles to Dom Pérignon: Sweet Escapes and Oceanic Adventures**

***MS Sagafjord, 1990***

After finishing my extended contract on the QE2, I returned to Switzerland with little sense of what came next. Kusnacht, a serene lakeside town, also the home of Tina Turner, seemed as good a place as any to catch my breath. There, I joined my ex-roommate from London in a quaint family patisserie. The shop smelled of fresh croissants, buttery Danish pastries, and local specialties, but it was their chocolate truffles that stole the show—and my attention.

As a confessed chocoholic, I told my friend I’d likely eat all the truffles before they could even be filled or decorated. Laughing, she reassured me there were plenty of “breakages” for my indulgence. But she also made a bold prediction: after four days of endless chocolate, I’d be over it. To my surprise, she was right.

By day five, I could barely look at a truffle, though I’d mastered their intricate creation.

**When the Ocean Calls**

Two weeks into my sweet Swiss interlude, the Cunard head office reached out, puzzled by my absence.

My friends had returned for another contract—why hadn’t I? Their offer was enticing: a higher position on a smaller, more exclusive ship. The ocean’s call was too strong to resist.

The Ms Sagafjord was worlds apart from the QE2. While the QE2 bustled with 2000 passengers and a crew as eclectic as a floating city, this ship catered to a more refined clientele. Smaller, more intimate, and with higher fares, it attracted demanding but well-heeled guests. Gone was the “people factory” vibe; this was luxury at its finest.

I was assigned to the top deck, where we welcomed guests with Dom Pérignon Champagne and strawberries—fresh or chocolate-dipped. It was an elegant touch, befitting the elevated expectations of our passengers.

Despite the polished veneer of the ship, life as a crew member remained chaotic and raw.

Back then, there were no crew bars, shops, or recreation areas. Entertainment was a luxury we couldn’t afford, and hangovers were an inconvenience we simply worked through. Yet, somehow, we managed to throw legendary parties on a hidden back deck, fuelled by creativity and an illicit supply of champagne.

What was there to drink without a crew shop? Nothing less than Dom Pérignon. Unopened bottles left in guest cabins were our bounty, and together with two spirited Austrian sisters, I became a back-deck bartender. Our makeshift punch was simple but potent: sugar-soaked strawberries layered in a cleaning bucket, chilled with ice, and topped with hundreds of dollars’ worth of French champagne. Served in paper cups, it was decadence with a dangerous edge.

The combination of champagne and sugar was as delightful as it was lethal, often leaving us with pounding headaches by morning. But the camaraderie made it all worthwhile. One night, though, one of the Austrian sisters slipped on the steep ladder leading to the back deck.

We tried to nurse her injury with ice, knowing full well the stakes: there was no sick leave. If you couldn’t work, you were off the ship at the next port, replaced without ceremony. For three agonizing days, she soldiered on, her swollen ankle wrapped in whatever we could find. Finally, the pain became unbearable.

A doctor’s visit revealed she’d been working on a broken foot. Her grit and determination left us all in awe—tough Austrians, indeed.

What a whirlwind of contrasts. By day, I served champagne to the world’s elite; by night, I guzzled it from a bucket with friends under the stars.

**And the Winner of the multinational Beer Drinking Contest is…**

***The Manhattan Bar, the Kimberley Hotel, Kowloon, Tsim Tsa Tsui, HongKong 1992***

After finishing my contracts on the QE2 and MS Sagafjord with Cunard, I debarked in Vancouver. I spent two months on Vancouver Island, completing a dive instructor certificate in ice-cold water with zero visibility. This was the same city where I’d previously told my Canadian ex-boyfriend that I wasn’t interested in Canada, yet here I was, traveling along the coast to Seattle, Whistler, and other beautiful destinations.

After two months of these adventures, I felt it was now or never—I wanted to go to Asia.
So, I booked a one-way ticket to Hong Kong, which was still under British rule at the time.
This made it difficult for a German like me to find a job and secure a work permit, as British citizens didn’t need one to work. My money was running low, so I bunked in a place called Chungking Mansions, a building housing thousands of other opportunists, in a hostel run by a large American. I calculated my remaining funds and set myself a strict goal: I had 30 days to find a job, or I’d leave.

On the 30th day, I received confirmation for a Bar Manager’s position at a Chinese hotel in Tsim Sha Tsui, managing an American bar. Everything seemed to be falling into place, but there was a catch—the Chinese F&B Manager had no idea how to handle neither the bar nor me. He was a non-smoker, a non-drinker, and a vegetarian—a rather interesting mix for someone in charge of a large F&B department in a hotel.

The General Manager, desperate to open the bar, was at his wit’s end, and ready for any solution, which included me. While the F&B Manager wasn’t thrilled about employing a 30-year-old, wild and on top of it blond German with crazy ideas like playing music, serving alcohol, and offering food with it.

But I wasn’t discouraged. After getting the go-ahead, I set to work. I implemented draft beer (yes, you read that right!), ordered spirits to create cocktails, installed a jukebox, hired three Filipinas to serve in front of the bar and Rosie, from Manchester as the bartender behind the ridiculously big round shaped purple bar. And somehow in the basement of a large 5 star hotel business took off. Stockbrokers, foreigners working in Hong Kong, Arabs, and many other interesting characters found their way to our bar—a non-descript hotel bar in the basement of the Kimberley Hotel.

Full of energy and motivation, as this was my first management role, I created menus, promotions like Halloween and St. Patrick’s Day events, and even organized live music with bands. I made friends with the guests, all while working to drive revenue and fill the bar. Competition was stiff, as the hotel wasn’t in the heart of the entertainment district. Just outside a few kilometres away were well-known spots like Suzy Wong, Rick’s Café, Grammy’s, and the famous Lan Kwai Fong district.

After six months, the bar was so busy that I didn’t know every guest anymore. One night, three corporate gentlemen walked in: a Swedish guy, a Norwegian, and an Irishman, all in Hong Kong for a company meeting from Kuala Lumpur. After some small talk, they found a common ground—beer. And we had plenty of it. All three were beer drinkers, and what followed was a spirited beer-drinking competition between the three different nationalities. By 2 a.m., all three of them were still standing, although unsteadily, and by 3 M they were the last men standing and wobbling their way to the upper floor hotel rooms as the bar closed.

The next evening, when they returned to the hotel, guess which nationality made a wide berth around the bar and which one sat down at the counter, asking for a beer? The Scandinavian crew sheepishly walked past and straight to their rooms. You guessed that right! The Irishman walked right up to the bar, ordered a beer, and asked, “Where are my mates from last night?”

**One Beer or two?**

When you start at a new workplace, it's often easier to get things done right at the beginning. There’s an unspoken window of opportunity when bosses, co-workers, and other departments give you the benefit of the doubt. They’re friendly, forthcoming, and eager to make a good impression. Especially in Asia, the cultural imperative to "save face" means people tread carefully in their interactions with new colleagues.

My arrival at the hotel came with its share of challenges, particularly with my boss—the F&B Manager.

He was less than thrilled when, after only a week, I politely sent the four male, original Chinese servers hired for the bar, back to the dining room. I had taken the bold step of hiring three Filipinas and Rosie, a lively Brit from Manchester, to staff the bar instead. The F&B Manager was outright appalled by Rosie, going so far as to reject her entirely. To secure approval for her hiring, I had to appeal to higher management.

The General Manager, however, had a singular focus: get the long-designed, ready-built, and painfully empty bar open and making a profit. He granted my requests, even at the risk of clashing with his F&B Manager. Back then, I had little understanding of hospitality politics, let alone how they played out in Asia.

I was just trying to build a team that worked and opening a bar with a weird name.

The Filipinas I hired were fascinating characters themselves. Two were the wives of band players who had spent years in Hong Kong. One was just 18 years old and the daughter of another musician. And then there was Rosie. She was a backpacker who wandered into the bar on a whim, spotting me fiddling behind the bar counter. Unlike me, she didn’t need a work permit—being British in Hong Kong at the time had its perks. Rosie stood nearly 1.80 meters tall, her loud voice carrying a deep bass undertone, matched only by her infectious laughter. Her thick Manchester accent was hilariously hard to understand, but it added to her charm.

Rosie had an undeniable presence. Her boldness was matched by her physicality—her confident stance, towering height, and, well, certain prominent features that couldn’t be ignored. These features often became the unintended centrepiece of her bar-side routine; two peaks were standing out as high as the two columns of the famous tower bridge of London.

Leaning across the nearly one-meter-wide counter, arms braced for emphasis, Rosie would lock eyes with a guest and ask in her raspy Manchester drawl, “What’ll it be, a beer or two?” The guests—Asian men especially—were often so flustered by her confidence (and distracted by her "twin towers") that they’d instinctively blurt, “Two, please.”

Without missing a beat, Rosie would whirl around, flashing a cheeky smile and responding, “Two beers it is, my lad.”

This scene became a daily spectacle. No matter the guest—Hong Kong stockbrokers, Middle Eastern oil workers, Chinese factory owners, or Japanese tourists—they all fell under Rosie’s spell. Meanwhile, the rest of us stood back, watching the show unfold like a live-action comedy sketch, complete with Chaplin-esque repetition.

Day after day, Rosie’s charm turned potential awkwardness into a winning strategy. As the bar thrived, so did our camaraderie. And every evening, as the “show” ended, I couldn’t help but feel a mix of awe and relief. Applause and the curtain call. Rosie had earned her spot, and the bar had found its rhythm.

**A Life of Entertainment: Tales from Behind the Bar**

If you’re open-minded and easy going, working in a bar or evening environment offers an endless stream of entertainment. From the guests to your colleagues, the nights become a stage for humour, drama, and the occasional surprise performance. I’ve found this to be true not just in Hong Kong, but even during my time working at the Warteck in Switzerland.

In fact, I came to see working evenings—especially weekends and Sundays—as a secret advantage. While office workers spend their free hours hunting for entertainment, often spending money for the privilege, I had entertainment brought to me every shift. Friends could join me at my workplace, the guests provided a steady flow of stories, and weekends meant double pay. The cherry on top, especially in expensive Hong Kong? It was all free.

**The Nights Came Alive**

Even in a city of endless distractions—whether the casinos of Macau, the glitz of Lan Kwai Fong, or the seediness of Wanchai—our little bar became its own hotspot. Guests and staff alike found ways to entertain and be entertained.

Take Rita, for instance. She was a 35-year-old Filipina, the wife of a guitar player, and a mother of four.
I hired her for her charming smile and sharp wit. About three months into her time with us, the jukebox suddenly stopped during a busy evening. Jokingly, someone asked if anyone could sing. Someone pointed at Rita. She shyly waved it off, saying, "No, I can’t sing."

How exactly the extraordinary happened, nobody remembers. Rita stepped up, and her voice rose above the noise of the room. For a moment, we thought Mariah Carey or Celine Dion had made a surprise appearance. Her crystal-clear voice silenced the entire bar, 50 people staring in awe. When her song ended, the applause was thunderous—reminiscent of a Plácido Domingo encore. From that day on, the jukebox mysteriously "broke" several more times. Whether a guest pulled the plug or it truly malfunctioned didn’t matter—Rita was our secret star.

**Themed Nights and Wild Guests**

Special nights like Halloween, St. Patrick’s Day, Oktoberfest, and Mardi Gras brought out our creativity.
One Halloween, we wrapped ourselves in bandages, poured ketchup on top, and ran down the street as mummies, terrifying pedestrians. Hong Kong’s wild drink fashions—often gross concoctions like a hundred year old cognac on ice with coke or "Red Eye," a mix of Heineken, Guinness, and tomato juice did the rest.

Then there were, of course, the guests.

An Arab poet, thrilled by my compliment the day before, showed up with a black sports bag filled with bundles of $100 bills. Placing bundled 100 dollar notes of cash on the bar he beckoned for me to exit the bar and proposed to marry me, only for three German oil engineers to warn me that rejecting him might lead to chaos. How much money was in the bag I never found out and I am still single and alive.

A Japanese guest, usually reserved like most of his peers, stunned me by attempting to kiss me on the dance floor during one of our wild nights.

A Kenyan businessman and his Chinese girlfriend treated the bar as their haven, a place where they could relax without stares or judgment.

Stockbrokers, despite their status and bravado, they could barely hold their beer—especially with Rosie pouring. Unlike the rowdier types, they’d slink away quietly after a few too many.

**500 Nights of Memories**

For nearly 500 nights, the jukebox played relentlessly, beer flowed freely, and the bar became a microcosm of life in Hong Kong. It wasn’t just a job—it was a nightly adventure, filled with laughs, surprises, and stories to tell for a lifetime.

Working in the Manhattan bar taught me that sometimes, the most memorable moments aren’t planned or scripted. They happen when people come together—often under the influence of a few too many drinks—and create something magical, hilarious, or outright bizarre.

**Culture shocked Germans
*Moevenpick Hotel Beijing, 1993***

Like a seagull in flight, swooping down to snatch something small and delicious—this was the vision of Mövenpick founder Ueli Prager, inspiring the name of the now-iconic Swiss brand.

Mövenpick, headquartered in Basel, Switzerland, has grown from this whimsical concept into a world-renowned hospitality company. Since its acquisition by Accor in September 2018, the company has continued to thrive, managing over 80 properties, including hotels, resorts, and Nile cruisers, and serving an impressive 5.8 million guests annually.

At Mövenpick Beijing, conveniently located near the airport, we hosted large tour groups, primarily from Germany. These groups would often stop for lunch before boarding their flights back to Europe after an immersive 14-day journey through China.

For many of our guests, this meal seemed to be their first true encounter with authentic Chinese cuisine. While Chinese restaurants are common in Germany—often appreciated for their affordability—they can't compare to the vibrant flavours and traditions of the real thing.

As with any Chinese banquet, we arranged large, round tables for ten guests, each equipped with a lazy Susan at the centre. Every seat had the customary setup: a rice bowl, a pair of chopsticks, and a small sauce bowl. This, however, sparked a cultural revelation—and occasional chaos.

Despite spending two weeks traveling together, our guests often balked at the idea of sharing a table with "strangers." The concept of communal dining was alien to some. “You mean I have to eat from the same plate as others?” they'd whisper, eyebrows raised in disbelief. But what was the real final drama?
The chopsticks.

Cue the flurry of panicked gestures, the darting eyes, and the indignant exclamations: “I can’t eat with sticks—I NEED a knife and a fork!”

And so, amid the culture shock and clashing expectations, these lunches became a melting pot of humour, patience, and learning—a microcosm of the broader journey they'd just experienced.
No matter how many times I asked the General Manager if I could set up knives and forks before the guests arrived, he refused. “We are in China, the guests have been traveling in China they must adapt.”
However, he never came to witness the drama.

**I’ll do it ‘my way’**

In early 1993, I arrived in Beijing as an Assistant F&B Manager at Mövenpick Hotel. Within just four months, the F&B manager departed, leaving me solely in charge of six outlets and around 100 staff. It was a challenging, exhilarating time—an era when Beijing was transforming, yet still retained an old-world charm.

Cars were so rare you could count them on one hand, while the symphony of millions of bicycle bells filled the streets, creating a soundscape as loud and constant as modern traffic. Back then, China operated with two currencies: the FEC (Foreign Exchange Certificate) for expatriates and the RMB for locals. This dual system was abruptly abolished in late 1993, with mere days of notice—a reflection of the rapid and unpredictable changes shaping the nation.

In joint-venture hotels like ours, most department heads were expatriates. Beijing had only 15 such large-scale hotels, making recruitment and training an extraordinary challenge. While finding staff was possible, training them was an entirely different story. Many recruits arrived from rural provinces, unable to speak Mandarin, let alone any other language. Communication barriers were common even among the team members themselves.

Imagine this: newcomers were expected to learn English and some of them Mandarin, adapt to a completely unfamiliar work culture, and acquire new job skills—all while adjusting to life in a big city like Beijing. I marvelled at their resilience and adaptability. No one could do it faster than the Chinese. I couldn’t help but imagine the reverse scenario: Imagine the quiet life of a German farmer, surrounded by rolling green pastures and the hum of rural familiarity, abruptly exchanged for the towering skyscrapers and constant buzz of a Chinese megacity with ten million inhabitants jostling for space and a language that felt as intricate as a maze. Where sturdy slices of rye bread and bratwurst once stood, there was now a steaming bowl of slippery noodles waiting to be tamed, trying to learn Mandarin and master a new job all at once. And all this without any comforts of home—no German TV, no bratwurst, no familiar language.

Our hotel bar became a hub of activity, with an English duo providing 3 times a week live music to an eclectic mix of international guests. We had a central service bar near the kitchen to cater to restaurants, banquets, coffee shops, and the rooftop bar. The rooftop bar itself was a rollercoaster—either buzzing with energy or eerily quiet.

One day, as I darted between outlets to oversee a lunch rush for a group of German tourists, I stumbled upon a commotion in the kitchen near the service bar. A small crowd had gathered, voices rising in animated excitement. For a Westerner, it looked like chaos; for the Chinese staff, it was business as usual.

Curious, I pushed through the crowd to find one of our female bartenders from Sichuan, a non-Mandarin speaker, in the middle of the action. She was furiously slamming a large round object onto the tiled floor, while the restaurant manager animatedly offered advice. As I edged closer, I realized the object was a bunch of white banquet tablecloths, tied together into a big ball.

After a good five minutes of language barrier, Google translate did not exist, I could finally piece together that there was a wine bottle, encased in no fewer than ten layers of banquet tablecloth inside the big white ball.

The bartender’s ingenious (or audacious) theory was to shake the bottle violently to build pressure then bang it on the floor until the cork popped out. The layers of tablecloth, she explained, were to prevent the bottle from shattering and the wine from running out.

I couldn’t help but laugh as I reached for the simple corkscrew sitting idly on the counter. Pointing to it, I suggested, “Why not use this?”

Her response was immediate and adamant: “NO GOOD!” she declared. “I do it my way!”

And so, I stepped back and let her work her magic. In that moment, I realized this wasn’t just about a bottle of wine—it was about creativity, persistence, and ownership of one’s approach. After all, sometimes the unorthodox path leads to the most memorable moments.

**Beer pouring explained**

One of our young and eager aspiring bartenders embodied the spirit of opportunity in the 1990s Beijing hospitality scene. Fresh from the countryside, with no work experience or Mandarin skills, he was a blank slate ready to be filled with the lessons of a foreign-run establishment. Despite scepticism from my German General Manager, I saw his potential and hired him immediately, an act of necessity as much as belief in nurturing raw talent.

**Challenges in the F&B Industry**

Tourism was relatively new in China and the Moevenpick Hotel faced fierce competition. Located on the outskirts of Beijing, the relatively unknown Swiss brand struggled against industry giants like Sheraton and Kempinski located in the city centre in a better location. Staffing posed unique challenges for several reasons.
There was a limited talent pool, few English-speaking candidates were available, and hiring them often required offering salaries well above standard wages.

Cultural and language gaps were evident, bridging Eastern and Western expectations demanded more than professional skills; department heads doubled as English teachers, cultural ambassadors, and life coaches.

The Top Bar, our hotel’s premium nightlife spot, epitomized these challenges. Open only in the evenings, it catered to tourists and businesspeople seeking Western comforts. For young employees like our bartender, this could be a challenge, but also a steep learning curve in both service etiquette and cross-cultural communication.

Our British duo, he playing the guitar and she being a singer, were entertaining a few nights a week from 20:00 – 23:00. Although mostly everything went smooth there were occasional complains about the draft beer, either not “enough beer in the glass” or the beer being flat.
Since I am not a beer drinker, I once in a while poured a draft beer just to check, and everything seemed to be OK. Guests complained of glasses not being full or beer being flat. The bartender, eager to perfect his craft, sought my guidance. With his limited English, I devised a simple yet effective teaching method:

British Guests (the band player’s accent): Fill the glass to the brim with no foam.

German Guests (My Accent): Ensure a head of foam; otherwise, they’ll complain it’s flat.

For a time, this approach worked seamlessly. He mastered the beer tap, balancing foam and liquid with precision.

One day he impatiently asked me although he pours the draft beer more or less the same for every guests but there still was a complain AGAIN and how could he solve this challenge to make the service perfect?

A guest, who sounded like me, was angrily insisting his pint was “half-empty and overpriced.”

Confused, he asked me why the usual technique had failed.

It didn’t take long for me to unravel the mystery. The guest, a Dutch South African, indeed had an accent similar to mine, but his expectations were different. Back then, Chinese didn’t even know South Africa existed. Accents can be misleading, and understanding goes beyond language—it’s about context and awareness. In a time before Google Translate or cultural fluency, we relied on body language, intuition, and trial-and-error to bridge gaps. It’s a testament to the resilience and adaptability of young professionals like our bartender, who not only learned the technicalities of bartending but also the art of navigating a rapidly globalizing world. Now you know why some wise Hoteliers include Geography in their training.

**The unseen side of Hospitality -a Brush with the Chinese Mafia**

A 5-star hotel often feels like a bubble of refinement, shielding its staff and guests from the harsher realities outside. For me, a German professional with a penchant for order and rules, this environment was a sanctuary. Having spent a year in Spain, I had softened my edges, but my values of propriety and fairness remained intact. However, one late-night incident in the Top Bar of our Beijing hotel shattered my illusions and taught me a sobering lesson about the limits of control.

**A Late-Night Intrusion**

It was past 11 PM, and the bar had officially closed for the night. The beer tap was switched off, equipment packed away, and when I saw some Chinese figures at the entrance. I was tidying up when several rough-looking Chinese men entered the bar. Their demeanour set off alarm bells. My instincts told me this was not a group of ordinary customers, and until now we never had guests leaving without paying their bill.

This was the first time that this possibility came to my mind.

I quickly sent my eager young bartender to the back with strict instructions to stay there.

I stand 1.7 meters tall and felt no fear. The men were shorter than me, and it was uncommon for locals to confront foreigners directly, especially in English.

I greeted the group with a polite but firm explanation: the bar was closed, the staff had gone home, and I lacked the knowledge to operate it. My attempts at diplomacy were met with silence—until one man suddenly produced a stick looking like a walking stick. With a swift motion, he shattered the glasses hanging above the bar, sending shards raining down around me.

Before I could fully process what had happened, another man drew a knife and pressed it against my throat. “Will you open the bar now?” he demanded in broken English.

Time seemed to stop and as I struggled to think of a response, the back door burst open.

The bartender, ignoring my earlier orders, stormed into the bar. His movements were a mix of desperation and courage as he opened the fridges, cleared the shattered glass from the counter, and began serving the group. His actions were furious yet efficient, driven a clear instinct for self-preservation.

Bruised and shaken, I stayed silent, realizing that sometimes the best response is no response at all.
The group eventually left after being served and needless to say without paying, leaving the bar in disarray but with no further violence.

**The Aftermath**

The next morning, the incident dominated the hotel’s staff briefing. Our General Manager, appalled and indignant, vowed to take action. “Nobody touches my staff in a 5-star hotel,” he declared. His words carried the conviction of someone who believed in the sanctity of the establishment, but we were naive. We quickly learned that such confrontations were not about courage or standing your ground. In that moment, I came to understand the unspoken power dynamics at play. We weren’t just running a bar; we were navigating a complex social landscape where figures like the local mafia operated outside the boundaries of our rules.

**Lessons Learned**

Respect for Local Realities: Operating in a foreign country means understanding its unspoken rules and risks. As we later realized, confronting or defying certain groups could have dire consequences.

Sometimes the pristine veneer of a 5-star establishment is an illusion. Beneath it lays a world of challenges, both cultural and situational, that require humility and adaptability. While the experience left me shaken, it also taught me a valuable lesson: in hospitality—and in life—there are moments when silence and survival are the only strategies that matter.

**Freeze! A picnic at the Great Wall of China**

Beijing’s coldest winter may have been in 1966 at a frigid -27°C, so why am I complaining about -13°C in 1993? It felt plenty cold to me. Organizing an outdoor banquet in these conditions was a challenge that I certainly could recount. Serving 50 people outdoors in -13°C tested us in ways we couldn’t have anticipated. With the freezing temperatures, every breath was a foggy reminder of the cold, and handling silver and chinaware was a chilling experience.

But preparation is Key, every detail matters when working in extreme condition and pragmatism wins. Complaining changes nothing; adapting changes everything.

The Human Spirit is resilient, even in the harshest environments, teamwork and determination can create something beautiful.

**The Setting**

Gubei Water Town, nestled in Gubeikou Town of Miyun County, is a picturesque haven. Surrounded by the Mandarin Duck Lake Reservoir and leaning against the Simatai section of the Great Wall, it is a dreamlike fusion of nature and history. Known as the “Wuzhen of Beijing,” the town’s beauty can captivate even the most reluctant winter enthusiast—if experienced indoors at a cosy 24°C, of course.

But our task was not to admire the scenery from warmth. Instead, we were to host an elegant banquet for 50 guests outside, in the biting cold, at the edge of Duck Lake.

The preparation for the event began long before dawn. Armed with layers of warm clothes that made movement nearly impossible, I left my comfortable hotel room at 6 AM. Days prior, we meticulously planned every detail with a banquet checklist, packing dishes, silver and glassware, knowing that the remote location and harsh conditions left no room for error. The logistics alone were daunting:

An 80 km drive each way meant nothing could be forgotten. Unloading and transporting equipment through 50 cm of snow tested both physical endurance and mental resilience.

Communicating with the inexperienced non-English speaking team added an extra layer of complexity to an already demanding task.
This being the “first time ever” event, a novelty was testing our adaptability.

With chinaware, silverware, and perfectly folded napkins in hand, we set out to transform a frozen lakeside into a dining experience worthy of a 5-star standard.

By midday, the banquet was ready, set against the breathtaking but icy backdrop of Mandarin Duck Lake. The guests arrived bundled up, their faces glowing with the excitement of dining in such an extraordinary location. After lunch, a walk up to the Great Wall added a fantastic experience, followed by the painstaking process of packing everything up without losing or damaging anything.

What a wonderful feeling to succeed in delivering a memorable experience for our guests.

An entire 100g container of Nivea cream poorer I returned to my cosy hotel room, it was my lifeline, shielding my face from the biting cold and preventing frostbite.

I couldn’t help but marvel at what we had accomplished. The beauty of Gubei Water Town was undeniable, and the shared effort of overcoming challenges that made the day truly unforgettable.Even now, I look back on that -13°C banquet with a mix of pride and shivers. It wasn’t just about setting a table in the snow—it was about proving that even the coldest challenges can be met with a warm, can-do spirit.

**On the Radio**



Not a song on the radio, but a voice with a German accent on the radio in China.

Living as a Foreigner in Beijing, 1993: A Year of Change and Reflection

By the end of 1993, Beijing was a city alive with transformation, and for foreigners living there, it was a particularly fascinating time. I was fortunate enough to share my experiences as a female expatriate through an unexpected opportunity—a radio interview.

**My Voice on the Airwaves**

The invitation came from a local radio station intrigued by the perspective of a foreign woman living in China. The interview, held at the hotel I worked at, Moevenpick Beijing, turned out to be a 10-minute window into my life in the city. I recounted my daily routines, my observations of local culture, and the unique challenges and joys of being a foreign resident in a rapidly evolving metropolis.

**The End of the FEC Era – another significant event**In the morning of December 30, 1993, dozens of foreign ambassadors, their wives and anxious foreign businesspeople stormed into a duty-free store in the east of Beijing, packing their bags with anything they found on the shelves.

But the unusual shopping spree was not ignited by the New Year Eve rush, but instead by an unexpected overnight announcement from the central bank saying it would stop issuing foreign exchange certificates (FECs), a convertible version of renminbi used by foreigners in the mainland, from the beginning of 1994.

Although the People's Bank of China made it very clear that existing FECs could still be used temporarily, FEC holders believed the sooner they spent them the better.

**Genders upside down**

Managing staff in a fast-paced environment like the F&B department is no easy task, especially when juggling talent, perceptions, and results. I focused on competence and dedication over appearances or societal expectations, which often clashed with the more traditional outlook of my General Manager.

Take one of my female hires, a graduate student for example. She might not have fit the conventional image my GM envisioned for a front-facing role with her old fashioned long hair and thick glasses. Yet, with her excellent English, sharp work ethic, and determination, she was exactly what I needed in my office. Similarly, another young male university graduate, brought promise but initially lacked the proactivity necessary for banquet sales.

In time, I saw that the female student excelled in handling clients and delivering quick, tailored offers, while the male was better suited to behind-the-scenes tasks. Shuffling responsibilities played to their strengths and improved outcomes, but it didn’t stop the complaints.

The GM’s next issue? The optics of a female F&B Manager paired with a male secretary. It seemed there was always something unconventional to question, no matter how effective the arrangement.

In the end, it’s a lesson in leadership: you can’t please everyone. The key is to recognize potential, adapt to your team’s strengths, and stand by the decisions that drive results—even if they ruffle a few feathers along the way.

**What’s in a Name?**

When Chinese professionals work for foreign companies or move overseas, they often adopt an English name to facilitate communication. In the 1990s, before the age of the internet and Google, they relied on books, newspapers, or hearsay for glimpses of Western culture and inspiration for names. Often, they chose names that sounded somewhat similar to their Chinese names, making them easier for foreigners to remember and pronounce.

This naming practice wasn’t just practical; it was a way to demonstrate worldliness. When interviewing with a foreigner, one of the first things they’d proudly share was their English name—a small but significant gesture reflecting their readiness to bridge cultural gaps.

Yet, there was always a curious disconnect between this outward-facing persona and their roots. I often preferred calling my Chinese colleagues by their real names as a sign of respect and effort to engage with their culture. After all, at family gatherings—weddings, funerals, or birthdays—if you mentioned “Natalie,” the reaction might well be a bewildered “Who?” Their English name belonged strictly to their professional or international context, not their personal lives.

What I found even more fascinating was the remarkable flexibility in this practice. A bartender named Sue might, after a year, walk in one day and declare, “I’m Sharon now—I like it better.” Perhaps inspired by something she read or saw, she’d simply decide to rebrand herself overnight. For many Westerners, such sudden name changes are baffling. We’re accustomed to names being immutable, a core part of identity. Adjusting to a new name for someone you’ve known for a year requires a mental recalibration, something that feels unnatural to our more rigid cultural framework.

This fluid approach to naming is both charming and disorienting. It reflects a certain freedom in self-expression and identity that contrasts with the Western notion of names as fixed and enduring. For me, it underscored the adaptability of Chinese culture—an ability to navigate both tradition and modernity with surprising ease.

One of the funniest moments involving my own name happened during a lunch break. I was sitting with some of the managers on the long bench in our coffee shop, enjoying the conversation and the relaxed atmosphere. Suddenly, our Restaurant Manager began pacing back and forth through the coffee shop with a curious, searching look. She even walked through the entire area a few times.

After a while, I couldn't resist asking her what she was looking for.

She stopped, looking slightly flustered, and said, "There's a gentleman at the entrance asking for a Ms. Mar. Do you know who that is?"

It took me a second to process her question, but before I could respond, the realization hit me—and apparently, the other managers too. They all burst out laughing!

"That's my last name!" I said, trying to hold back my own laughter.

The poor Restaurant Manager! She had no idea, and her confusion just made the whole situation even funnier.

**The Love Boat**

***Das Traum Schiff/ The dream liner/ Ms Berlin,1994***

The MS BERLIN, one of the smallest cruise ships in the German-speaking and international deep-sea market, stands out for its size—which is also its greatest asset. Its compact build allows it to navigate narrow waters and shallow passages, such as the Corinth Canal, a feat few cruise ships can manage.

Despite its smaller scale, the BERLIN retains the charm of classic ocean liners, with its multi-tiered stern, side promenades, and real wood flooring underfoot.

When a Swiss colleague enthusiastically recommended me for the position of Housekeeping Manager aboard the BERLIN, I accepted on a whim. The words “love boat,” “Housekeeping Manager,” and “world cruise” were all I needed to hear to seal the deal. But as the embarkation day drew closer, doubt began creeping in. What was I thinking? I had never managed in Europe before. My experiences on the QE2 and MS Sagafjord had been as a room attendant—a small cog in a vast machine. Now, I was stepping into a leadership role. Could I really pull it off?

The reality hit hard as I boarded the ship. The decks were strewn with piles of dirty linen, and chaos seemed to reign. My instincts kicked in, and I tackled the challenge head-on. First, get bags for the linen and no more linen allowed on the floor. Second, get the chemicals organized in a neat chemical store. Third, make a team meeting. Fourth, start regular training sessions. Fifth—and the most critical—cut the dramas.

And dramas there were, of course. Ships are like small floating worlds, and whether the crew is European or from elsewhere, the dramas follow. It’s just the nature of the job—different ships, same challenges.

Luckily, I found an unexpected ally in the Hotel Manager. Gruff, grumpy, and undeniably old-school, he was the most cantankerous leader in the operation, yet we worked together seamlessly. Our no-nonsense styles meshed perfectly, and together, we made the BERLIN’s housekeeping department run like clockwork.

Noteworthy meetings on the MS Berlin were Tina Turner, whom I would never have recognized, Roberto Blanco and Roy Black, famous European singers, and of course the TV cast of the Love boat.

In the end, it wasn’t just about cleaning rooms or managing staff; it was about navigating uncharted waters in more ways than one. The BERLIN taught me that adaptability, instinct, and a little humor go a long way—on-board or off.

**Vineyard Weddings**

***Lord Neethlingshof, Stellenbosch, South Africa, 1995***

**From Sydney to South Africa: How a Chance Encounter Shaped My Adventure**

When my contract with the Love Boat came to an end, I found myself with some spare cash, plenty of free time, and a sense of curiosity. I booked a ticket to Sydney, Australia to visit my aunt and explore possibilities to settle in Australia. With no Australian residency at the time, finding work in Sydney was nearly impossible. After nearly two weeks in Sydney as I strolled through the CBD one idle day, an advertisement in a travel agency’s window caught my attention: “$499 to Johannesburg, South Africa.”

Africa had always been a dream, and in that moment, I decided to make it a reality. Gesagt, getan—as we say in German. I booked a one way ticket and a week later I was on my way to the red continent.

**Johannesburg to Cape Town: A Journey of Unexpected Encounters**

Landing in Johannesburg, I met an Australian boat builder from Perth. Together, we travelled down the coast and explored Durban for a week before parting ways. I continued south to Jeffreys Bay, where a visit to a German bar introduced me to a milk farmer who ended up following me all the way to Cape Town inviting me to stay with him. He was a lovely person, but I think I would have painted all his cows purple out of boredom in a short matter of time

In Cape Town, on my first day, I landed a waitressing job at the “Frog and Something” pub.
On my second night there, I met a South African lady—a head-hunter—while casually chatting with patrons.
To my surprise, she told me she knew someone who needed exactly what I had to offer.
True to her word, she returned the next day, whisking me away on an unforgettable drive into the South African countryside. Our journey led to Neethlingshof Wine Estate, where the entrance greeted us with a picturesque palm-lined alley. Inside, I met the German Restaurant owner, sitting at the bar with a Heineken. The restaurant was eerily quiet, adorned with spider web-covered walls and empty tables.
Yet, beyond the main house, the Palm Terrace—a glass-enclosed space—offered a hint of promise.

Neethlingshof Estate has a long and rich tradition of wine making in Stellenbosch, the second oldest and most premier wine producing area of South Africa. The Estate occupies an incredibly privileged site with ideal natural conditions, soils, slopes, altitudes and climate to produce a variety of great wines. All the grapes for the Neethlingshof wines are grown on the estate and all the wine is made, matured and bottled in the cellars of the estate, adhering to strict vegan guidelines during the entire farming and winemaking process.

After a brief conversation (as Germans do), we shook hands, and the next day I started as the newly appointed Restaurant Manager. Back then, the menu was simple: spaghetti Bolognese, burgers, and sandwiches, prepared by the owner and a small kitchen team. The restaurant’s low foot traffic stemmed from a lack of management—but that quickly changed once we teamed up.

Neethlingshof was a hidden gem in the heart of the wine route. At the time, it was the only wine estate offering food, perfectly positioned for hungry visitors exploring 3–5 wineries in a day. Once we got things moving, the restaurant became a bustling hub. The Palm Terrace was packed daily, serving 100–200 lunches during peak season.

Weddings became a cornerstone of the estate. Every weekend, we hosted grand events, often accommodating over 100 guests. From Friday evening receptions to Sunday lunch celebrations, the pace was relentless. As anyone in the industry knows, weddings come with their unique challenges.
In South Africa, as elsewhere, parental involvement often dictated menus, décor, and guest lists—a delicate balancing act of stress and satisfaction.

**Managing Chaos: Weddings, Spikes, and the Banquet Book**

Before I arrived at Neethlingshof, wedding bookings were a haphazard affair. The owner, a true Chef at heart, jotted down event details—like the couple's name, guest count, table arrangements, and menu preferences—on small rectangular scraps of paper called bons. These were casually spiked onto the kitchen’s order holder, becoming a precarious archive of upcoming events.

When I started, the spike was brimming with about ten of these papers, each holding the makings of someone's "most important day." The first few weddings were absolute chaos. For example, on Saturdays, our team of casual staff would disassemble 20 round tables by 3 PM, only to reset 40 square ones in just three hours for the next wedding at 6 PM. It was clear something had to change.

**Order amid the Madness**

Like any good German would do, I introduced a system: the Banquet Book. This organized all wedding details in one central location and enabled us to streamline operations. If one wedding used round tables, we made sure the following ones did too, reducing unnecessary resets. Weddings came with elaborate colour schemes—coordinating tablecloths, napkins, and flowers—and we enforced strict policies. Deposits were mandatory and any last-minute menu changes were rejected unless made 48 hours in advance.

Just as everything seemed to run smoothly, a hiccup revealed itself in spectacular fashion. One afternoon, a couple walked in to confirm their booking with a deposit for their wedding next weekend. Alarm bells rang. Neither the spike nor the meticulously maintained Banquet Book had any record of their event.

We scrambled to cross-reference every name they provided, from parents to in-laws, but came up empty-handed. Their faces turned ghostly pale before erupting in panic—understandably so. The next weekend was packed: one wedding Friday, two back-to-back on Saturday, and another Sunday. But we hadn’t accounted for this mystery wedding.

Thanks to their foresight in confirming a week ahead, we scrambled to accommodate them. And so, we hosted our first-ever back-to-back weddings on a Sunday, complete with a table reset. It was hectic, but somehow, we pulled it off.

Another memorable event was the address by President Nelson Mandela at the 10th anniversary celebration of the Neethlingshof Estate, Stellenbosch 21 April 1995.

**The Joys and Challenges of the Estate**

Working at Neethlingshof was as exhilarating as it was demanding. Our team was a unique mix of black and white staff—a reflection of South Africa’s complex socio-cultural dynamics. The owner of the estate, an eccentric German, had previously run the restaurant with a stiff Chinese manager. Their formal suit-and-tie approach and exclusive, high-end menu alienated many potential customers and failed to turn a profit.

When the owner leased the restaurant to my boss—a German married to a white South African—it began to thrive. The simplicity of our menu, combined with a relaxed atmosphere, brought in crowds.

But success brought envy. The estate owners, noticing our bustling restaurant, wanted to take it back under their control.

They began making life increasingly difficult for us. Their meddling created tension, and after a year of relentless work, I decided to take a break during the August off-season to visit a friend in Germany.

While I was away, the tension reached its peak. My boss and the estate owners had a massive fallout. Instead of battling it out in court, they negotiated a payout, and my boss handed back the restaurant.

My time in South Africa was one of the most colourful and adventurous chapters of my life. The stories about the estate alone could fill a book: the eccentric guests, the frantic pace of weddings, and life on the nearby farm where I stayed, the end of the apartheid, It was an era of chaos, and growth—a blend of culture, work, and pure human experience.

**Back to the Tropics - A tough Schnitzel**

***Ottmar’s Restaurant***

So, I did not return to South Africa, life has a way of rewriting plans. When I visited a friend in Germany, I didn’t expect to meet an Austrian goldsmith who would change my trajectory. But fate had its own script. Within a month, we eloped, and soon we found ourselves navigating the unexpected: from Costa Rica to Texas, where his job prospects faltered. Yet, fortune smiled in Grand Cayman, where my familiarity with the island helped him land a job—and me to seamlessly re-join a place I’d once called home.

Grand Cayman welcomed me back like an old friend, and it wasn’t long before opportunity knocked.

When I first returned to the island after an extended stay in New York, I was broke and eager to get back to work. I took the first opportunity that came along—a waitress job at Ottmar’s. I had no idea that this decision would lead to the privilege of working with one of the greatest chefs, albeit briefly, before moving on to Morritt’s Tortuga Club.

Chef Ottmar Weber’s culinary journey was nothing short of extraordinary. In 1985, he opened Ottmar’s at the Grand Pavilion Hotel with his Cuban wife, Sandra, and their daughter, Helki. His dedication to excellence soon gained international attention. In 1997, the Great Chefs television team came to Georgetown, Grand Cayman, to feature him in two series: Great Chefs of the Caribbean and Great Chefs of the World, which aired on the Discovery Channel.

Ottmar’s career wasn’t without its challenges. In September 2004, Hurricane Ivan devastated Ottmar’s at the Grand Pavilion. Unshaken, he opened Fisherman’s Reef Bar & Grill two years later and eventually reopened Ottmar’s Restaurant & Lounge on West Bay Road, Seven Mile Beach. His contributions to the culinary world were so profound that in 2011, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Culinary Society of Grand Cayman, presented by celebrated chef Keith Griffin.

But what set Ottmar apart wasn’t just his talent in the kitchen—it was his character. Unlike the stereotypical chef, he wasn’t temperamental or egotistical. Instead, he exuded warmth, calmness, and a sharp sense of humour. One memorable example of his light-hearted nature came courtesy of a regular patron—a loyal fan of schnitzel and pommes—who one day complained that his schnitzel was too dry and tough. Ever the prankster, Ottmar had coated and pan-fried a cleaning rag and handed it to me to serve to the guest. At first, I hesitated, but Ottmar persuaded me. The guest took a couple of bites before Ottmar emerged from the kitchen, retrieved the dish, and revealed the prank. The entire room erupted in laughter.

Working with Chef Ottmar wasn’t just about food; it was about the joy of sharing moments, learning from a master, and witnessing a man who combined skill, humour, and humanity with effortless grace.

***Morritt’s Tortuga Club, Grand Cayman Island, B.W. I 1996***

Not long after Ottmar’s I moved to at Morritt’s Tortuga Club on the island's East End as acting Food & Beverage Manager. The Swiss General Manager didn’t mince words—my salary would be lower than my predecessor’s, but the allure of leadership and the familiar rhythm of island life sealed the deal.

This was followed four Christmases, many parties, weddings, reunions, break ups, dives, and dinners before I left Morritt’s Tortuga Club and Grand Cayman after the millennium for Egypt.

Morritt’s was not a luxury escape, but it had its charm. Nestled in the quieter East End, it offered breathtaking ocean views, pristine beaches, and an atmosphere far removed from the island’s busier districts. The property had a single restaurant with a terrace, a small bar, and a pool bar. Its timeshare model, spearheaded by David Morritt—a savvy Brit—and his French wife, kept the place buzzing, even though it was tucked in a less sought-after part of the island.

The staffs at Morritt’s reflected the world’s diversity, with team members hailing from Jamaica, Canada, Sri Lanka, China, Ireland, and beyond. The Jamaican bartenders spun cocktails like the island winds—Rum Punches, Mudslides, and other delights. The restaurant staffs was equally motley, mirroring the international tapestry of the guests who poured in week after week.

Events were the heartbeat of Morritt’s. Monday nights pulsed with the Macarena; Wednesdays descended into "Mudslide Madness," where Vitamix blenders churned cocktails non-stop. The parties were hilarious, noisy, and raunchy; hundreds of Americans of all ages their entire body bobbing to the Macarena. Fridays were alive with the rhythms of ‘The Steelers’ steel drums during Reggae Night. These events drew a mix of timeshare invitees and paying guests, creating a lively, uninhibited atmosphere. Drinks flowed freely—Heinekens at $12, Mudslides at $18. The Cayman dollar was 20 – 30% higher than the US$, so this was super expensive.

**Building Structure amid Chaos**

In two months, I reshaped the operations. Streamlining procedures and organizing the chaotic rhythm of the resort's events became my mission. The transformation was palpable, and soon, the F&B team operated like a well-oiled machine.

In the fast-paced world of hospitality, managing losses is often part of the game. Minor discrepancies are tolerable, but when it’s glaringly evident—like noticing 700 Heinekens leaving the bar every night with only 250 logged in the POS system—it’s time to take action.

Within a month I lost 70% of my bartenders. The problem was clear: long fingers were undermining the business. While small losses under 5% were usually accepted, this situation was beyond control. I began with a targeted approach, focusing on the Canadian Pool Bartender who closed the bar at 6 PM. Working with the accountant, we counted a single product—Heineken—against the input for three consecutive days. On the third day, it was time for a direct confrontation: “Where are the missing 250 bottles of Heinekens in three days?” He had no answer. Instead, he quietly removed his apron and left.

This set the tone for cleaning house. Over the following days, the American bartender followed suit.
Only one bartender, an Irish lady, proved to be trustworthy—or learned to become so. Rooting out the last holdout, a Jamaican bartender took nearly a year. In the end, he sealed his fate by walking out at midnight with a box of Heineken under his arm. His parting words? “It was a good job, but my time is up.”

Once the team was rebuilt with reliable staff, it was time to rethink operations. I organized three event evenings designed to maximize efficiency while minimizing waste. By purchasing rum by the gallon, we developed a system to premix cocktails in bulk. Re-using the gallon containers we mixed the ingredients for seamless pouring. A similar process was applied to Mudslides, blending vodka and crème de cacao in advance. The company produced Vodka by the gallon and would produce crème de Cacao for us which we premixed, throw the mix into the blender with ice, swoop it into the glass, top it with a dollop of cream and squish plenty of messy chocolate sauce over it. With this system, a single bartender could churn out up to 500 cocktails in a night—transforming the bar into a well-oiled machine.

The impact was immediate and undeniable. Three months later, when my pay check arrived, my salary had doubled. Assuming an error, I approached the General Manager, who simply smiled and said, “You earned it.” The owner, too, expressed his appreciation. For over a decade, he’d been operating at a loss whenever guests dined. Under my management, every burger now turned a profit. It was a moment of pride—not just for the results, but for breaking barriers as the first female F&B Manager on the island.

Leadership is rarely smooth sailing, and my journey was no exception. While there were victories and moments of pride, there were also heartbreaking and challenging times that tested my resilience.

Amid the whirlwind of managing the business, my personal life took a blow. My Austrian boyfriend decided to return to his roots—back to Mama, Topfen Strudel, and dumplings. It was a bittersweet farewell.

Around the same time, my best friend from Cuba arrived with her boyfriend, and for a while, we shared a house. Living on the opposite side of the island near George Town meant nightly drives of 40 km after long shifts. One evening, I encountered a Caymanian lady, around 40 years old, living in her car with her four children. Her plight moved me deeply. Against the advice of my General Manager, who warned me, “Don’t do it,” I hired her. “I can handle it,” I assured him.

At first, it seemed like a small victory—helping someone in desperate need. But my optimism soon unravelled. On one of my days off, she shocked everyone by grabbing a long knife from the kitchen pickup area and stabbing an Indian waiter in the stomach, yelling, “You motherfuckers, you’re taking all our jobs!”

The scene was chaos—ambulances, police, panic. The injured waiter was rushed to the hospital, and the waitress was arrested. But the nightmare didn’t end there. The next day, I was summoned to the immigration office. My General Manager met me outside, his face grim. “Keep your mouth shut. I’ll handle it,” he ordered.

Inside, I was blindsided. The waitress had told the police that I was a racist and blamed me for her actions. The interrogation that followed was humiliating and infuriating. I was grilled about my ethics and accused of prejudice, a bitter irony given my history of volunteering at the prison through Rotary and my initial act of kindness in hiring the local lady. Outraged, I finally stood up and declared, “Shove your visa up your backside. I don’t want to stay in a country that treats me like this!”

As the dust settled, I learned that she had a criminal record—a fact unknown to me when I hired her.
My GM’s parting words were a frustrating reminder of his earlier warning: “I told you so.”

This episode left a mark, teaching me that compassion, while vital, must be balanced with caution.

It also highlighted the complexities of leadership, where even well-intentioned decisions can have devastating consequences.

**Help – my Boss is a Woman!**

***Flamenco Beach Resort Marsa A`lam and Hilton Dabab, Sinai, Egypt 2000***

After the millennium, I decided to leave Grand Cayman. My initial plan was to return to Asia, but life took me on a detour to Egypt. My first job through the internet landed me at the Flamenco Beach Resort in Marsa Alam, a quiet town in the south of Egypt. The General Manager, an Austrian, had hired me.

However, neither of us could have predicted what lay ahead.

**The Arrival: A World of Brown**

Touching down at Cairo airport was surreal. The view from the plane was a sea of brown, a stark contrast to the lush greens of the Caribbean. The journey to Marsa Alam by bus was another adventure—dusty landscapes stretched endlessly. It was as though I’d been transported to a completely different planet.

**A Dusty Start**

Brimming with energy, I began my first day by tackling my new office—a cramped 3x3-meter space packed to the brim with dusty furniture and rubbish. True to form, I threw everything outside the door, reorganized the space, and cleaned until it was unrecognizable.

Amid my focused cleaning, the door creaked open slightly. A head peeked in for two seconds before vanishing. Amused but undeterred, I returned to "making my nest."

The next day, at 10 AM, I attended the first of what would become the most unforgettable morning briefings of my career. The General Manager sat behind his desk, while the department heads lined up like soldiers standing in front of his desk. I was formally introduced to the team. My Assistant F&B Manager, I was informed, was on leave.

**The Resignation I did not see coming**

A few days into the job, I was summoned to the General Manager’s office, where I was met with an angry outburst. “Why did the Assistant F&B Manager hand in his resignation?” he demanded.

Confused, I replied, “He is on leave, and I have not met or spoken to him.”

As it turned out, the resignation had nothing to do with my actions. Instead, the Assistant F&B Manager had quit outright, refusing to work for a woman.

This was my first taste of the cultural landscape in the Middle East—a fast-track lesson in navigating perceptions and workplace dynamics as a female leader. While the challenge was daunting, I was determined not to let it derail me.

**Who gets the Booze?**

As the F&B Manager at the Flamenco Beach Resort in Marsa Alam, one of my key responsibilities was holding the hotel's liquor license. In Egypt, this wasn’t just a symbolic title; it came with significant duties. The license was linked to my passport, and purchasing liquor required trips to the Duty-Free shop in Hurghada—a several-hour drive from the hotel.

These trips were an experience in themselves. The process involved physically selecting bottles, navigating inventory surprises, filling out piles of paperwork, and paying in cash. It was a far cry from streamlined supplier deliveries, but it added a hands-on charm to the task.

On my first trip, I was eager—not just to fulfil the hotel’s needs but to pick up a couple of bottles for myself after a long dry spell. As usual, my assistant accompanied me to handle paperwork and payments.

We cruised through the shop, filling our trolley with selected bottles, and made our way to the cashier. That’s where the excitement turned into an unexpected cultural clash.

**A Hierarchical World Turned Upside Down**

At the counter, I presented my passport, and my assistant, ever efficient, began filling out the forms, stamping documents with the official hotel stamp he carried in a small box, and preparing to pay.

Then, the cashier asked for his passport.

My assistant gestured to me, indicating that my passport was sufficient since I held the liquor license.

What followed was a shouting match that brought the shop to a standstill.

The cashier had assumed I was the secretary and my assistant the F&B Manager. When he realized that I, a woman, was actually in charge, his entire understanding of hierarchy unraveled. In a society where Allah-fearing Muslims were prohibited from drinking and only allowed to buy liquor for businesses serving foreigners, this was already a sensitive transaction. Add to it the shock of a female manager conducting business, and it became a full-blown dilemma.

**A Temporary Solution for a Permanent Problem**

After hours of negotiation and deliberation, we arrived at a compromise. My assistant was temporarily named the F&B Manager for the sake of the paperwork. With his male identity in place, the transaction could proceed.

While the situation was resolved, the experience was a stark reminder of the cultural complexities of doing business in the Middle East, particularly as a female leader. It wasn’t just about navigating bureaucracy—it was about challenging deeply ingrained societal norms, one trolley of liquor at a time.

**Rescues in the Red Sea**

Flamenco Beach Resort was managed by a hot tempered General Manager with little compassion and understanding for this different culture in a male dominated world, and I found myself unexpectedly transitioning to Hilton Dahab, a picturesque destination in the Sinai Peninsula , Sharm El Sheik’s little sister; by a chance encounter with the HR Manager I thought nothing of.

Dahab, once a small Bedouin fishing village, had blossomed into a multicultural haven with colourful beachfront cafes, handicraft shops, and a laid-back charm. However, running a hotel here was far from idyllic.

The Hilton Dahab, with its 120 rooms, three restaurants, a lagoon pool, a spa, a kids’ club, and a private beach, was an operational maze. Staffing was an ongoing battle. Located 100 kilometres from the bustling resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh, it was nearly impossible to find local workers.

The hotel relied on a dormitory for its staff and operated a shuttle bus to Cairo—a gruelling 500-kilometer round trip every week—to bring employees back to their families. Most staff lived on-site and worked up to 14-hour days, often shuttling between outlets with no breaks simply because they were there.

Recognizing this unsustainable schedule, I restructured the roster, tweaking outlet opening times and allowing staff to rotate between outlets. This adjustment created a manageable nine-hour workday.

Initially, my assistant protested, calling the changes scandalous. The team was wary of the unfamiliar concept of shorter shifts. But I pushed the plan forward, and before long, the team warmed to it, appreciating the improved work-life balance. Their trust and respect grew, laying the foundation for a motivated team.

**Bribery, Corruption, and a Towering Blonde**

Egypt's deeply entrenched corruption often made even basic operations exhausting. The shuttle bus was regularly stopped by police under the pretence of inspections, and someone’s paperwork always seemed conveniently “wrong.” Human Resources and accounting spent countless hours resolving these interruptions with bribes and diplomacy.

One day, however, I’d had enough. Without notifying anyone, I marched into the police station located 200 km from the hotel to resolve the latest incident myself. At 1.7 meters tall, a blonde foreign woman without a headscarf walking into a police station and glaring into a prison cell full of male detainees singling out two inmates was an unusual sight. Two of my team members, held for vague infractions, were stunned when the prison door opened to set them free without argument, questions, or money changing hands.

Unfortunately, this miracle only worked once. But it earned me the loyalty and admiration of my team, who saw I was willing to go to bat for them.

**A Rescue Mission**

Despite tight budgets, I wanted to strengthen camaraderie within my F&B team. Inspired by Dahab’s natural beauty, I rented a boat for a day on the water.

Before setting sail, I asked the team who could swim. Everyone confidently assured me they could.

Once on the boat, I led the way, diving into the crystal-clear sea.

To my horror, all 25 team members, all male, followed suit—only to flail helplessly, unable to stay afloat.
I found myself frantically paddling and pulling people into a makeshift circle, rescuing them one by one.
I am not sure if they did it on purpose to be “rescued by me, but it turned out that “I can swim” meant they had been near water before.

It was chaotic, exhausting, and, in retrospect, hilarious. Despite the mishap, the experience created unforgettable memories and a sense of unity.

**Children horror tales**

The courtyard at Hilton Dahab became the backdrop for surreal and poignant encounters. One evening, as the Head of Departments (HOD’s) relaxed after a long day casually having coffee at a table, a squeaking sound drew our attention upward. To our horror, a toddler was crawling along a narrow balcony ledge, smiling and peering down at us.

Half the team rushed upstairs to secure the child, while the rest stood below; arms outstretched in case the unthinkable happened. Thankfully, the baby was saved. Twenty minutes later, the parent’s appeared, collected the two year old child without so much as a thank you, and left.

Months later, a different scene unfolded in the same courtyard.

Late one evening, a young boy sat crying on the steps.

“What’s your name?” I asked gently.

“I don’t have one,” he replied.

“Do you know your room number?”

He shook his head.

“Your parents’ names?”

“I’m not allowed to say.”

For hours, we tried to piece together clues about his identity. At 11 PM, with no parents in sight, I brought him to my room, hoping to comfort him. He cried relentlessly, his small body shaking with sobs until 3 AM, when exhaustion finally overcame him.

The next morning, at 11 AM, 12 hours later, his mother appeared in front of my door, emotionless and unapologetic. She took him from my bed without a word, leaving me stunned at her indifference.
Or maybe she was just looking for a free babysitter for one night.

My time in Dahab was a testament to the unpredictability of life in hospitality—and the resilience required to thrive in it.

**Football Fanatics**

Working at Hilton Dahab wasn’t just a job—it was a crash course in crisis management. The hotel seemed to have a knack for attracting misfortune, from lost children and near-drowning team members to fiery midnight mishaps. Our Swissotel neighbours didn’t fare much better; their General Manager resigned after a child drowned in the pool and a guest died in a four-wheel-drive accident. Hilton Dahab had its share of calamities too, including a fire in the artist’s store, a lawsuit by the Italian ambassador (who fell into a construction hole), and even a full-blown panic during 9/11 when all the guests demanded immediate flights out.

Through all this, our General Manager was often noticeably absent. Young, newly married, and blessed with a family connection (his father was Hilton’s VP for the Middle East), he had a penchant for working remotely—sometimes from exotic locales. Instructions were delivered sporadically via phone, leaving the team on the ground to fend for them.

**A World Cup Catastrophe**

One such directive came during a World Cup (or Euro Cup, the memory is hazy) final, which was set to air early in the morning in Egypt due to the time difference. The GM called to insist that we open the Windjammer Bar to show the matches on the big screen TV. I was sceptical—who would want to watch a morning match with drinks? Reluctantly, I complied, instructing the team to open the bar, expecting little action. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

The bar filled with eager football fans that quickly began consuming beer like it was water. The atmosphere was electric, but as the match drew to its dramatic conclusion, disaster struck. England lost to Portugal after a gruelling 110 minutes, and frustration boiled over. Chairs flew, tempers flared, and before security could intervene, the bar was reduced to rubble.

By the time the dust settled, the guests had retreated to their rooms, leaving us to face the aftermath—a tattered bar and an unforgettable story.

With no GM on-site, I was thrust into decision-making roles that honed my crisis management skills—skills that later proved indispensable in my own career as a General Manager. The Hilton Dahab wasn’t just a workplace; it was the ultimate training ground, wrapped in a whirlwind of unpredictability

**Indecent Exposure**

During my time working at the Hilton in Egypt, we did not very often host Russian guests. They had a unique way of traveling—not in groups but usually as couples, rarely mingling with other nationalities and not engaging at all into the local culture. Their focus seemed to be simple: sun, beach, and relaxation.

But from my time in China in 1993 to the 2000’s the Russians seem to have evolved. Prior the women looked rather drab they are now tall, slender and slim, wearing attractive make up and clothes.

While most European guests preferred to stay outdoors during the day, lounging by the beach, I noticed the Russians were just as drawn to the sun but often preferred the pool. This inspired me to adjust the hotel’s offerings, setting up a grill in open air on the beach and adding a snack and ice cream bar by the pool, which became surprisingly popular.

One particular day stands out vividly in my memory. A stunning Russian couple was sunbathing by the pool. At first, I didn’t pay much attention; it was just another day closing the breakfast restaurant, moving the crew to open the grill and get going at the Pool Bar. However, I started noticing that the waiter at the beach grill went to serve food at the pool, the lifeguard suddenly had guests to tend at the pool, and a maintenance worker had to change the water filter —all seemed unusually interested in the pool area.

Curious, I passed by but saw nothing remarkable. The pool area wasn’t crowded, and the couple on the loungers appeared relaxed. Dismissing it, I went back to the crowded beach and afterwards to my office.

Then, around 3 PM, the front desk called. A Russian lady had stormed into the reception, loudly complaining in broken English. No one could decipher her grievance. As I approached, the mystery unravelled itself in an instant—before I even heard a word.

There she was, standing at the reception desk, wearing a G-string bikini and nipple covers. She had been sunbathing topless by the pool all day and was furious about being stared at. She demanded that I do something to stop it.

Trying to suppress a laugh, I calmly explained that there wasn’t much I could do about the male staff looking at her. What followed was a one-hour lesson in Middle Eastern culture. I explained how women here often cover themselves from head to toe in public and why a topless woman might be considered haram, especially around married men.

Her frustration gradually turned to reluctant understanding. By the end, she grudgingly agreed to either wear a T-shirt or tolerate the attention.

While the situation was resolved, I couldn’t help but marvel at the cultural disconnect. It was a perfect example of how travel can sometimes become a collision of worlds.

**Ali Baba and the forty Thieves**

A hard and fast fact about the hospitality business—one that some owners or managers may not want to accept—is that, inevitably, money or goods will go missing. This reality extended to the Hilton Dahab, where I worked. The saddest part is that the culprits are often the last people you’d suspect, while those under suspicion are usually innocent.

In every hotel, there comes a time when a guest complains about a theft—whether it’s money missing from a wallet, jewellery disappearing from a room, or even a misplaced camera. No manager wants to believe there’s a thief among the staff; we’re trained to see the good in people. And, of course, scepticism is necessary—many “stolen” items are merely misplaced or were never brought along by the guest in the first place.

At the Hilton Dahab, the layout centred around a courtyard, bordered by the Windjammer bar, a few shops, and the main restaurant. Near the reception, between it and the bar, was a public restroom. It was in this restroom that a strange discovery unfolded.

The ceiling in the restroom was made of gypsum board panels, each panel resting on a metal frame. I’m naturally observant, and on several occasions, I noticed that one of the panels seemed out of place. Using a pen to reach the ceiling, I would push it back into position. I didn’t think much of it at first; perhaps maintenance work had disturbed it. This happened four or five times without raising any alarm.

But then, one day, the panel was more dislodged than ever—completely out of alignment. It looked like someone had been working on it, but there was no sign of maintenance nearby: no ladder, no tools, no work notice. As usual, I tried to push the panel back into place. However, this time, it was far too heavy. Suddenly, it came crashing down on me—along with a collection of items that were unmistakably not tools.

For a moment, I froze. There I was, alone in the public female restroom, staring at a hidden stash that had tumbled from the ceiling. It was shocking. Among the items were a camera, a necklace, bracelets, rings, and other valuables—things guests had reported missing. My mind raced. This wasn’t a coincidence.

I quickly ran to find our guest relations officer, another German who worked with me, and shared what had just happened. Together, we returned to inspect the items more closely. We were appalled. This wasn’t misplaced property; this was stolen loot, carefully hidden in the ceiling. After a brief discussion, we decided to put everything back where it was and devise a plan to catch the thief.

It didn’t take long. We soon caught the male public attendant, who had access to a master key, sneaking into the female restroom. His method was disturbingly calculated—he would use the restroom as a temporary storage spot for stolen goods until it was “safe” to move them elsewhere.

This experience was both unsettling and enlightening. It reminded me that trust must be balanced with vigilance. It’s not enough to assume the best in everyone—you must always keep an eye on the details, even in the most unlikely of places.

Another story, the abrupt end of my top bartender still lingers with me, a mix of pride and disappointment. He had been a fresh face from the countryside, arriving with nothing but ambition and a willingness to learn. Over the course of a year, he blossomed into an indispensable member of the team, celebrated for his quick wit, natural charm, good English skills and exceptional ability to connect with guests.

So adept was he at his role that I entrusted him to manage the Pool Bar solo—a coveted position.
Guests often remarked on his easy manner, and I was secretly delighted by his growth, even favouring him among my staff. But as the saying goes, trust takes years to build, seconds to break.

It was during dinner when a German guest approached me in the dining room. The guest appeared puzzled, recounting telling me about paying for his ice cream at the pool bar. I mentioned that he does not have to pay cash; he can sign his bill to the room. But he insisted on paying cash to keep track his expenses, Germans like to do this, but found it odd that the bartender had pocketed the money. At first, I brushed it off, thinking it might be a misunderstanding of our policy. I explained to the guest that cash payments were perfectly acceptable and receipts were issued. But his final question hit a nerve: Why don’t you have a cash drawer at the Pool Bar? And of course, we did have a cash drawer at the Pool Bar. But it seemed my star bartender had decided to keep a cash drawer of his own.

The next morning, before his shift began, I called him to my office. The conversation began lightly, easing into the topic of procedure. When I asked about handling cash payments, his reaction was swift. Without any argument or answer to my question, he removed his nametag and apron, placed them on my desk, and apologized. “I am so sorry,” he said simply before walking out.

And just like that, one year of training walked out of my office.

This is the bittersweet nature of managing people. It’s a reminder that even the brightest talents can falter and that leadership sometimes involves letting go of those who no longer align with the values of the team.

Managing a team is often a balancing act between nurturing talent and curbing mischief. But every so often, the creativity and effort employees channel into circumventing the rules leave you both incredulous and exasperated. If only that ingenuity were directed toward their jobs, imagine the possibilities!

Guests weren’t the only ones to fall victim to their clever schemes—the company itself bore the brunt of their resourcefulness. Their craftiness reminds me of a particular discovery I made, which I still recount with equal parts disbelief and reluctant admiration.

Many of you are familiar with those small plastic inserts on top of luxury alcohol bottles. Patented in 2005 and widely implemented by 2008, these contraptions were designed to prevent tampering—specifically, refilling premium liquor bottles with cheaper alternatives or even tea. But my bartenders had already perfected their workaround long before these caps became standard.

Their operation was ingenious and disturbingly effective:

Decant and Replace: Premium Black Label whisky was decanted into water or coke plastic bottles for clandestine sale on the black market. The emptied Black Label bottle was refilled with tea, carefully matching the original colour. This is also very clever marketing; in a region where many Muslim patrons abstain from alcohol, the real whisky would be sold as a nondescript “soft drink.” No one questioned why the Coke might look a little lighter than usual.

When the tamper-proof caps were introduced, I thought the game was over. But Ali Baba's crew simply upped their game. They’d break the spout of an empty bottle to access it, refill it with tea, and put it on the shelf. Then toss the genuine liquor over the bar wall into a grassy ditch behind the property.

I uncovered this scheme in the most serendipitous way. One evening, while visiting the neighbouring Swissotel managed by an Italian GM, I noticed something peculiar—a Red Label bottle in the ditch.

I could not really see if it was full or empty. At first, I dismissed it as odd. Who would discard a bottle of whisky, especially in a region where alcohol was forbidden, scarce and prized?

Hours later, on my way back, the bottle was still there. Curiosity got the better of me. I picked it up and took it back to my room, discovering it was indeed an original, unopened bottle of Red Label whisky. It took me a few days to connect the dots, but when I did, I couldn’t help but feel a strange pride in my detective abilities. Perhaps I missed my true calling as a Scotland Yard detective.

Never underestimate the resourcefulness of your team—especially when it comes to bending the rules. Creativity is a powerful force, one that can either build or dismantle a business. The challenge for any leader is channelling that creativity into constructive endeavours.

This is a colourful reflection on resourcefulness, and the challenges of managing talent in an environment rife with temptation.

**Get me out of here – NOW!**

On September 11, 2001, at around 4 PM local time in Dahab, Egypt, my General Manager called me. His voice was tense, almost urgent. "Switch on the TV in the Windjammer Bar," he said. "The USA has been ‘bombed.’"

Curious but unsure of what awaited us, the guest relation and me, the only foreigners working in the resort, turned on the television. What unfolded before our eyes was shocking: the first two planes crashing into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, and a third striking the Pentagon in Arlington County, Virginia.

We stood there in disbelief, processing the horror. Yet, after switching off the TV, a strange sense of detachment prevailed. The United States felt so far away—a distant world. Here we were, on the other side of the planet, in sunny Dahab, Egypt, surrounded by the Red Sea and bustling tourists. We thought, surely, this tragedy would have no direct impact on us.

At the time, the hotel was bustling, operating at 70% occupancy with German, Italian, and a handful of British guests. Dinner service began at 6 PM as usual across our three dining rooms. That evening, we served approximately 200 guests. It was a busy night, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary—just another day in paradise. We, the department heads, didn’t think to brief our team about the news.
We simply carried on, not realizing the storm brewing beneath the surface.

**The Morning After**

At 6 AM the next day, a call came from reception and guest relations: “Urgently come to the lobby, alatul (right now).”

When I arrived, the scene was chaotic. Long lines of guests crowded the reception area, their luggage packed and ready. Voices clashed in a cacophony of demands: "We need to leave immediately!"

The nearest airport, Sharm El Sheikh, was 100 kilometres away, and in the early 2000s, its operations were dominated by chartered flights, not commercial ones. Yet guests were insistent, calling travel agents and demanding immediate evacuations.

The guest relations manager and I were dumbfounded. What had sparked such panic overnight?
The answer became clear soon enough.

During dinner the previous evening, some German guests—curious and analytical as they often were—had asked our waiters what they thought about the bombings in New York. By then, it had become known that the attacks were carried out by Middle Eastern terrorists. Many of our staff, Egyptian and Muslim, responded with comments like, “Inshallah” (God willing), “Alhamdulillah” (praise be to God), and “Well done by our brothers.”

What they likely meant as expressions of religious submission or pride in their cultural identity was interpreted far differently by our Western guests. To them, it sounded like a dangerous endorsement of terrorism. Panic ensued. The German guests passed their fears onto the Italians, and everyone called their travel agents, demanding immediate evacuations. By dawn, hysteria had spread across the hotel.

**The Aftermath**

For nearly an entire day, I was on my feet, tirelessly calming distressed tourists. I fielded calls from frantic travel agents pleading with me to keep their clients calm, explaining repeatedly that we couldn’t charter planes at a moment’s notice. Despite the frenzy, we managed to avoid a complete breakdown, but the experience left an indelible mark.

How interconnected the world had become. Events that seemed far removed geographically could ignite fear and mistrust across borders and cultures within hours. How fragile is the balance of perception and communication in the hospitality industry, particularly in times of crisis!

**Banquet Battles**

***Radisson Amman Jordan, now Landmark 2002***

After the September 11 attacks, global markets and industries, particularly travel and tourism, were hit hard. Egypt’s tourism industry, just beginning to recover from the 1997 Luxor massacre, nosedived again. The bustling hotels of Sinai emptied almost overnight.

I was one of the last foreigners left employed on the Sinai Peninsula. My contract was renewed and signed on September 10th, just one day before the attacks, but with no guests and no income, we had to become creative. I was asked to look after several Hilton properties, but without guests there was nothing to do.
I resorted to shifting working light bulbs from the back to replace broken ones in the front, laying off staff, and dusting unused tables. It was a ghost town.

Through a network connection, I received an offer to work as the Executive Assistant Manager (EAM) in charge of Food and Beverage at the Radisson in Amman, Jordan. Amman was booming—thanks to the looming Iraq War. Big corporations and NGOs like Save the Children, UNICEF, and the Red Cross were flooding in to "set up camp." These organizations favoured staying in top-tier hotels like the Radisson, Hilton, and Hyatt. The Radisson in Amman was a large business hotel managed by an Irishman. It had one main restaurant, but its crown jewels were its numerous banquet halls, particularly the Royal Hall, which could accommodate up to 2,000 guests—complete with space to drive a Mercedes-Benz through a fake wall. My domain as EAM was Food and Beverage, and the lifeblood of my department was banqueting.

My management team consisted of an Assistant F&B Manager and a Banquet Manager. The latter operated out of a tiny office, almost a box, hidden between two wings of the hotel. Despite its modest size, that office was the nerve centre for daily events. Banqueting is never smooth—last-minute changes to guest numbers, equipment, programs, or menus are the norm, believe it or not in every country.

My banquet staff was composed entirely of male casual workers—regular hires who could handle the demanding events. Thankfully, a valuable lesson I’d learned at the Mövenpick Beijing from the GM’s wife stayed with me: delegate. It’s easy to get lost in the mess of tasks and people, but planning, delegation and clear communication were my survival tools.

**The Exhibition That Refused to End**

During a very low season, we received a super low priced booking for an ambitious three-day exhibition in the Royal Hall, featuring 500 booths. From the start, the event was a mess. It opened a day late, was poorly attended, and plagued by disorganization.

By the third day, the exhibition was set to end at 5:00 PM, allowing us to transition the hall into a theatre-style setup with 2,000 seats for a university graduation the following day at 2:00 PM.

What should have been a straightforward turnover became a logistical nightmare.

At 10:00 PM, the exhibition booths were still standing. By midnight, the hall doors were finally locked, and we waited for the organizers to break down the booths. Tomorrow, we were told. But when we reopened the doors at 10:00 AM, the booths were still there. The exhibitors had returned, and the event had resumed—completely ignoring the schedule, contract and endless conversations.

Meanwhile, the university staff arrived to start decorating the hall with flowers. Panic ensued. The Banquet Manager, overwhelmed, barricaded himself in his office, calling me every 10 minutes with the same desperate plea: “We have to cancel the university!”

Cancelling wasn’t an option. Because where could you find a hall for 2000 people set up theatre style in 4 hours and inform all these 4000 guests that the location has changed last minute? I promised to find a solution.

**Battle Stations**

From 10:00 to 12:00, the phones were ablaze with calls from the exhibitors, the university, and the frantic Banquet Manager. In the background, I quietly assembled my troops. I gathered my few permanent F&B staff from the hotel restaurant, tripled the number of casual banquet workers, requested backup from the hotel as in every available security and housekeeping staff, and secured every available trolley in the hotel.

Behind the scenes, I held a 40-minute emergency meeting, drawing up a meticulous battle plan for my 40-person team. The Banquet Hall layout was printed on a A3 paper and marked up with sections and roles were assigned:
A security stationed at each door with a baton to scare unruly booth holders.

Young energetic banquet casuals acted as dismantlers to tear down booths and folded tables whether there were guests or not, they were instructed just to dismantle.

Movers transported the debris of the booths and tables in large garbage bags outside the door.

Outside special garbage crew hauled away trash.

Every Housekeeper was equipped with a vacuum cleaner and had an assigned section they had to vacuum immediately after the booth and garbage was removed.
2000 red banquet chairs were lined up the previous night in the back of the hall; we had borrowed more chair trolleys from other hotels.

By noon, we were ready.

The massive double doors of the Royal Hall flew open, and with something akin to a battle cry, me and my crew charged in. The dismantling was swift and ruthless—“Die Fetzen sind geflogen” (the scraps flew).

At 1:30 PM, the chair team rolled in with 2,000 chairs on 50 trolleys. By 1:50 PM, the university staff swept in, placing flowers and decorations. At exactly 2:00 PM, the doors reopened to welcome the guests like nothing had happened behind these closed doors.

**Victory**

At 2:20 PM, the Banquet Manager emerged from his hiding place, shaking hands and congratulating everyone as if he’d orchestrated the entire operation. I couldn’t help but laugh.

This was one of my most memorable lessons in crisis management. It reminded me that, no matter how chaotic the circumstances, a cool head, a solid plan, and a dedicated team can pull off the impossible.

**A “Lanna Wedding”**

***Centara Grand, Chaweng Beach, Koh Samui, Thailand, 2004***

My two years at Centara Grand as Executive Assistant Manager were instrumental in shaping my approach to leadership, paving the way for my eventual role as General Manager in Vietnam. These were formative years, though not without their challenges.

With a non-functioning General Manager and a head office in Bangkok locked in disagreement, I was often handicapped in execution. However, these obstacles didn’t dampen my zest for innovation, out-of-the-box ideas, and revenue-boosting initiatives. One such project was the creation of a Lanna wedding package, a unique offering inspired by the rich traditions of northern Thailand.

The northern region of Thailand, known as Lanna, boasts a culture steeped in ancient rituals and ceremonies, entirely foreign to most visitors. Lanna marriage ceremonies are no exception. Mystical and deeply symbolic, these weddings have become a magnet for couples seeking a more profound and unique way to start their married lives.

A traditional Lanna wedding is an all-day affair, beginning at dawn when the couple offers alms—typically food, incense, and flowers—to monks on their morning rounds. This is followed by a blessing from a senior monk at a local temple. To gain further merit, the couple may release birds, fish, or turtles back into the wild. The day typically concludes with a Western-style reception in a hotel, blending old-world charm with modern celebration.

We decided to replicate the entire experience at Centara Grand, from the early morning rituals to a grand procession featuring traditional Lanna drums and even a bridal carriage. However, implementing such a program required meticulous preparation: procedural guidelines, specialized equipment, and—most importantly—promotional materials. To market the package effectively, we needed photos that captured the magic of the occasion.

**A Dutchman, His Katoey Bride, and a Win-Win Idea**

Serendipity struck when a Dutch neighbour from my compound approached me.

He was planning to marry his Katoey (ladyboy) partner, and I saw an opportunity.

I offered the couple the full Lanna wedding experience at cost in exchange for permission to photograph and document the event for marketing purposes. It was a win-win arrangement, and both the couple and my team were thrilled by the idea.

The weeks leading up to the wedding were a whirlwind of activity. Many meetings, intricate planning, and nerves of steel were required to ensure everything was perfect. The staff, from photographers to banquet organizers, poured their hearts into the preparations.

Finally, the big day arrived. The carriage was polished and ready, the traditional drums reverberated through the air, and the excited couple prepared to embark on their magical journey.

As the wedding ceremony unfolded, I positioned myself near the hotel’s grand entrance, ensuring everything ran smoothly. Unbeknownst to the General Manager—who was famously aloof and rarely aware of the finer details of hotel operations—the wedding procession was about to pass through.

When the couple entered the lobby, resplendent in their ceremonial attire, the GM was waiting to greet them with a broad smile, likely thinking this was a traditional, lucrative wedding. But the moment his gaze landed on the couple, his expression morphed into one of thunderous disapproval.

Turning to me, he hissed under his breath, his face red with anger:

"These are two men! What on earth is this?"

For a split second, I froze, suppressing both laughter and the urge to explain the obvious.

Instead, I gave him a calm smile and whispered, “Yes, two very happy paying customers.”

Despite the GM’s shock, no handshake and his hasty departure before the ceremony, the event was a resounding success. The couple beamed with joy, the photos captured the romance and grandeur of the occasion, and my team gained invaluable experience in executing a unique ceremony.

The Lanna wedding package became a talking point, and the photos from the event were instrumental in its marketing. While the GM never quite forgave me for what he perceived as a "scandal," I took satisfaction in knowing that I had turned a challenge into an opportunity—and created a truly memorable experience for everyone involved.

This story is a testament to the power of creativity, adaptability, and humour in the face of organizational challenges.

**Zico’s botched Mardi Gras Parade**

Zico’s Brazilian Churrascaria, the brainchild of a former F&B Manager at Centara, was a spectacle of sizzling success long before I arrived. Built right on the hotel’s parking lot, it was a feast for the senses. Golden-brown dancers shook their way through the night to pulsating Brazilian beats, while waiters wielded meter-long skewers of perfectly roasted meat. Guests flocked to experience the vibrant energy—it was the talk of the island.

But as with many great ideas, novelty eventually fades. By the time I came on board, Zico’s allure had dulled, and it was my turn to breathe new life into it. This was my kind of challenge—an opportunity to combine creativity, community, and flair.

**The Grand Plan**

After some brainstorming with my ever-helpful neighbour from the Amsterdam Bar and his spirited new bride, my percussion team, the Zico’s Manager, and our iconic dancers, I landed on the perfect idea:
The Mardi Gras Parade Koh Samui.

A few evenings of planning, fuelled by Brazilian beats and pure ambition, yielded the bones of my plan.

As usual, I mapped everything out on a simple Word document—complete with Google-sourced images pasted in for visual reference. (Yes, I still rely on this method to this day. ☺ old fashioned I know)

Here’s how it came together:

Floats Galore: We’d invite banks, schools, businesses, and anyone lesbian- and gay-friendly who wanted to advertise their brand to create a float for the parade by an invitation email/letter.

Minimum: 50 floats. Maximum: 200 floats (any extras would roll over to next year).

Participation Fee: A small fee would be charged to cover organizational costs.

Parade Route: The parade would start and end at Zico’s Brazilian Churrascaria—a perfect way to bring the focus back to the restaurant.

Government Approval: I drafted a letter to the local government requesting road closures for two hours to accommodate the parade route.

The ideas kept flowing and the concept caught fire. Hundreds of people were buzzing with excitement, from businesses eager to participate to locals thrilled by the idea of something so vibrant and celebratory on Koh Samui.

But not everyone shared my enthusiasm. The Swiss General Manager, infamous for his resistance to anything outside the box, was predictably unimpressed. To him, this was just another “stupid idea.”

Despite my best efforts, the ambitious Mardi Gras Parade morphed into something much smaller in scale: a foam party. While not quite the spectacle I had envisioned, the foam party became an instant hit, setting the stage for the many foam-filled revelries that followed on Koh Samui.

Would I have stayed on the island, the Mardi Gras Parade might have become a national holiday in Thailand—or at least a beloved annual tradition. Who knows?

Zico’s Brazilian Churrascaria sadly seems to have closed its doors, but a small part of its legacy lives on.

My old website is still up, featuring a picture of me and the restaurant in its glory days: <https://zicossamui.com/images.asp>
I’m proud of the energy and excitement we created, even if the final result wasn’t what I had imagined. Sometimes, even a scaled-back vision can leave a lasting impact—and a few laughs along the way.

**A Slap in the Face**

Running a five-star hotel is a juggling act of epic proportions. Our mission is to ensure stellar reviews, maintain a glowing reputation, keep guests happy, foster a motivated team, control costs, protect assets, and deliver impressive financial results—all while keeping operations smooth. Achieving this requires stamina, diplomacy, cultural sensitivity, empathy, language skills, adaptability, and, on occasion, a good sense of humour.

At Centara Grand, most of our guests hailed from Europe—Germany, Great Britain, Spain, Italy—with a smattering of Russians, Israelis, and Scandinavians. Like any resort, we had a bustling high season and a quieter off-season. During the lull, we relied on promotions for island residents and local markets to keep the property lively.

Among our regulars was a German couple who spent every low season with us for five consecutive years. Rain or shine, they arrived at 8:00 AM sharp, claimed their two favourite sun loungers by the grass near the beach with placing a towel on them, and left for breakfast, a walk before returning around 11:00.
As you might know Germans are famous all over the world for “reserving sun loungers”. Even if the resorts are empty – they will get up at 6:00 or 7:00 just to place a book or a towel on the sun lounger.
Over time, I befriended them. The wife was imposing—doubles my size and notoriously hard to please—while her quieter husband played the role of peacemaker.

**Low Season Challenges**

Running a 12-year-old resort was no easy feat. Competing with newer, more inexpensive properties next door meant constant maintenance and vigilance. Every day brought new challenges: a strange smell in a room, a blocked toilet, grass growing too high, or unwelcome wildlife—anything from cockroaches in the rooms to snakes in the garden. Meanwhile, TripAdvisor loomed large, shifting the balance of power to guests. Even minor incidents could snowball into damaging reviews.

To complicate matters, my General Manager lacked people skills and spent most of his time either sipping wine in the restaurant or holed up in his office. That left me to manage everything, from irate guests to overflowing bookings.

**An Unforgettable Showdown**

One hectic afternoon, I was dashing through the lobby when my assistant called with a warning: “There’s drama on the beach.” I barely had time to hang up before spotting the German lady stomping toward me in nothing but her bathing suit, her thunderous expression making her intentions clear.

She stopped inches from me, pointed an accusatory finger at a British gentleman standing a few meters away from us and launched into a tirade. According to her, the man’s football repeatedly struck her sun lounger, disturbing her peace. When I tried to interject, she cut me off with a barrage of grievances about her rights as a loyal guest, the sun’s angle being critical for her skin, and ten other reasons I couldn’t track.

Meanwhile, the Brit remained calm, suggesting she could simply move her lounger. That only fanned the flames. Before I could utter “Stop,” she stormed past me and, in a moment of pure fury, delivered a thunderous slap to the Brit’s face that silenced the entire lobby.

**Picking Up the Pieces**

The slap stunned everyone, including me. The lobby was full with check in guests in the afternoon who stopped in their tracks, certainly this was not a 5 star welcome but more of a Fawlty Towers comedy show.
A five star hotel where you might get slapped?
The Brit, his sons now beside him, looked at me with an incredulous expression, though he quickly regained composure. As the German lady stormed off, declaring she’d “had enough,” I scrambled to apologize profusely. To my relief, the Brit shrugged it off, saying he wasn’t about to let a “stuck-up German” ruin his holiday. I was lucky, he was an easy going guest saving everyone’s day with his good humour.

But before leaving, he offered a piece of advice: “Why not rope off those VIP loungers? It might save someone else from getting slapped.”

The incident became the stuff of legend among the staff, a vivid reminder that no amount of training can fully prepare you for the wild unpredictability of hospitality. As much as this job requires tact and diplomacy, sometimes all you can do is laugh, adjust, and keep the ship afloat.

**Drunken Crows**

**The Great Crow Crisis**

At resorts, we welcome a wide variety of guests, each bringing their unique habits, perceptions, and expectations. However, in addition to our paying clientele, we often find ourselves accommodating some uninvited guests: pests. Rats and cockroaches are the most unwelcome, while mice and geckos, though less alarming, are still undesirable. Occasionally, we encounter snakes—a reminder that humans and animals are sharing spaces as we encroach on their habitats. Pest control, from mosquito sprays to rodent traps and snake awareness training, is an essential part of resort management.

But nothing could have prepared us for the unexpected avian invasion at Centara Grand.

**A Cheeky Intruder**

It began innocently enough—or so we thought. One morning, a crow found its way into the breakfast buffet, causing a small stir as it was shooed away. We laughed it off as an isolated incident. A few days later, however, another crow swooped down onto a guest’s plate on the terrace and made off with the entire omelette. The scene elicited chuckles from guests and staff alike, and after replacing the plate, the incident was chalked up to nature's unpredictability.

What followed was nothing short of an orchestrated takeover.

The crows began multiplying, appearing under the terrace beams and eyeing diners with unnervingly intelligent expressions. Guests, amused by their antics, began feeding them directly from their hands.

What started as light-hearted fun spiralled out of control. Soon, the crows were everywhere: on tables, chairs, the buffet, even inside the dining room itself. By the time we realized the severity of the situation, the terrace had become a full-fledged crow sanctuary.

**The Bird Brains Take Over**

Every morning, as the buffet opened at 6:30 a.m., an army of 200 crows or more descended upon the terrace. Their antics became a major headache for both guests and staff. Despite all efforts—shooing, sonic bird repellents, and professional pest control consultations—the crows remained unfazed. Their presence brought not just noise and disruption but an unsanitary mess of bird poo that required constant cleaning.

It was during one of our daily meetings, where the crows had become the main agenda item, that our American entertainment director approached me privately with a wild idea. Our General Manager was not very open and approachable, and he didn’t want his outlandish idea being shut down in front of all the Department heads. He suggested we cook a large pot of rice, lace it with whisky, and serve it to the crows. His theory? The alcohol would make them drunk and disoriented, they will pass out and allowing us to relocate them to another part of the island.

**The Whisky Experiment**

I stared at him in disbelief, but desperation made his plan seem worth a shot. I half-jokingly asked if the crows would accept a cheap brand of whisky or if we needed to splurge on something top-shelf for these "five-star crows." With the plan set, I instructed the chef to cook 10 kilograms of white rice before dawn. The entertainment director procured the (cheap local) whisky, mixed it into the rice, and set out 25 plates strategically across the terrace before 5:00 a.m., before the crows settled to watch the buffet set up.

At 6:30 a.m., the guests arrived, with the crows being in their usual positions, on the beams, roof, floor, everywhere. For the thirty minutes, not much happened, save for one or two crows appearing unusually lethargic and falling into the grass. Guests and staff asked what happened and were alarmed if the crows were sick and could spread a disease. I kept quiet and watched. But by 7:30 a.m., during the peak of breakfast, the terrace became a chaotic yet comical spectacle: 200 crows or so, in various stages of drunkenness, tumbled from the beams, trees, and terrace roof into the grass below.

Guests gasped, waiters panicked, and I did my best to maintain composure while suppressing laughter.
I calmly went around to explain to guests and waiters that the crows were not dead, there was no disease falling from the sky, no sniper shooting them or anything, the crows were simply drunk.
As the entertainment director had promised, the crows weren’t harmed—just thoroughly intoxicated.
The entire morning he had been hiding in the bushes in anticipation, now emerged triumphantly with gloves and large bags in his hands to collect the inebriated birds by their feet, bundling them into the large plastic bags.

**A Crow-Free Happily Ever After**

Immediately as promised, he transported the drunken crows to the other side of the island, where he released them. Perhaps too hangover, embarrassed or too disoriented to return, the crows never graced our terrace again.

The crow story became the stuff of legend at Centara Grand. Guests still chuckle over the tale, and staff learned a lesson in creative problem-solving. As for our entertainment director? He didn’t start a pest control company, though I wouldn’t have been surprised if he had.

And thus, Centara Grand lived happily ever after—crow-free!

**A measly thousand Dollar Cat**

Just as we thought the saga of uninvited animal guests had ended with the drunken crows, a new chapter began. This time, the trouble didn’t fly in on wings but walked in on four paws—soft, furry, and initially unassuming.

It all started with one small, scrawny cat, its pitiful meowing tugging at the heartstrings of our guests. Despite our attempts to shoo it away, the guests insisted on feeding it, citing its "poor, helpless" demeanour. Before we knew it, the cat had a litter of kittens, and the family soon grew to around 10 cats, all frequenting the breakfast buffet and demanding their share every morning.

Unlike the crows, the cats were more manageable. They couldn't fly, after all, and our approach was straightforward: discourage guests from feeding them and catch them, bring them to the local cat rescue organizations to spay, vaccinate, and rehome them. But as with all good stories, there was a final act—one that cost the hotel dearly.

**The Resilient Black Cat**

By the time we had dealt with most of the feline population, only one stubborn, mangy black cat remained. This scrappy survivor seemed impervious to all our efforts, evading traps and defying our attempts to capture it. We made it clear to guests: Do not feed the cat. We would take care of them later, ensuring their proper care and control.

But rules, as always, were made to be broken.

One morning, as breakfast service was winding down, a young couple sat on the terrace enjoying their meal. Despite the staff's warnings, the wife began slipping scraps of food under the table to the black cat, who happily accepted her offerings. When she stood up to go to the buffet, the cat, emboldened by the promise of more, followed her.

The wife tried to shoo the cat away, but this particular feline didn’t take no for an answer. In an audacious leap, the cat jumped at her and landed right on the buffet table, helping itself to whatever it pleased.
What followed was pure chaos.

The wife, who was visibly pregnant—eight months along—screamed in panic. Her cries brought the husband running into the restaurant, where the scene quickly escalated. The couple demanded to see the manager—me.

They accused the hotel of negligence for allowing "dangerous animals" to roam the dining area, citing hygiene concerns. The husband insisted the cat had attacked his wife, a situation made even more perilous because of her advanced pregnancy. They demanded an ambulance, claiming the wife needed immediate medical attention to ensure the safety of the unborn baby.

It took every ounce of diplomacy to convince them that calling an ambulance was unnecessary and that a taxi to the hospital would suffice. Still, they remained visibly upset.

The couple spent the entire day at the hospital, undergoing tests, vaccinations, and—ironically—enjoying lunch between appointments. They returned in the late afternoon, only to announce their decision to check out and move to another hotel. On their way out, they insisted that we cover all their expenses: the hospital visit, the vaccine, the lunch, the taxi, and the remainder of their stay in another hotel.

Arguing with disgruntled guests in such situations often does more harm than good, so we agreed to their demands. In total, that scrappy black cat cost the hotel nearly $1,000.

**The Moral of the Story**

Manage your pests, whether they’re birds or cats. While some guests find these encounters charming, others see them as serious infractions. Address such situations swiftly and decisively, in this case we chose to absorb the cost for the sake of maintaining the hotel’s reputation.

As for the black cat? It was eventually captured, spayed, and rehomed—ensuring that no more feline fiascos unfolded at the buffet.

**The Tsunami in Phuket**

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was a disaster of unimaginable scale, claiming over 230,000 lives across multiple countries in just a few hours. Among the hardest-hit areas was Thailand, where nearly 5,400 lives were lost, including 2,000 foreign tourists.

On December 26, 2004, the day after Christmas, the idyllic beaches of southern Thailand were bustling with tourists seeking tropical warmth. At 7:59 AM, a massive 9.1-magnitude earthquake struck beneath the Indian Ocean, generating waves that tore across the ocean at 500 mph. An hour and a half later, walls of water obliterated the coastal provinces of Phang Nga and Phuket.

The scenario reminded me exactly of the September 11 attacks in New York when I was in Egypt and I thought it has no effect on us. Although we were on Koh Samui, hundreds of miles from Phuket, the tsunami’s effects rippled far beyond the directly impacted areas. What followed in our resort over the next four days was a crash course in managing human behaviour under crisis—a mix of fear, selfishness, and compassion in equal measure.

**Chaos at the Reception Desk**

December 26th was a day of confusion. The news of the tsunami spread quickly, leading to panic among tourists. Even though Koh Samui was untouched, the devastation in Phuket caused ripple effects that upended our operations.

The peak tourist season in Thailand, stretching from December 20th to January 15th, meant that our resort was running at nearly full capacity. Many tourists were on pre-organized travel itineraries, combining multiple destinations, such as a week in Bangkok, another in Phuket, and a final stretch in Koh Samui.

At 12:00 noon, check-out time, the trouble began. Guests scheduled to leave for Phuket understandably refused to go, but their reactions were far from uniform. Some calmly informed the reception of their predicament, while others simply refused to check out or left us scrambling to locate them. By mid-afternoon, chaos reigned.

The reception area became a scene of confusion as guests shouted, "I will not go to Phuket!" Others stayed on without notifying the staff, creating a domino effect for incoming reservations. We had no clear record would actually check out or who of the arrivals would really check in. Over four days, until December 30th, the reception team functioned in complete disarray, relying on guesswork and improvisation to manage the influx and outflow of guests. Incredible scenes took place, I accommodated guests in my spare guest room at my bungalow, and some guest slept in the Banquet Halls. All hotels in Koh Samui were in total chaos and overbooked.

Amid the chaos, human behaviour ranged from touching compassion to shocking indifference. Some guests expressed genuine concern for the tsunami victims, offering to donate or asking how they could help. Others, oblivious or unwilling to acknowledge the disaster, simply wanted their vacation to proceed without interruption.

One family, insistent on going on a previously booked island-hopping tour, became irate when informed that their boat trip was cancelled for safety reasons. They stormed into the reception, demanding a refund, declaring, "We paid for this trip, and we want our money's worth!"

These contrasting attitudes highlighted the difficulty of dealing with a diverse mix of people during a crisis.

By December 30th, the reception got used to the daily room juggle games, but tensions lingered.
That evening, our General Manager announced a controversial decision: to cancel the New Year’s Eve Gala in light of the tragedy. He asked me to draft a letter to inform all guest rooms of this change.

I disagreed with this approach. Sending such a letter risked escalating tensions further. Guests, already on edge from disrupted plans, were unlikely to respond well to news that a much-anticipated celebration was cancelled. Thankfully, as the person responsible for implementing the directive, I quietly decided not to send out the letters and he could not do anything about it, so we went ahead with the gala dinner.

On New Year’s Eve, the GM took to the stage and addressed the guests at the Gala dinner. He spoke at length about the tsunami, explaining the decision to hold a subdued celebration out of respect for the victims. What followed was both unexpected and telling: a brief applause gave way to boos and shouts of disapproval.

Guests, many of whom had paid premium rates for their holiday, were vocal about their displeasure. "We paid for this!" someone yelled. "We want to have fun!"

Sensing the rising tension, I diplomatically stepped in, cutting the speech short and guiding the GM off the stage. The program resumed, and the evening unfolded without further incident, though the atmosphere remained tense.

The days following the tsunami tested our resilience, resourcefulness, and emotional intelligence. Managing a resort during a natural disaster—even indirectly—requires balancing empathy with pragmatism. Communication is key: Transparent and timely updates to guests can prevent misunderstandings and temper emotions. Flexibility is essential: In moments of crisis, standard protocols often fail. Adapting on the fly becomes a necessity.

Empathy matters: Understanding the diverse emotional responses of guests can help diffuse tension.

In the end, we survived the ordeal, but the experience left a lasting impression. It was a stark reminder that in the hospitality industry, crises often expose the full spectrum of human behaviour, from the selfish to the selfless.

**Where is the Car?**

Unlike in Myanmar Thailand has plenty of cars, good roads and it is easy to find a driver for your hotel car.

Although Thailand has one of the highest traffic fatality rate in Asia it also has plenty of police checking the cars and drivers. Corrupt traffic police like other Asian countries create the same pain and no gain.

One of the first things hotel and company owners usually ask me is to either buy a car or buy a second car.
And I usually recommend buying NO car, but rent and leaving the car business to other people.
At Centara we had a whopping 4 cars, but whenever we needed one either there was no driver available, or the car was on the mainland, or the car was stranded on the other side of the island with a flat tire and the driver abandoned it to go on his day off. Having done a lot of Profit & Loss calculation for cars, it is clear that including the asset depreciation, very seldom there is a profit for the company and it is more headache than worth it.
To find a disciplined driver, maintain the car, cover the costs associated with it takes a lot of time and energy. The most vivid memory is of the two days of hectic searching with the remaining 3 cars driving all over Koh Samui to find the 7 seater SUV, because the driver could NOT remember where he left it.
I was met with incredulous looks by the HR Manager when I suggested, after we found the car, to terminate the driver. He just could not remember – you have to forgive him.

**A Side Trip into Retail: Revitalizing a Boutique Shopping Arcade**

Located on Koh Samui's bustling Chaweng Beach Road, the hotel featured a boutique shopping arcade with eight shopfronts, a once-promising addition to the guest experience. However, the empty shops had become an eyesore, with only the Deli—a small sandwich and snack outlet—operating successfully.

The General Manager's vision for substantial revenue from the small 40m² shops was unrealistic compared to the modest income generated by the Deli. Convincing him to prioritize occupancy over high rental fees was an uphill battle. Ensuring shopkeepers could sustain their businesses while meeting rental obligations required balancing affordability and practicality. Determined to revitalize the arcade, I circumvented management's resistance, seeking tenants willing to pay $200 monthly rent—a modest fee compared to empty shopfronts. It involved outreach, negotiation, and an understanding of potential tenants' needs.

Within a month, I was able to fill the arcade with a diverse array of tenants which might not have been suitable for the target audience, but at least the shops were occupied and did not collect dust.

Mom and Baby Shop – Catered to families and locals.

Handicrafts Store – Highlighted local artistry and souvenirs.

Sustainability-Focused Shop – Aligned with eco-conscious travellers.

Soaps and Cosmetics – Provided boutique bath essentials.

Upmarket Drinking Water Shop – A niche concept for premium hydration.

Kashmiri Carpet Store – Unexpectedly enduring, catering to a niche market.

Businesses with unique offerings enhance the guest experience and made the arcade vibrant and inviting. The long-lasting success of the Kashmiri carpet shop defied initial assumptions about guest preferences. Focusing on tenants' ability to thrive created sustainable partnerships, ensuring continuity and mutual benefit. Retail spaces, even within hotels, require flexibility, creativity, and a focus on long-term guest engagement rather than short-term revenue goals. It offered me an opportunity to engage with individuals from various backgrounds.

**Too much Rain is a Pain**

***La Residence Hotel & Spa, Hue, Vietnam, 2008***

In 2006, while working at Centara Grand on Chaweng Beach Road in Koh Samui, I received an unusual phone call: would I be interested in a General Manager position at La Residence Hotel & Spa in Hue, Vietnam?

Vietnam held a special place in my memories. Back in 1993, after my Hong Kong years, inspired by some of my Japanese guests, I had embarked on a four-week holiday there, traveling from north to south. At the time, Vietnam had just opened up to the world, attracting curious Japanese business men—many of whom returned swearing they’d never do business in this country, Vietnam. My experience had been far more positive; although I had a terrible eye infection in Hanoi I had a wonderful time. However, not in my wildest dreams did I think I would one day work there.

My ambition was to land a General Manager position, regardless of where it might be—whether in Hue or Timbuktu, or somewhere with six months of rain or -40°C winters. Centara had offered me another Resident Manager role in Phuket to “support” yet another struggling GM, but it wasn’t the step up I craved. Secretly, I had hoped for the GM role at Centara Lamai Beach Resort, but that didn’t pan out.

So, when the Hue offer came, I seized it. It was my first General Manager position, and like everything else in my life, I was determined to do it right.

La Residence Hotel & Spa had a soft opening in August before my arrival. By the time I got there, some rooms and the Resident Suite were still incomplete. The spa offered a mere two treatments a day, as the trainer had told the therapists anything more was "unhealthy." To complicate matters, local parents often forbade their daughters from working in spas, seeing it as an inappropriate profession.

**Then there was the rain.**

In Hue, the rainy season wasn’t just a weather pattern—it was a way of life. Locals had an almost theatrical response to the rain, dropping everything to exclaim, “Cơn mưa!” (Rain!). At home, at work, or even while riding a motorbike, people would lament the downpour with raised hands and sorrowful faces.

Unfortunately for me, rainy season coincided with high season, and occupancy often hovered at 80%.

Yet, many staff wouldn’t show up to work, citing flooded roads or non-functional phones as excuses.

During one particular flood, with a full hotel and a skeletal crew, I reached my breaking point.

Determined to set a precedent, I rented a boat and dragged the HR Manager along with me. Together, we rowed through the flooded streets to the homes of absentee staff. The sight of the General Manager gliding past verandas where workers were sipping coffee, playing cards, and enjoying their unscheduled "day off" was priceless. Furious, I loaded them onto the boat and triumphantly returned to the hotel with my reluctant recruits in tow.

A memo soon followed: no pay for a "rain no-show." From that point forward, the staff never dared skip work during rainy season again.

**Battling Floodwaters**

The challenges didn’t stop there. Our on-site laundry, located dangerously close to the river, was a constant victim of flooding. During one particularly bad year, the Chief Engineer and I had to dive into the water to salvage the motors from the washing machines before they were ruined. By 2008, relocating the laundry to higher ground became my top priority.

That same year, we outsourced laundry services, but even that came with its own drama. On the second day of heavy rain, with no fresh laundry returned, I once again commandeered a boat to investigate. Arriving at the laundry, I found all eight workers cosily napping on top of the machines. Despite being high and dry with full power, their excuse was predictable: “Cơn mưa.” It was raining, they sorrowfully explained, as though this justified the complete halt in operations.

**A City Underwater**

November 2008 brought another unforgettable flood. The river rose so high that it submerged the pool, lotus pond, and walkways, leaving only the classic white hotel facade visible above the brown waters—a surreal sight, like a cream topping on a chocolate cake. We had to remove all outdoor lights to prevent electrical hazards.

Guests were warned to avoid the back of the hotel to prevent injuries on submerged steps. Surprisingly, their complaints weren’t about the rain or the flooding but about the colourful koi fish and turtles now swimming freely around the property. Many guests insisted we collect the animals immediately, worried they might not be fed.

Hue tested me in ways I hadn’t imagined. From rowing boats to retrieve staff to diving into floodwaters to save laundry equipment, my first General Manager position was a master class in resilience and problem-solving. Despite the challenges—or perhaps because of them—those years at La Residence taught me to think on my feet, adapt to cultural nuances, and face any storm (literal or metaphorical) with determination.

**Battling Interior Design Wars**

When I joined La Residence Hotel & Spa, the construction was not finished. The new wing had unfinished rooms, the spa was missing vital components to operate, and the highlight of the property—the Resident Suite—had no curtains. This was no ordinary room; perched on the second floor of the original building, the round-shaped suite overlooked the street below with its stunning curved windows, serving as a grand living room with two adjoining bedrooms. Its design was elaborate, its space unparalleled, and its price the highest in the hotel.

But for all its grandeur, it came with a glaring issue: no curtains.

In these early days, our focus was on selling run-of-the-house rooms, not optimizing revenue by promoting premium suites. The Resident Suite was rarely occupied, but when it was, complaints poured in. Guests found it impossible to sleep in a room bathed in sunlight at dawn, not to mention the lack of privacy.

In the storerooms, I discovered rolls of curtain material, which led me to believe the absence of curtains in the Resident Suite was an oversight during construction. Confident I had found a straightforward solution, I approached the interior designer to confirm which fabric to use.

What I expected to be a routine conversation turned into a battle of wills. The designer's response was sharp and laced with obscenities: I lacked the expertise to make design decisions.

Curtains were deliberately omitted to showcase the suite’s unique round windows and the street view.

Despite my reasoning that most guests prefer to sleep without the sunrise beaming in their faces, the designer doubled down on their decision, dismissing my concerns as irrelevant.

Faced with this impasse, I had two choices:

Abide by the designer’s vision and risk continued guest dissatisfaction.

Take matters into my own hands to ensure our service met acceptable standards.

I chose the latter. I commissioned curtains in a fabric that complemented the suite’s interior design.
The solution, however, came with a caveat: I implemented a discreet system to avoid offending the designer or the property owners.

Whenever the suite was unoccupied and the designer or owners visited, the curtains were removed.

The engineering team could quickly reinstall them for guest stays. This workaround ensured both guest satisfaction and peace with the design team, even if it required a bit of behind-the-scenes juggling.

Guest Comfort Trumps Aesthetic Ideals: While striking design choices can elevate a property, they should never compromise guest comfort. Curtains are a basic amenity, not a negotiable luxury.

By finding creative solutions I was balancing the needs of guests, owners, and designers which requires diplomacy, resourcefulness, and, at times, subtle defiance.

The note in our software to manage the "curtain-switching" process ensured the operation ran smoothly without unnecessary friction.

**Amazing Races - Teambuilding Adventures like No Other**

Picture this: a motley crew of 15 people—a mix of Vietnamese locals and a few foreigners—gathering at 8:00 AM over breakfast at the charming French restaurant Le Carambole in Hue. Divided into three teams, each group was handed 1 million Vietnamese dong and a list of bizarre tasks.

The mission? Scour the city for pigs, dragonflies, weddings, food, conical hats, and other quintessentially Vietnamese items. The team that returns first, spends the money wisely, and completes the most challenges wins.

With a bang, the race was on!

**Chaos on the Streets of Hue**

What followed was a day of sheer hilarity and camaraderie. The serene streets of Hue were turned into a circus of red-shirted participants sprinting around on cyclos, loudly bartering, posing for photos, and executing strange requests that left the locals bewildered. Hue residents watched in mild irritation—and, in some cases, amusement—as our teams galloped through the city on their scavenger hunt.

This teambuilding exercise wasn’t just fun; it was a triumph of spontaneity and creativity. Organized by an American teambuilding company, the concept had initially been met with scepticism. When they first assessed Hue as a location, they dismissed it, saying there was “absolutely nothing to do in boring Hue.”

As a lover of Hue, I couldn’t let such a provocation slide. Inspired by the early episodes of The Amazing Race on TV (a much simpler production than today’s high-tech iterations), I invited them to come and prove me wrong. The result? A full day of adrenaline, laughter, and team spirit that my head of departments raved about for weeks.

But how could I possibly top such a memorable day the next year?

**From Streets to Summits: The Bach Ma Mountain Adventure**

The following year, I decided to take the team to Bach Ma Mountain, a stunning national park with decaying French villas, plenty of fauna, and cascading waterfalls. My plan was ambitious:

Hike 15 km, approximately three hours to the summit.

Set up the tents and camp overnight under the stars.

Abseil down the waterfall the next morning.

The same teambuilding company from the previous year offered to pre-set the tents for us, but in the spirit of teamwork (and perhaps overconfidence), I insisted that setting up camp should be part of the experience.

**Camping Champions**

The trek to the top was manageable enough, but upon reaching the summit, we encountered an unexpected challenge: no one could figure out how to set up a tent. Even the Chief Engineer, the supposed master of all things technical, stared at the tent poles as if they were alien artefacts. What followed was an hour of fumbling, arguing, and collapsing tents before we finally managed to cobble together a semblance of a campsite.

Dinner presented its own hurdles. Cooking over an open fire seemed like a good idea—until it wasn’t.

Let’s just say that by the time we ate, everyone was too tired to complain about the slightly burnt food.

**Abseiling Hilarity**

The next morning, the abseiling event brought both thrills and laughs. Standing atop a massive waterfall, each team member took turns conquering their fears and descending into the roaring cascade.

The highlight of the day? The Chief Accountant.

Claiming she couldn’t risk the company’s fortunes (or perhaps her life), she adamantly refused to abseil.

I wasn’t having it. After a lengthy argument, she relented, handing me her mobile phone and the keys to the company safe with a dramatic, “Goodbye.” To everyone’s surprise (including her own), she made it all the way to the bottom without incident—and even admitted to enjoying it afterward!

Nowadays, teambuilding events are often elaborate productions run by professional companies, with slick setups and international venues. But for me, nothing compares to these down-to-earth, hands-on experiences. From racing through Hue’s streets to camping atop a mountain and descending a waterfall, these exercises built not only teamwork but also resilience, trust, and a treasure trove of unforgettable memories.

Would I do it again? In a heartbeat.

Would I still insist on setting up our own tents? Probably not!

**Get the Dog out of my Walk In Fridge!**

Traveling often reveals the stark contrasts between cultures, pushing us to confront and question our own beliefs. One such moment for me occurred during my time at La Residence Hotel & Spa in Hue, Vietnam—a country rich in traditions, some of which can be difficult for outsiders to fully comprehend.

**A Culture Clash**

The practice of eating dog meat, though increasingly rare in Vietnam, is steeped in historical and cultural significance. For some, it’s believed to bring strength, good luck, or honour to guests, though these ideas are based on long-standing myths. Thirty years ago, when Vietnam was poorer, people consumed what was available. In modern times, however, such practices are dwindling. In fact, Hoi An recently saw its last dog slaughterhouse close, and Hanoi has begun issuing directives against dog consumption due to rabies concerns. But for some, the tradition persists.

It was the Vietnamese New Year, Tet, a time of celebration and culinary indulgence. Our Sous Chef, originally from Hanoi, had returned early from his holiday to support the kitchen team during this busy period. With limited staff on duty, I found myself more hands-on than usual, diving into tasks I’d rarely take on during quieter seasons.

While making a routine check in the walk-in cooler, I came face to face with something that stopped me cold: a cooked dog, prominently displayed on the middle shelf.

For a moment, I couldn’t process what I was seeing. Horror-stricken, my mind spiralled into worst-case scenarios:

A guest wandering into the cooler and stumbling upon this grotesque centrepiece.

A rumour spreading that our hotel served dog meat, tarnishing our reputation.

A scathing TripAdvisor review exposing this “scandal.”
Of course, nothing of this sort would happen.

The Sous Chef, oblivious to my panic, had brought the dog as a “Tet treat” for the staff—a gesture rooted in tradition and camaraderie. While his intentions were harmless, I couldn’t fathom the implications of this culinary choice in the context of an international hotel.

While I respected the chef’s cultural traditions, the potential risks to the hotel’s image far outweighed the gesture. The sight of a cooked dog in our fridge was not something our largely international clientele would understand, let alone accept.

This cultural differences are what makes travel so fascinating—and sometimes unsettling. Practices like eating dog meat may be diminishing in Vietnam, but they persist in pockets, often misunderstood by outsiders. While I couldn’t reconcile this tradition with my own values, it offered a moment to reflect on how deeply food intertwines with identity, history, and circumstance.

It highlights the importance of sensitivity and adaptability when working in a multicultural environment. Whether navigating traditions or addressing potential crises, understanding and respect are essential—even when your instinct screams, “Get the dog out of my fridge!”

**A Master Class in Manipulation: Handling the Worst Guests**

After a gruelling year of getting our hotel operations off the ground—hiring staff, training them, managing cash flow, and fine-tuning our services—we encountered one of our first and most unforgettable complaints. It wasn’t just a complaint—it was a performance by a middle aged English couple, professional freeloaders who turned their stay into a strategic campaign for freebies.

The local Hue staff, known for their genuine hospitality and kindness, had never encountered such calculated behaviour. It was a shocking lesson in the darker side of hospitality.

**The Orchestrated Complaints Begin**

The trouble began at check-in. The couple arrived early, at 11 AM, and demanded to be checked in immediately. While early check-ins are not guaranteed, we rushed to prepare their room. Instead of gratitude, they lambasted the team for "lousy service."

Next, they claimed their room was not the category they had booked. It was, in fact, exactly as reserved. Sensing their potential to escalate matters, I pre-emptively offered a complimentary upgrade to diffuse the situation. It seemed to placate them, at least temporarily.

**Complaints at Every Step**

By morning, the husband appeared at reception with fresh grievances, this time about their dinner experience. He claimed the food was terrible, the service subpar, and demanded the bill be cancelled—despite signing it without issue the night before.

When I was called in to address the issue, I asked him why he hadn’t mentioned his dissatisfaction during dinner. This simple question was met with fury:

"Are you accusing me of lying?" he bellowed, raising the tension further.

Then came breakfast. The complaints were now on repeat:

The food was cold.
The quality was below standard.

The presentation was unattractive.

The chef was incompetent and should be fired.

When I attempted to clarify his remarks and offered them a freshly cooked breakfast

"Give me the owner’s number! Didn’t you say you’d fire the chef? I want your name"

By this point, it was evident this couple wasn’t interested in resolutions—they were pursuing leverage.

**The Grand Exit**

At 11 AM, the couple stormed to the reception desk, despite holding a three-night booking, demanding an immediate check-out. But they weren’t just asking—they were screaming.

"If you dare charge me even one penny, I’ll write bad reviews on TripAdvisor, Google, and anywhere else I can!"

Recognizing their tactics, I calmly instructed the reception team to waive all charges—accommodation, food, everything—and let them leave without hassle. The staff was stunned, their morale shattered.
How could we let such guests win?

Once the guests left, I gathered the team to explain why we chose this course of action:

You can’t win wars like this. Certain guests use reviews and social media to get free stays.

Prevention of escalation matters more. Waiving the charges diffused their ability to argue further or demand more compensation.

If they still decided to write a scathing review, I would respond publicly and transparently that this couple received their entire stay and all meals free of charge, yet still chose to leave a negative review. We wish them well but must clarify the circumstances for future guests.

This ordeal wasn’t just about dealing with difficult guests—it was a case study in the art of manipulation and how to handle it without damaging the team’s morale or the hotel’s reputation.

This taught my team to recognize professional complainers, some guests are experienced in exploiting hospitality norms to avoid paying. Look for patterns in their behaviour—like escalating complaints or avoiding in-the-moment feedback.

It also taught them to maintain composure, as emotionally charged guests thrive on reactions.
Staying calm and collected takes away their power to escalate.

As for me, I tried to protect my team’s morale as frontline staff often bear the brunt of these encounters. It’s crucial to reassure them that such situations are rare and not a reflection of their service quality.

If such guests leave negative feedback, a measured and factual public response can mitigate damage.

While the experience was unsettling, it became a valuable lesson in crisis management. The staff recovered, wiser and more prepared for future challenges. As for the couple, unfortunately they will never run out of places to exploit.

**Medical Emergencies**

In a hotel, you're more than just a manager—you’re often called upon to play the role of a doctor, counsellor, and crisis manager. Over my career, I’ve witnessed medical emergencies ranging from minor incidents with big dramas to life-threatening events. Each one serves as a reminder of the responsibility we have toward our guests and the unpredictability of our roles.

On a busy check out morning at the hotel, a Dutch tour group was lounging in the lobby, awaiting their bus to Hoi An. Among them was their young tour guide, a 20-year-old on her first trip to Vietnam. I had just exchanged pleasantries with her and was making my rounds, chatting with guests and ensuring everyone was comfortable.

As I walked through the lobby, I noticed an elderly man seated on the sofa. Without warning, he began to slump forward, silently sliding to the ground. His wife, in visible distress, tried to help him, but panic quickly spread among the group.

The hotel’s reception was only a few steps away, and I instructed them to call a taxi without delay.

The hospital was just 400 meters away—every second could count.

Meanwhile, the inexperienced tour guide, unaware of the severity of the situation, tried to dismiss the need for urgent medical attention. She handed the guest some water, attributing his condition to exhaustion or dehydration. But his laboured breathing and ashen complexion told a different story.

Despite her protests, I insisted the guest be taken to the hospital right away. Within minutes, he was en route, his fate no longer in our hands. The outcome, thankfully, was positive—the Hue hospital, renowned for its cardiac care, diagnosed him with a heart attack. He received the treatment he needed and recovered successfully. I have learned that In medical emergencies, hesitation can be fatal. It’s better to act decisively and face unnecessary expense than to regret inaction. I trust my Instincts, years of experience had taught me to recognize when a situation was serious. This intuition can make all the difference.

In moments of crisis, particularly with inexperienced individuals like the tour guide, assertive leadership is essential. Her hesitation could have cost a life.

Hotel management is about more than just ensuring smooth operations or providing luxury—it’s about being prepared for the unexpected.

In another scary episode we almost lost a thumb.
One female guest tried to adjust the back of the wooden sun lounger without getting up, the back of the sun lounger folded down while her hand was fiddling with the clasp and squashed the thumb between two pieces of wood. There were masses of blood, and the Housekeeping Manager who was duty manager this afternoon had put pressure on the thumb and ordered a taxi immediately. When the couple came to the reception to board the taxi, knowing Vietnam very well, I asked the husband to go back to the room and bring the passports. He started swearing at me asking me if I am out of my mind. At the same time our front office manager gave cash to the Housekeeping Manager who went with the couple to the hospital to assist.
Indeed the husband came back one hour later as the hospital did not accept the patient without ID.

Once a month we accommodated an American Tour group staying only for 1 night on a tight program, mostly couples over sixty. They arrived on evening flights and leaving within 24 hours. Their itinerary was relentless: check-in, dinner, perhaps a quick spa session, and an early breakfast before a packed day of sightseeing at Hue’s Citadel and royal tombs. By evening, they would already be en route to Hoi An.

Despite their short stays, these guests often left us with lasting memories—sometimes for the most unexpected reasons.

One morning during our daily management briefing in the office, we were interrupted by a sudden, resounding thud against the wall. Startled, we rushed to investigate. Opening the door, we found an older gentleman standing near the wall, facing us blankly.

While descending the stairs, instead of taking a turn. he had walked straight into the wall—face first.

The impact was severe. I immediately requested an ice bag, but the damage was already done. The spot on his forehead where he’d hit had swollen dramatically and split open in mere moments. Blood trickled down as the swelling grew, creating a scene that startled even seasoned staff.

What struck us just as much as his stoic reaction was his wife’s calm demeanour when she arrived moments later. Having taken the elevator down, she surveyed the scene with an air of detachment and casually remarked, “He does this all the time.” Cautiously we sent him to the hospital to get patched up

Was it exhaustion from the whirlwind itinerary? A lapse in attention? Or simply a recurring habit, as his wife suggested? Whatever the case, the guest appeared remarkably unfazed, as if this were just another morning. Even with well-planned routines, mishaps can—and will—happen. Quick thinking and basic first aid skills are invaluable. While the wife’s reaction might have seemed dismissive, it’s a reminder that every guest comes with their own unique circumstances.

**HR Crisis and Strategies - Mutiny of the Reservation Team**

In my first week on the job, a surprising situation unfolded. The entire reservation department—consisting of just three people—handed in their resignation at the same time. Moments before I received their written notices, the Front Office Manager stormed into my office to warn me. He advised me not to interfere or try to retain them, assuring me there would be no disruption in the department's operations. Confidently, he promised that he’d manage the situation and keep things running smoothly.

Shortly after, all three team members entered my office with their resignation letters in hand. I invited them to sit down and asked what prompted their decision. The supervisor, clearly the ringleader, declared that their workload was too heavy and demanded that their salaries be doubled. Her tone left little room for negotiation.

“Well,” I responded calmly, “if that’s your position, there isn’t much to discuss. We can’t simply double one department’s salary without doing the same across the board.” Without hesitation, I signed their resignation letters. They seemed surprised by how swiftly I accepted their decision, as though they had expected a lengthy debate or persuasion. They left the office looking somewhat unsettled.

The following day, I held one-on-one conversations with each of them. It became evident that the two reservationists were having second thoughts but were too proud to admit it outright. The supervisor left first, sticking to her decision. Later, the only male in the department, who had been promoted from bellman to reservationist, came to my office. He admitted that he had been influenced by the supervisor and wasn’t entirely sure about resigning.

This young man had potential. Prior to joining our five-star hotel, his experience was limited to night shifts at small family-run properties, leaving him with little to showcase on his CV. I pointed this out to him, advising that he stay for at least two years to solidify his resume before considering a move. After consulting with the Front Office Manager, we agreed to keep him on board.

As for the third team member, things took a different turn. Shortly before her final day, the local labour office appeared at our door. She had filed a complaint, claiming she was unfairly dismissed. We showed them her resignation letter and all related paperwork, which were in perfect order. However, the labour officer informed us that she had changed her mind and now wanted to keep her job.

I apologized, saying, “Oh, I’ve already hired a replacement. I’ll have to inform the new hire that the position is no longer available.”

The officer’s response was swift: “Oh no, you can’t do that. Please keep her.”

 “I don’t have the budget for four people in the department,” I replied.

After seeing his displeasure, I suggested with a light hearted tone, “No problem! We’ll keep the current staff member and hire the new one, then split the salary between them.”

He quickly dismissed that idea, and a spirited discussion in Vietnamese ensued between the labour officer, our HR Manager, and the owner’s representative. In the end, the original reservationist left, the new hire started, and peace returned to the reservation department.

From that day forward, the team operated harmoniously.

**The Big Hiring Party**

When I first arrived in Hue in 2006, the hotel was fully staffed with 170 team members. However, every time someone resigned, finding a replacement felt like an uphill battle.

By the second year, we faced a critical staffing shortage, with 20-30 positions unfilled. Despite our efforts, finding the right candidates proved nearly impossible. Hue is home to numerous orphanages and pagodas that care for abandoned children, many of whom speak English. Unfortunately, while they appear to support the children, the reality often falls short. Many volunteer programs charge overseas participants significant fees—up to $1,000 per week—to work with these orphanages. Volunteers, moved by the plight of the children, bring essentials like vitamins, toys, and clothes. Yet, these donations often end up being sold.

For Christmas we taught Christmas carols to the kids and had them singing in the hotel, to get them out into the world and exposed. In gratitude we tried to organize outings for the children, such as a pool day or an Easter egg hunt, we faced resistance. The orphanages prioritized monetary donations over activities that could bring joy or foster integration into society. The reality for many of these children is stark. Orphanages and pagodas often require older children to remain within their system; caring for younger ones rather than helping them integrate into the outside world.

Globally, orphanages are becoming a relic of the past. Many countries, have been working to transition toward foster care systems that provide children with a family environment and social integration. Romania, for instance, has made significant strides in closing orphanages, despite the challenges. Studies have shown that prolonged stays in such institutions can severely impact children’s emotional health, cognitive development, and ability to form relationships.

Surprisingly, 80% of children in orphanages worldwide are not orphans in the truest sense. Many have at least one living parent. Due to extreme poverty, families often send children to orphanages, hoping they’ll receive basic necessities like food, shelter, and education. The intention is rarely to sever ties but to alleviate financial strain temporarily.

Despite our efforts, collaborating with orphanages yielded no results. While we partnered with small NGOs like Plan and Streets, they only supported a handful of children. I knew we had to look elsewhere.

I tasked our HR Manager with connecting with vocational schools, colleges, and universities to attract young talent. Weeks passed with little success. The schools were resistant to our overtures, refusing to let us promote hotel careers at graduations or events. Their reasoning? Students aimed to become doctors, professors, and other professionals, not hotel employees. Frustrated but determined, I decided to approach the schools myself. Even then, they refused to engage.

If the schools wouldn’t come to us, I decided we would bring the opportunity to them. I proposed a bold plan to our HR Manager: an “Open Door Day” at the hotel. Here’s how we executed it:

Create a buzz: We scheduled the event a week before graduation parties, targeting students who were about to enter the workforce.
Create interactive booths in the meeting room. Each department head had to set up a booth showcasing their roles—Housekeeping brought a bed and minibar, F&B displayed a dining table and bar, Engineering featured tools and a broken pump, and Front Office had check-in folders. To motivate our department heads, we added a prize for the best booth.

Hospitality at its best: We served snacks and drinks to all attendees, creating a welcoming atmosphere.

My HR Manager was sceptical, warning that no one in Hue would show up. But I was determined. We printed simple A6 invitations and handed them out in front of schools, just like kids distributing flyers outside a metro station.

The Open Door Day” arrived. By 4 p.m., the hotel was ready—but the students weren’t. By 4:30 p.m., still no one had come. My HR Manager smirked, “I told you so.” Then, at 4:45 p.m. , a small group of 10-15 students walked in, surprised by the warm welcome. Word spread quickly, and soon more arrived. By 6 PM, the hotel was bursting with over 500 attendees.

The event was a resounding success. Department heads, initially sceptical, became fiercely competitive, each vying to recruit the best talent. The enthusiasm in the meeting room spilled over and we were able to fill every single vacancy. For the next two years, the hotel was never short of staff. Students applied, staff recommended their friends and the hotel became well known for a good and stable place to work and as a good start for any career. Universities, once hesitant to engage, didn’t refuse us anymore—but by then, we didn’t need their permission.

This taught me that persistence, creativity, and a willingness to adapt can break even the most entrenched barriers.

**Girl Power in the Spa**

One of the most challenging departments to manage in Human Resources was the Spa. At the time, Vietnam’s hospitality industry was still in its infancy, and the concept of a professional Spa was new territory. There were no qualified Spa staff, and the industry relied heavily on suppliers from countries like Thailand to train therapists as part of their product sales strategy. Compounding the issue was a deep-seated cultural stigma: many older Vietnamese associated Spa therapists with less reputable professions, and they didn’t want their children working in such roles.

To address this, I decided to hire foreign Spa Managers—young, dynamic trainers from Thailand or Indonesia who had a few years of experience and were eager to explore the world. These individuals were both affordable and enthusiastic, not asking a General Manager’s salary. My second Spa hire was a woman from Bali, Indonesia. She seemed like an ideal fit—wiser, experienced, and skilled in traditional Balinese treatments. Her unique methods, like turmeric body wraps, brought a touch of Bali to our Spa, and I was optimistic about her leadership.

However, just after passing her three-month probation period, she rushed into my office one Sunday, clearly distressed. She stammered that there was “a problem” and hinted that “some therapists” might be planning to resign. When I asked why, she explained that the supplier’s trainer had told the therapists they should only perform two massages per day to avoid physical strain. Additionally, the trainer had insisted the therapists shouldn’t have to clean their own treatment rooms because that was a cleaner’s job.

As the hotel became busier, the Spa Manager had attempted to push the therapists to take on more treatments and assist with cleaning when the Spa cleaner couldn’t keep up. However, the therapists outright refused.

By midday, the resignations began rolling in—not just a few, but all eleven therapists and receptionists.
The owner’s representative called shortly after, alarmed by the mass walkout. Like my front office manager years prior, I assured her that I would handle it and to trust me that the Spa operations would not be interrupted, and that she didn’t need to come in.

I sat down with the Spa Manager again to unravel the situation and she admitted that in frustration, she told the therapists, “If you don’t like it, you can resign.” But it also became clear that a single individual had led the charge—a “ringleader.” I decided to speak with each staff member individually. To my surprise, every one of them promised to step up, except one. The rest agreed to learn English, clean their treatment rooms, and even take on up to 15 treatments and additional overtime if necessary.
Their change in attitude puzzled me, but I decided to retain the entire team—except for the ringleader.

As for the ringleader, I transferred her to the Food and Beverage department, thinking she might thrive in a different environment. She immediately began pushing back. First, she said she couldn’t work the afternoon shift, even though her hours were identical to the Spa. Then she claimed the menu was too complicated and that she wasn’t interested in restaurant work. No problem, I said—we’ll assign her to breakfast service instead. I assured her that if she improved her attitude, gratitude, and communication skills, I would consider moving her back to the Spa after three months. She resigned before her second month was over.

Reflecting on this, I couldn’t help but wonder: why did the Spa staff fight to keep their jobs, while other departments like Reservations didn’t? The answer became clear later—they were earning significant tips from guests after treatments.

And there are more tales from the Spa to follow. Picture the first hilarious male Spa Therapist drama.

The idea came from German female guests who frequently requested male therapists, believing they had stronger hands. Yet, after experiencing massages from our petite female therapists, these guests would marvel at their strength and skill.

And so, the tales of the Spa department continued to unfold, each more unexpected than the last.

**The first “Man” in Hue**

Not long after, an opportunity arose in the Spa department when one of the therapists resigned and another went on maternity leave. Around the same time, one of my night receptionists approached me with an unusual request. He asked if I would consider hiring his younger brother, a 22-year-old who had never worked a day in his life and spent his time idly at home, not even helping his mother. “If he works with you,” the receptionist said earnestly, “he might finally make something of himself.”

I was struck by the young man’s candour. Typically, we avoided hiring family members to prevent potential conflicts. Sensing my hesitation, he leaned in and confided, “I’m planning to resign soon anyway.”

“Alright,” I said, “send your brother in for an interview.”

When the brother arrived, I was faced with a unique challenge: what could I do with a 22-year-old who had no English skills or work experience? After some thought, I narrowed it down to two options. Speaking slowly, with a translator on standby, I explained:

“You can either work in housekeeping, cleaning rooms, or train as a Spa therapist.”

Before I could even finish outlining the responsibilities, he immediately replied, “Spa therapist.”

The translator and I explained what this role involved: interacting with guests who might sometimes be undressed, working in a humid environment like saunas and steam rooms, having the stamina to perform four or five massages in a row, cleaning treatment rooms, and—most importantly—learning English.

As soon as the translator finished the last word, he responded confidently, “I want this.”

To ensure he understood the role, I took him to the Spa. I showed him the treatment rooms, explained the setup, and let him speak with the therapists. Despite the realities of the position, he stood firm in his decision. I informed the HR Manager to prepare the paperwork.

Ten minutes later, the HR Manager was back in my office, visibly distressed.

 “This is a no-go,” he said.

 “Why?” I asked.

“This is a man,” he replied, as though the answer was self-explanatory.

Apparently, the idea of a male Spa therapist in Hue was unthinkable. In 2008, there was only one, known to us, male Spa therapist in the entire country, working in Nha Trang. The HR Manager hadn’t expected me to offer the applicant a position in the Spa.

“What’s the problem with him being a man?” I asked.

“This is Hue. No men allowed in the Spa,” he insisted.

The next day, the owner’s representative echoed this sentiment. “No men allowed in the Spa,” she affirmed. “But there’s a male Spa therapist in Nha Trang,” I countered.

“That’s different,” she said. “This is Hue.”

I pressed further. “What’s the difference? Isn’t it the same country?”

The resistance only grew. They claimed it was prohibited under labour law.

 “Fine,” I said, “show me the labour law.”

As expected, they responded with the familiar refrain: “It’s in Vietnamese.” But by then, the era of mobile phones and Google Translate had begun—even in Hue—and even for me, and I wasn’t deterred.

Ultimately, the male therapist was hired, despite the initial uproar. Sixteen years later, I was delighted to learn that he had worked his way up and was now a Spa Manager.

**Black or White?**

Hue, with its deep cultural heritage and slower pace of life, presents unique challenges for the hospitality industry. Compared to bustling urban centres like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Hue experiences lower incomes and revenues, which result in reduced budgets for businesses. Despite lower prices, tourists visiting Hue expect the same level of service they receive in larger cities, placing additional strain on businesses.

For hospitality professionals, life in Hue can feel less appealing due to limited lifestyle options, unlike the bigger cities, Hue offers fewer social, shopping, and nightlife opportunities, which can deter professionals, especially those used to urban environments.

Sourcing supplies and hiring qualified staff is more challenging, particularly for senior positions like Executive Chef.

Adding to these issues is the difficulty of bridging cultural and professional expectations.
A foreigner working in Hue must navigate local working methods while delivering output aligned with Western standards. Conversely, for locals, hiring a foreign professional represents a valuable chance to learn, broaden horizons, and develop new skills.

When one of my former chefs recommended a South African colleague—a female Executive Chef— I was eager to move forward. I arranged an interview to outline my objectives, the challenges she might face, and her role’s expectations. After agreeing on a salary and start date, I submitted her application to the owner’s representative for approval.

However, the process took longer than anticipated. Weeks passed, and I noticed the she seemed hesitant. When it became urgent to finalize the hire, I approached her directly to discuss her concerns.

Her response surprised me: “Oh, yes,” she said hesitantly, “I don’t know... South Africa.”

After some hesitation, she confided: “These are black people. I don’t know if this is suitable for Hue.”

I was taken aback but responded calmly. “Black people? Not all South Africans are black! This is a white lady.” She was visibly relieved, I was secretly surprised but I was finally able to secure the hire. The South African chef joined our team in Hue, bringing with her a wealth of expertise and a fresh perspective.

This was quite an insight I had not expected in a culturally diverse industry.

**You have got Talent**

In the traditional, time-honoured city of Hue, where modernity often felt like a distant dream, we were always on the lookout for talent—not just to fill positions in the hotel but also for events like Christmas, New Year or simply entertainment. Back in 2008-2009, finding local artists was a challenge.
There were no bands, no English-speaking MCs, or performers available in Hue; talent usually had to be flown in from Ho Chi Minh City at a premium.

Hue, rich in history, was once the seat of the Imperial Palace during the French colonial era when it was part of the protectorate of Annam. The city retained its cultural and educational prominence, boasting several universities, including the University of Music, located just next door to La Residence Hotel & Spa. These old, high-ceilinged buildings lacked air conditioning, and on sweltering summer days, their windows were left wide open. From my desk, I often heard the students’ chatter, the echo of instruments, and the hum of their musical rehearsals drifting through the warm air.

La Residence, with its French colonial roots, maintained a strong connection to French culture.
We frequently played French music in our lobby. One day, I thought I heard Edith Piaf’s unmistakable, crystal-clear voice—but it wasn’t coming from the lobby speakers, as the lobby was in another building far away. It was emanating from the neighbouring music university.

Curious and intrigued, I got up from my desk and walked straight to the university. The security guard, likely assuming I was too old or unfamiliar to be a student, tried to stop me, but I was undeterred. I bolted up the grand staircase, following the sound of that remarkable voice, and eventually found myself in a classroom with just two people: a teacher and a student.

Standing before me was a graceful young woman from Hue. She wasn’t particularly tall, but her presence commanded the room. Her operatic voice was unlike anything I’d ever heard in this part of the world—absolutely mesmerizing. Without thinking, I blurted out, “You’re hired!”

In my excitement, I’d forgotten that they had no idea who I was or why I was barging into their classroom.

The following day, the girl’s family came to the hotel. They weren’t just curious; they were cautious.
They wanted to understand why I had been at the university and, more importantly, whether the hotel was a safe and respectable place for their beloved daughter. In Hue, the idea of a young woman singing in a hotel lobby was unconventional, almost scandalous.

To ease their concerns, I agreed that her brother—a guitar player—would accompany her. And so, for several months, she performed in our lobby, her voice filling the Le Governors Bar with its incredible richness. She didn’t need a microphone; her natural talent carried every note with clarity and grace.

It was absolutely magical. Guests were captivated, and the evenings she performed became unforgettable moments at La Residence.

**Long Fingers and Creative Minds**

In hospitality, no matter the hotel, incidents of “long fingers” are almost inevitable. Even after years in the industry, I continue to be amazed by the creativity some people employ when helping themselves to what isn’t theirs.

It began with a complaint from a guest claiming that money was missing from his wallet while he and his wife slept. He was adamant that a $100 bill had disappeared, leaving the smaller denominations untouched. We checked the corridor cameras and found nothing suspicious. The guest suggested a thief might have scaled the balcony, which seemed highly improbable unless the perpetrator was a trained acrobat. Secretly, we suspected the wife might have taken the money for shopping without mentioning it.

The complaint remained unresolved, and we let it slide, as we couldn’t find any evidence to substantiate the claim. However, over time, similar complaints surfaced. Guests would report one or two large bills missing from their wallets while the rest remained untouched. Whether the wallet had been on them, in their room, or locked in the safety deposit box, the pattern persisted. Still, we never had proof, and these incidents remained a mystery—until one Saturday.

That afternoon, I coincidentally struck up a conversation with two middle-aged German ladies checking in around 4 PM. Their English was limited, and they asked me about sunset times and whether they could still take a swim before dinner. I encouraged them to enjoy the pool and went back to my office, thinking nothing more of it.

At 7 PM, just before dinner, I was urgently called to the reception desk. The two German guests were there; visibly upset, reporting that €200 was missing from their wallet. They recounted the sequence of events with classic German precision:

They checked in and were escorted to their room.

After dropping off their luggage, they took out swimsuits, left all luggage and purses, and headed to the swimming pool.

Upon returning, they tidied up, stowed their luggage, and opened the safe to store their passports.

That’s when they noticed two €100 bills missing from the wallet.

I was stunned but determined to get to the bottom of this. Having heard similar complaints in the past, I suspected there was a pattern.

Using the hotel’s VingCard system, I printed a log of key entries for the room during the three-hour window since their check-in. The record was short and seemingly unremarkable: the guests entered upon check-in, left for the pool, a Housekeeping master key accessed the room (likely for turn-down service), and the guests returned with their key. Nothing looked amiss.

Next, I checked the corridor security footage for the same time frame. When I reviewed the video, I noticed something odd: a public cleaner entered the room around 5 PM, carrying no cleaning equipment, bucket, or towels. This made no sense, as turn-down service didn’t start until 6 PM.

On Sunday morning, I called the owner’s representative to summarize my findings. I expressed my hesitation to involve the police, as it could damage the hotel’s reputation, and I wanted to resolve the issue discreetly. She assured me she would address it on Monday.

Meanwhile, I quietly refunded €200 to the guests from my own pocket before their check-out that evening. I apologized sincerely, thanked them for bringing the issue to my attention, and assured them that the matter had been resolved. They appreciated my directness and the swift resolution, leaving without any further complaints or accusations.

To the front office team, I downplayed the situation, suggesting the guests had likely been mistaken. I wanted to avoid unnecessary panic until the issue was fully resolved.

On Monday morning, the owner’s representative “invited” all Housekeeping staff who had worked on Sunday afternoon to a meeting. One person failed to show up: the public cleaner. By noon, his distraught wife appeared with a handwritten apology from her husband and the €200 he had stolen.

It's remarkable, isn't it? The audacity and precision behind such actions are both frustrating and oddly impressive. To single out large bills, knowing they might not be immediately missed is clever in a devious way. And the timing? Spotting the guests' check-in, tracking their departure for the pool, and seizing the moment so swiftly—it almost speaks to a criminal efficiency that borders on professional-grade observation skills.

If only such energy, creativity, and attention to detail were channelled into legitimate work!

Imagine the productivity and ingenuity they could bring to their roles. Instead of quick schemes, they could thrive as problem-solvers or innovators in their field. It's a stark reminder of how potential can be misdirected and the fine line between brilliance and mischief.

**A Prize to the overnight Laundry Champions!**

As I passed by reception one day, I noticed the Front Office Manager and Housekeeping Manager locked in an intense discussion. Curious, I casually asked what was going on, but before they could answer, my phone rang. It was the owner of a travel agency in HCMC, a major travel agency that frequently sent us guests.

The owner, always calm and soft-spoken, began describing a situation that, despite his measured tone, sounded like pure chaos. His group of 50 American travellers had just experienced a disaster in Halong Bay: their luggage boat had capsized and their bags ended up in the water of the bay. While they managed to retrieve the bags, everything was soaked, and there hadn’t been a chance to dry them before their flight to Hue.

“We’ve already struggled to get the drenched, overweight luggage onto the plane without incurring extra charges,” he explained in his characteristically sweet voice. “Now they’re on the way to your hotel, and we need help. I spoke with your team, but there doesn’t seem to be a solution yet.”

I couldn’t decide whether to laugh at the absurdity or feel sorry for him. “Honestly, I have no idea how to fix this,” I replied, my German directness cutting through my own disbelief. “But let me speak to my Housekeeping Manager, and I’ll figure something out.”

“Please, Carmen,” he said with a sigh before hanging up.

I returned to the reception desk, where my two managers were still deliberating with no resolution in sight. “What’s the issue here?” I asked. With just a look, we all understood what was at stake.

The Housekeeping Manager finally explained, “It’s impossible to do laundry for 50 guests in one night, even if we run the machines non-stop.”

“Why not?” I countered. “At home, you can wash clothes for a family of four in an hour, right? The problem here is sorting by 25 individual rooms. If we don’t sort, can we manage?”

And just like that, the plan took shape.

The hotel was buzzing with activity as we prepared for the group’s arrival. I instructed the Housekeeping Manager to bring 10 large guest linen trolleys to the meeting room, labelling each with a printed sign for colours: white, black, green & blue, orange, pink & red, yellow & brown. Two additional staff was scheduled to work overnight, and the large 40kg machines would be used for the big loads, like black and white items.

The Front Office Manager was tasked with directing the group and their wet luggage to the meeting room for check-in.

When the group arrived at 8 PM, our bellboys hauled in 100 soggy suitcases and bags.
I greeted the guests warmly with our usual welcome speech and a welcome drink and before issuing the room keys I explained the unusual plan:
The travel agency will cover the cost of laundering your wet clothes. However, with your short stay of less than 12 hours, doing individual loads for each of you isn’t feasible. Here’s what we propose:

You’ll unpack your luggage here in the meeting room.

Drop your wet items into the color-coded trolleys.

By tomorrow morning, your laundry will be clean, folded, and sorted by colour on the corresponding tables.

We won’t be able to separate items by room, handle delicate fabrics, or guarantee against damage.

This is not our usual service, but given the circumstances, it’s the best solution we can offer.”

To my relief the guests—easy-going Americans, all females and above size 16 —cheered and clapped.
They happily opened their suitcases on the spot, tossing oversized bras, underwear, and other intimate garments into the trolleys.

Watching my two laundry attendants wheel away the trolleys—eyes wide at the sight of these items—was priceless.

By 6 AM, the red-eyed but triumphant attendants returned with clean, fragrant laundry, stacking it neatly on the color-coded tables. The meeting room smelled like roses, and the first guests to collect their items were thrilled. Their smiles were worth every ounce of effort.

One small oversight: In the whirlwind of check-ins, laundering, and early-morning organization, I completely forgot to call the travel agent to update him. It wasn’t until 10 AM, after check-out, the next day, that he called to ask how much he owed for the service.

“Mission accomplished,” I told him. And it truly was. The guests were happy, the team felt proud, and it was one of those rare challenges that left everyone smiling.

**State Visits & Celebrities**

One of the very first celebrities we welcomed was Colin Farrell, the Irish actor.

He was not very well known to Vietnamese people and came on his own, for a one day whirlwind tour of Hue. Back then I was not very savvy with social media, I barely remembered to take a photo, but did not ask if I can use it for media purposes or if I need permission.
Only later when my colleagues from Accor asked me why I didn’t tell them and they would have come I started to think about the publicity.

**Danish Royalty in Hue**

State visits were nothing new to me. Over the years, I had navigated the complexities of diplomacy, protocol, menus, and security for high-profile events. From almost shaking hands with Queen Elizabeth on the QE2 in the nineties to hosting celebrities like Tina Turner, I had seen it all—or so I thought.

But nothing could have prepared me for the unique challenges of hosting the Queen of Denmark in Hue, especially under the watchful eye of the Hue government. One foreword, the Queen’s visit was not a state visit, it was a private visit.

It all began during a business trip to Hanoi, where I attended a function and found myself speaking with the Danish Ambassador. When I introduced myself and mentioned I was managing a five-star hotel in Hue, his curiosity was piqued.

“Hue?” he asked. “What is there to do in Hue?”

Proudly, I shared details about the historic city and my hotel, La Residence Hotel & Spa.

“There’s a five-star hotel in Hue? Really?” he chuckled. “Danish-owned Carlsberg has shares in Huda, and I’d love to bring the Queen of Denmark to Hue.”

I laughed, thinking he must be joking. After all, the idea of Danish royalty in our small, traditional city seemed improbable. I left the event, returning to Hue, and forgot all about our conversation.

Months later, we received a last-minute booking for two rooms from a Danish couple in Hanoi. There was no indication that the guest was the Ambassador himself. When he arrived, cheerful and easy-going as ever, I greeted him warmly, gave him a tour of the hotel, and proudly showcased its art deco charm.

He seemed impressed, and I had long dismissed his earlier comments about the Queen.

As we returned to the reception, he casually dropped a bombshell: “Carmen, I need 40–45 rooms for the Queen!” I was baffled. “When?” “Early December,” he replied.

December was peak season in Hue, notorious for its rainy weather, and our rooms were already heavily booked. But who wouldn’t shuffle things around for the Danish Queen?

The Ambassador outlined their plans. “We Danes are easy-going,” he said. “No security, no rigid protocol—we even love buffets. We’ll bring our own plane and cars from Hanoi. We’ll arrive late and would like to have a fusion buffet dinner.”

He requested exclusive use of our newly built Block A with its 43 rooms. With some juggling, we made it work and felt honoured to host such a prestigious visit.

However, not everyone was thrilled. The Hue government wasn’t pleased that this private visit had slipped through their fingers without their involvement or oversight. Their discontent soon turned into active interference.

At 8 AM on the day of the Queen’s arrival, government officials stormed the reception desk, demanding guest lists and immediate evacuation of rooms. They insisted on inspecting the suite reserved for the Queen, which was still occupied by a British couple.

Unconcerned, we had not planned anything. We knew that the Queen wouldn’t check in until 10 PM, giving the current guests ample time to check out by noon. The officials disagreed. They marched to the suite, knocked on the door, and demanded the British couple vacate immediately. Chaos erupted.

The couple, understandably outraged, demanded to see me. When I arrived, there was shouting on all sides—the guests protesting their rights, the officials demanding compliance. I apologized to the guests but before I could say anything further the officials insisted that I leave the hotel for “disturbing the peace.”

Minutes later, the owners called me and ordered me to leave for Bangkok or anywhere else immediately.

It was clear the situation had spiralled out of control.

The department heads, loyal to a fault, threatened to leave if I left. It took every ounce of my strength to convince them otherwise, explaining that my absence was a strategic retreat to ensure the hotel’s stability. I retreated to my apartment, hoping the crisis could be contained.

Then, the chef called in distress. Government officials were in the kitchen, insisting that a Queen must be served a set menu, not a buffet and requesting recipes and royal food to be cooked.
I instructed the Chef to prepare both, a set menu and a buffet, keeping quiet about the plan to serve the buffet regardless. “They can’t tell the difference between a set menu and a buffet in the pot,” I quipped.

As if things couldn’t get worse, the Queen’s plane couldn’t land in Hue due to high winds and diverted to Danang. The Ambassador called, furious about the bus ride to Hue. When I informed him I wouldn’t be at the hotel to greet them, his frustration deepened.

When the group finally arrived, the government took over, leaving no management present to properly welcome the Queen. They insisted she pose for pictures and caused chaos by reassigning rooms.

Dinner was a bizarre mix of officials trying to serve a set menu and imposing on the visitors, leaving guests confused and dissatisfied.

The next morning, the Queen and her entourage departed for a brewery visit before being bussed back to Danang. There, they were warmly received by the Danang government in a cleverly orchestrated display of hospitality.

It was a bitter end to what could have been a monumental occasion for Hue. The Ambassador later told me it would be the last time he brought anyone of importance to the city.

**French Diplomacy meets Hue’s Bureaucracy**

A similar situation ensued with the French Prime Minister’s visit

.
State visits are often intricate affairs, requiring careful planning, diplomacy, and seamless coordination.

I had handled many such visits before, but nothing could have prepared me for the chaos that ensued during the French Prime Minister’s visit to Hue.

This was a formal state visit, and I still have a few trinkets from the diplomatic gifts exchanged during that time. Given the close relationship between the French and Vietnamese governments, the French protocol had submitted a comprehensive itinerary to the Hue government well in advance, including plans for pre-security inspections.

The pre-inspection took place a day before the official visit and quickly turned into a spectacle. Four French protocol officers were met at the airport by armed Hue government officials and escorted to the hotel. Their check-in set the tone for the day. The Vietnamese officials requested chairs to be placed in the corridors outside the protocol officers’ rooms so they could “guard the occupants.”

We dutifully brought banquet chairs from our storeroom. But no—the officials deemed these chairs unworthy. In a fully occupied hotel, we had no choice but to go into guest rooms and remove furniture to meet their demands. Resistance was not an option.

Once the French protocol officers were settled, they came to reception to inspect the 12 rooms allocated for the delegation and finalize the rooming list. Their first request was for the chairs in the corridors to be removed. I regretfully explained that this wasn’t possible, as the Hue officials insisted on keeping them there.

The language barrier added an extra layer of complication. The Hue officials had brought along a French interpreter, a young university graduate who had lived in France. While his French was impeccable, his translations were selective—sometimes incomplete, sometimes non-existent.

It was a clash of worlds: the rigid traditions of Hue meeting the polished formalities of the French.

As we went through the rooms, the French protocol meticulously noted who would stay in which room, and after the inspection they would seal the room. But the Hue officials repeatedly objected, insisting on their own arrangements. The back-and-forth soon spiralled into heated arguments, covering everything from the rooming list to the program, menus, security protocols, photography permissions, and even the smallest details.

After two gruelling hours, the French security officer turned to me, exasperated. “How is it possible for you to be the General Manager of this hotel and the government is managing everything whatsoever?” he asked. His frustration was palpable, and he declared it would be his last trip to Hue.

I was caught in an impossible position. The interpreter, though fluent, lacked the experience and tact to diffuse the escalating tensions diplomatically. As for me, I was acutely aware of the consequences of pushing back too hard; memories of my prior forced departure during the Queen of Denmark’s visit were not forgotten.

It was a perfect storm of bureaucracy, cultural differences, and mismatched expectations—one that left everyone exhausted and disheartened.

**Tricky Diplomacy**

We rarely had Vietnamese officials as guests at the hotel. Being a foreign-owned establishment without any kickbacks for bookers, we were, albeit unfortunately, the best option in Hue, which placed us in a somewhat unavoidable position.

On one occasion, a high-ranking Vietnamese official stayed for a single night and, upon check-in, requested an in-room massage by a female masseuse. This request sparked immediate controversy. The owner's representative contacted me, strongly advising against fulfilling the request, citing its sensitive nature and potential to cause trouble. Meanwhile, the therapists collectively refused, stating they would not go to the room. The Front Office Manager argued that denying the request would reflect poorly on the hotel, as it appeared to be a straightforward service.

The issue quickly became the centre of discussion throughout the hotel, with opinions divided on how to proceed. Fortunately, I had a female foreign trainee from a Swiss hotel school interning with me. I asked her if she would be willing to accompany the therapist to the guest’s room under the pretence of helping set up the equipment, and then remain present during the session. She agreed, allowing us to honour the request.

The massage lasted only 30 minutes, and while I am unsure if everyone involved was satisfied, the situation was resolved without further incident.

**Hollywood & Politics High-Profile Guests: Balancing Privacy and Publicity**

At La Residence, we had the privilege of hosting a variety of notable guests, from minor politicians to renowned celebrities. Most were delightful, grounded, and a pleasure to serve. However, their stays often presented unique challenges that required careful navigation.

One memorable instance was the visit of the former Greek Prime Minister. Unfortunately, his stay was shortened due to not being able to land at Hue airport with his private plane, a recurring issue for us.

The visit resumed later in Danang, but it highlighted the delicate balance we had to strike—protecting our guests’ expectations of privacy and discretion while accommodating the government’s desire for publicity. While our team had grown adept at managing these dual demands, not all guests were as tolerant of the disruptions caused by government interference.

Other high-profile visits stood out for their lighter moments. For instance, a group photo with Danny DeVito’s family turned out wonderfully, encapsulating their warmth and joy. Similarly, Chelsea Clinton and her then-boyfriend opted for a very low-profile stay. Despite some close calls, their efficient and stern personal assistant ensured everything ran smoothly.

These experiences reinforced the importance of adaptability and discretion in creating memorable stays for our esteemed guests, even amid external pressures.

**Crisis at Full Occupancy: The Spa on Fire**

In the hospitality industry, challenges come in many forms, and not all are guest-related. During a time when I was hosting a General Manager colleague from Italy, who was eager to experience Asia and assist with restaurant training, we faced a major incident that tested our resilience.

On a particularly busy evening, the Spa staff asked me to man the reception for 30 minutes so the therapists could focus on treatments. It was around 6 PM, and I noticed a peculiar “Do Not Disturb” sign on the female sauna. The last person I had seen entering the sauna was a Colombian guest at 4 PM. Concerned by the unusually long occupancy, I inquired with the staff, but language barriers and shift changes left me without answers.

I asked the male therapist to knock and check, but he hesitated due to this being a female sauna.

Insisting on urgency, I turned my attention to assisting a guest. Suddenly, a loud thud shattered the evening's routine, and smoke began to fill the reception. Flames erupted from the sauna, fuelled by the oxygen when the door was opened.

**Quick Thinking amid Chaos**

I immediately shut the sauna door and called for the in-house fire team, who were slow to respond. Realizing the gravity of the situation, I began evacuating guests from treatment rooms.

Some were unaware of the danger and reluctant to leave, requiring calm but firm persuasion.

Unfortunately, key engineering staff was unavailable: the Chief Engineer was off-duty, and the Assistant Engineer had left for the day. The remaining supervisor and team attempted to extinguish the fire with buckets of water, but this proved ineffective. Thinking quickly, I instructed the team to fetch another pump and place it near the swimming pool, but the long distance and low horse power of the pump rendered it insufficient.

Spotting a functional fire hose on the first floor, I ran upstairs, opened a balcony door, and threw the hose down to the ground floor. This solution finally provided enough pressure to combat the flames. All this transpired with me dressed in a velvet dress and heels, which is rare attire for me.
I discarded heels to focus fully on the task at hand.

I called reception to call the fire brigade, they did not believe me and I had to insist.

The local fire department was slow to respond, initially doubting the severity of the situation. When they finally arrived 25 minutes later, they were found to be intoxicated. My team had to take over and connect the hoses themselves.

Smoke had spread to the first floor and affected guest rooms. Using one of the firemen’s masks, I instructed staff to focus water on the sauna and its shaft. By morning, it was clear that the fire had climbed to the second floor, burning through sewage pipes. Whether the sewage water or the fire hose extinguished the flames no longer mattered—what mattered was that the fire was out.

At the front desk, guests awaited check-in, and with the hotel at 90% occupancy, we scrambled to assess the damage. Nearly all 60 rooms in Building B were impacted by smoke and required relocation, but we did not have rooms available. Despite the disruption, guests understood, thanks to our transparency and efforts to keep them informed.

Although this being a Saturday night, by Sunday morning, the insurance team arrived from Hanoi, ready to investigate if negligence played a part. Of course insurances are clever and try to find reasons not to pay. Thanks to meticulous documentation and a prepared Accounting department, we submitted a complete inventory of losses by Sunday night.

Rather than repairing the damaged sauna, I chose to replace it with a steam room. Although the exact cause of the fire remains unknown, we suspect a guest may have left a towel inside the sauna, which ignited.

This highlights the importance of quick thinking, teamwork, and adaptability in crisis management.

Honest communication with guests and thorough preparation ensured that we recovered financial damages without issue, turning a potentially catastrophic event into a lesson in resilience.

Of course it is not always plain sailing and not all about the guests.

**Norfolk Island – on the receiving End**

***Paradise Hotel, Norfolk Island, 2010***

I have family in Australia who always asked me to work in a “normal country”, so I made a point after my three and a half years to try and apply in Australia, I was eager to bring my experience to the Pacific. However, there seemed to be no opportunities—until the former President of Accor Asia, stepped in with a recommendation that opened the door.

My welcome to Accor Australia, however, was less than enthusiastic. Upon meeting the Regional General Manager of NSW, I was greeted with the warm words:

"Please note that I am obliged to hire you and would have never done so on my own." The tone was set.

**From Brisbane to Nowhere**

Following the national GM’s meeting—a gathering of 240 people, only 8 of whom were women—I was sent for a three-day induction to Brisbane. From there, I was shipped off to manage a 50-room hotel on Norfolk Island, 2,400 km from the Australian mainland.

Norfolk Island? I’d never heard of it, much less the hotel I was meant to oversee. When I inquired about my arrival and stay logistics, Brisbane’s regional office offered simple instructions:

"Take a taxi to the hotel when you arrive. No one will be there to pick you up."

The reality was even stranger. Upon exiting the tiny airport, an older gentleman approached me and asked, “Are you Carmen?” I nodded, surprised, and he handed me his business card, introducing himself as a representative of the receivers.

Receivers? Confused, I tried to reconcile this revelation with what I’d been told—that the hotel was being managed by the son of the owner. In truth, the resort had been in receivership—for the third time—and the receivers, whose expertise lay in managing pubs, had brought in Accor to oversee the property.

A small detail they had conveniently omitted to mention.

**Six Months on an island**

Despite the rocky start, my six months on Norfolk Island turned out to be an unforgettable experience. The island’s rugged beauty, fascinating history, and peculiar local culture quickly grew on me.

With a population of just 1,400—descendants of the famous Pitcairn Islanders—Norfolk operated in a time warp. There were 800 government servants, a love for independence from Australia, and quirks like progressive dinners, poems in a forest, mutiny on the Bounty dinners that showcased the islanders’ hospitality. Public transport didn’t exist, but every hotel room came automatically with a rental car.

Managing the hotel brought its own set of challenges. Four months into my tenure, the property was suddenly put up for auction. Potential buyers began trickling in to inspect the site, but in true island fashion, I couldn’t recall who they were or when they visited.

Approximately one month later, the phone rang. A voice on the other end declared, “Carmen, I got the hotel! Please send me all the details—payroll, expenses, profit and loss, everything.”

Caught completely off-guard, I politely declined to do so for the moment until I received further instructions. Seeking some more information I immediately called Brisbane head office, only to find them just as surprised as I was. That evening, they instructed me to drop everything and fly back to the mainland. But there was a catch: Norfolk Air, bankrupt and barely operational, only flew to the mainland three times a week and twice a week to New Zealand. An amazing place in the middle of nowhere where you could not just get up and leave, literally unthinkable these days and quite incredible to the Brisbane head office too!

Faced with a delay, I entertained the idea of a Christmas escape to Whangarai, New Zealand to visit some friends. Sadly, these plans evaporated when head office reassigned me to Kalgoorlie, requiring a return to Perth instead.

My time on Norfolk Island left an indelible mark. Beyond its scenic vistas and eccentric population, it offered a window into a unique era of self-governance.

On June 17, 2015, the Norfolk Island Legislative Assembly was abolished, and the territory came under the administration of mainland Australia. From July 1, 2016, travel between the island and Australia was classified as domestic.

Unfortunately, with destinations like Bali, Thailand, and Vietnam offering cheaper, more exotic, and more accessible travel options, Norfolk Island’s tourism industry has been on the decline.

While my stay was brief, Norfolk Island’s charm and challenges remain some of my fondest memories.

After my return from Norfolk Island I flew to Perth, and did a one month General Manager replacement at the Ibis Kalgoorlie. Kalgoorlie is a suburb in Kalgoorlie-Boulder and is the central hub of the town. With a bustling restaurant scene, plenty of great employment opportunities, and a friendly community, Kalgoorlie has earned its reputation as one of the most desirable places to live in rural Western Australia. Kalgoorlie is a miners town. About 900,000 ounces of gold are harvested here each year, making a total of 50 million ounces since it started operating in 1989. The hole is approximately 3.7 kilometres long, 1.5 kilometres wide and around 480 metres deep - big enough to bury Uluru. The Super Pit is in Boulder along the Golden Mile. I actually took a liking to Kalgoorlie, and the General Manager did not like it, and although he asked head office if he could switch that was not possible, I was just a vacation replacement and I had to return to Sydney. My start at Accor Australia coincided with the General Manager’s meeting.
To my surprise there were only 8 female out of 240 total General Managers.

In Sydney I was assigned to the Ibis Thornleigh, but I have not much to say about my time there.
Housekeeping, Engineering, IT, Laundry, everything was outsourced. It was a haze of constant stress with the few part time employees I had. My Assistant, a Kiwi lady, has been there for several years and was a hard and dedicated worker, but numb to a degree because she has been there too long. Anyone else was part time on hours. Efforts like a teambuilding held at the Luna Park, trying to employ disadvantaged youth and integrate them into the society and putting flowers on the tables in the restaurant were frowned upon. I was clearly too colourful for this part of the world and ‘did not understand hospitality in Australia” as per my regional General Manager, which means nothing but bottom line.

**Expiry Dates**

***Royal Haathi Mahal, South Goa, 2012***

Before my stay on Norfolk Island, I received an unexpected call from a Scottish Group General Manager offering me a General Manager position in India. Puzzled, as I didn’t recall applying for such a role, I joked, “India is a great country for a holiday, but probably not for work. After all, so many Indians pay a high price to immigrate to the US, Australia, and Europe. Why should we go and work there?”

Fast forward to after my tour across Australia—from Norfolk to Perth, Kalgoorlie, and back to Sydney—the same Group General Manager called me again. This time, he had “lost” another General Manager and was persistent. Timing was perfect; I was ready for a change. I hadn’t completed the required 24 months to renew my residency in Australia, leaving after just 20 months, and set my sights on colourful India.

Life in Sydney had become stressful, expensive, and lonely for a single person. Just as my friend Della decided to return to Australia from Egypt, I was preparing to leave. I handed her all my belongings accumulated over 20 months—glasses, an iron and ironing board, towels, and other odds and ends—bundled into one package. She begged me not to tell her kids why I was leaving.

A week later, I landed in Delhi and, shortly after, in Goa. The heat and humidity hit me like a wall. At the airport, an Indian gentleman introduced himself as the Human Resources Manager and escorted me to a rattling four-seater car. On the drive to the resort, he was all politeness, asking how my flight was and if it was my first time in India.

Nodding his head in the uniquely Indian way, he explained, “The Group General Manager sends his apologies. He could not come because... something expired.”

My exhausted mind conjured all kinds of scenarios. Had he found a ton of expired fish in the freezer? What could possibly have “expired” and been so important? The Indian accent, coupled with my fatigue, made it hard to clarify. Grateful for being picked up at all, I let it go.

We arrived at the resort, where I was greeted with an extravagant floral display. My initial excitement dimmed when I realized the flowers weren’t for me—they were for a funeral. The Director of Sales, who was also a part owner of the resort, had unexpectedly “expired” three days earlier.

I was escorted to a lavish suite, my accommodation. After a much-needed shower, I unpacked and prepared to meet the Group General Manager. Apologizing profusely, he informed me that the “final funeral” would be held the next day.

Drama had engulfed the resort. The deceased, an Englishman, had left behind a storm of uncertainty. Confusion reigned over what to do with the body, and, to add to the chaos, two wives—one Thai, one Indonesian—had materialized. Neither knew about the other, and they were embroiled in a heated dispute in the hotel lobby.

This was my introduction to life in India—a land of vivid contrasts and surprises. From the chaos of a funeral in the hotel lobby to navigating cultural misunderstandings, I could already tell this would be an adventure unlike any other.

**A short Action Movie**

Royal Resorts (now Kamala) was a burgeoning timeshare company with six hotels and counting.

The Group General Manager hired me to helm their flagship property, Hotel Haathi Mahal, located on Cavelossim Beach in Goa. It was an exhilarating challenge—timeshares mean perpetual occupancy, and weekends were a whirlwind of chaos. Every weekend from 10:00 AM to 9:00 PM was a high-stakes action movie. The tension built, drama ensued, and resolutions—or explosions—unfolded spectacularly. Nearly 400 guests, mostly Indian families, would flood the reception with complaints, some the usual, others never heard off, and always something new.

The room is too small.

The room is dirty.

The room is too far from their friends or lacked a view.

The room wasn’t what they booked.

You name it, they complained about it. The front desk team, unshaken and unsmiling dismissed these requests with stoic efficiency, adhering strictly to policy. In the pre-Tripadvisor days (India only caught on in 2008), reviews carried little weight, so guest satisfaction often felt optional.

Although I had worked at a timeshare property before, in Grand Cayman back in 1996, this was an entirely different beast. My first attempt at goodwill, sending a fruit basket to a guest room, backfired spectacularly. The small gesture opened Pandora’s box: a cascade of demands to provide the same to their “friends,” with threats of trouble if I didn’t comply.

**Midnight Chaos**

One night, at 2:00 AM, I was jolted awake by the duty manager, breathless and frantic, reporting guests “fighting.” Still half-asleep, getting out of bed and passing the pool, for good measure without any concrete plan, flying by I grabbed the lifeguards whistle hanging by the poolside and rushed to the scene. I found four women and four men embroiled in a full-blown brawl. All four of them were well dressed and well-spoken but obviously not well mannered. A shrill blast of the whistle separated them, and 15 minutes later I was back in bed.
But the aftermath was no less dramatic. By morning, the incident required delicate diplomacy to pacify four guests, and, naturally, a doctor’s attention. I told the first couple that the second couple would press charges with the police, and vice versa, the second couple I told that the first couple would press charges.

Indians are a bit wary of the police so I set my own secret conditions to “not call the police”.

I quickly learned the ropes in India in the most unforgiving way possible:

Union Demands: Unreasonable, silly and time wasting.

Red Stamps Galore: Every rupee required a labyrinth of forms, often five layers deep.

Team Dynamics: What is it?

Three months into my tenure, just as I was finding my rhythm, the Group General Manager—appeared in my office late one evening. His tone was uncharacteristically subdued. “My contract is up,” he said. “I’m heading back to Bangkok on a one-way ticket. You’re on your own. You’ll be fine.”

And just like that, he was gone.

**The Cash Jugglers’ Club**

With the Group General Managers departure, things descended into surreal territory. In timeshare hospitality, cash flowed in daily, but disbursing it required cheques, and the Group General Manager had been the sole authorized signatory. For a month, the six General Managers across the company and I engaged in a bizarre cash-juggling act. Those hotels flush with cash lent to others until a new Group General Manager would arrive, which we were not sure of as to when this would happen.

**New Management, More Chaos**

A month later, a new Group General Manager, hailing from the UK, arrived. It was his first time in such a role, and his approach was markedly different—more relaxed and hands-off. General Manager meetings became much more relaxed with a bottle of Jack Daniels, and operations ran on the rocks. But the challenges persisted.

My salary, paid in Indian rupees to an Indian bank account, presented its own complication. Each month, I had to navigate the black market to convert rupees into US dollars. Add to that a broken root canal, and I began to question the limits of my resilience.

**The End of the Action Movie**

After three months with the first Group General Manager, one month alone, two months with a new Group General Manager, five black-market rupee-dollar conversions, and endless weekend dramas, I paused to reflect.

While I thrived in high-energy environments, the ceaseless chaos was testing my limits. The six-month probation period in my contract, which I’d initially dismissed as a formality, became my lifeline.

On the last day, I handed my resignation to a stunned Group General Manager, officially calling it quits on my Indian adventure.

He wasn’t very thrilled about my resignation. But with the aid of a glass of red wine, he accepted my decision and promptly found my replacement. His efficiency allowed me to jet off to my next adventure—Thailand.

**HiSo in Thailand**

My destination was Putharacsa, a boutique resort in Hua Hin owned by the daughter and son-in-law of a famous Thai actress. The property reflected their eccentric lifestyle, serving as a canvas for their whims and indulgences. I quickly learned that in Thailand, people like them are dubbed HiSo, shorthand for "High Society." As a humble German, I found myself feeling like an odd fit among the HiSo owners and their equally ostentatious guests.

My mission? To transform Putharacsa on the sea side into a Kudeta-style hotspot like the iconic Bali venue. The goal was a beachfront nightlife extravaganza, complete with:

White Parties like guests dressed in flowing white, sipping cocktails under fairy lights.

Foam Parties with giant foam cannons drenching revellers in bubbly bliss.

Bar Action a buzzing nightlife scene sprawled across the beach in between the four beachside villas.

Unfortunately, navigating the dynamics of their social circle proved as challenging as the operational hurdles of turning a serene resort into a vibrant party hub.

**An Uneasy Fit**

My down-to-earth German work ethic and straightforward demeanour clashed with the flamboyant world of HiSo society. The owner’s expectations made for a challenging cultural adjustment.

Despite my best efforts to bridge the gap, it became clear that this wasn’t the right match. After six months, I decided it was time to move on again—this time to Myanmar, seeking my next chapter in a world less dominated by HiSo drama.

**The Snake Expert**

At Putharacsa, we had a modest meeting room that was rarely used, as the resort primarily catered to leisure guests. Like many resorts, we aimed to maximize revenue by offering meeting spaces for free, provided they included lunch or other catering services.

One Saturday afternoon, we hosted a small, non-profit church group of 40 people. The group enjoyed lunch at our restaurant and then used the meeting room, complete with a coffee break in the afternoon.

During the coffee break, I stopped by to check on the group’s leader to ensure everything was going smoothly. At first, he assured me that everything was fine but then hesitated before adding, “Except for the snake.” Confused, I asked, “What snake?”

 “Oh, there’s a rather big snake in the room,” he replied nonchalantly.

Thinking he might be joking, I hurried to the meeting room—and there it was. A large snake was coiled right on top of the coffee break table, its presence startlingly real.

 “Why didn’t you tell someone sooner?” I asked.

The leader shrugged, replying calmly, “We really didn’t know what to do.”

Fortunately, one of our bellmen was an expert with snakes and happened to be on duty.
I immediately called him for help. Without hesitation, he entered the meeting room.

In one swift motion, he grabbed the snake by its neck, removing it effortlessly. The entire process took only seconds. The group sat in stunned silence, clearly amazed by his skill and composure.

This is the unpredictable nature of hospitality! Every challenge is an opportunity to create a unique and unforgettable guest or staff experience.

**Temples and Monasteries**

***Bagan Lodge & Sanctum Inle Resort, Myanmar, 2012***

**Opening Bagan Lodge: From Sand to Splendour**

Bagan, Myanmar, stretches gracefully from the banks of the Irrawaddy River, an awe-inspiring blend of desert and verdant greenery. Located 700 km north of Yangon and 300 km south of Mandalay, its ancient temples evoke the same reverence as Angkor Wat in Cambodia. This enchanting city promised a magical backdrop for a new resort—but it also presented unique challenges.

**The Mission: Open in Four Weeks**

The Group General Manager, based in Hanoi, urgently asked if I could assist in opening Bagan Lodge, a new 5 star lodge concept aiming to capture the region’s charm. As with many owner-driven projects, the pressure to open quickly—to start generating cash flow—loomed large.

Arriving in May, I was greeted by an incomplete construction site. The lobby’s pillars stood roofless, eerily reaching into the sky. Thirty five bungalows were topped with tented roofs—a charming feature—but sand blanketed everything. The pool was ready, but utilities were unreliable: no running water, no internet, no electricity, and no working generator.

Strangely, whenever high-ranking politicians visited the site, the utilities miraculously worked—only to fail as soon as they departed.

The Australian General Manager on site assured me everything was “ordered,” but upon digging deeper, I discovered that essential contracts remained unsigned, deposits unpaid, and deliveries uncertain. It became clear that the “critical path” to opening—a step-by-step plan detailing milestones—was absent.

As the weeks rolled on, progress was slow. I hired a Spa Manager from Thailand and moved us both onto the construction site to accelerate the opening, also a mental mindset that things are moving.

In the evenings, we’d traverse the sandy terrain with flashlights, navigating pitch darkness and fearing snakes when we set out to go for dinner. When I told her that one day she would not remember this anymore, her sceptical glances as we trudged through the sand were hard to miss.

And as I said, four months later, when we strolled along paved paths illuminated by landscaped lighting, I asked if she remembered being afraid of the dark and the snakes. She laughed, marvelling at how far we’d come. It was a testament to human ingenuity: creating something remarkable from almost nothing.

To jumpstart the lodge’s operations, I initiated a soft opening strategy, inviting embassies, travel agents, and corporate clients to stay for just $20 in an unfinished, yet almost 5 star hotel. It was a win-win: guests enjoyed an incredible deal, and we gained valuable operational practice. This approach created much-needed movement and energy around the property.

During this period, I reconnected with former colleagues who had also relocated to Myanmar. One such friend from a high-end travel agency asked if she could drop off a package for a mutual acquaintance.

Without hesitation, I agreed. But I wasn’t prepared for what happened next.

**The Surprise Package**

At reception, in full view of staff and guests, she handed me a large, clear zip-lock bag filled with what looked dangerously close to weed.

My heart skipped a beat. In a country like Myanmar, where rules could be unpredictable and perceptions even more so, the implications of such a package could have been disastrous. I managed to maintain composure, swiftly taking the "gift" away from prying eyes, only to later confirm that it was, thankfully, harmless dried lemongrass—a thoughtful culinary token, not contraband.

Opening Bagan Lodge was a master class in resilience, adaptability, and finding creative solutions under immense pressure. From sand-filled construction zones to a functioning resort hosting guests, the transformation was remarkable. Looking back, it’s a reminder of what determination and teamwork can achieve—even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

**A Whirlwind Renovation in Hue**

After completing Bagan Lodge, I was set to move to Sanctum Inle Lake Resort, this project had barely started. However, delays left the project idle, and the Group General Manager asked me if I could do a short-term, “sensitive project” as it was to borrow me to a competitive company in Vietnam.

The company’s Hanoi headquarters had been sold, including 40% of the Group General Manager to a competing firm—a curious arrangement, to say the least. The new owners sought to renovate one of their properties, Alba Spa Hotel, a 30-room boutique in Hue.
A task which would only take maximum one month, simple and straightforward, the Group General Manager assured me, comprised of the following:

1. Estimate the renovation budget

2. Determine the timeline needed to do the renovations

3. Address key questions with the architect

It was meant to be a quick, one-month assignment before returning to Myanmar.

I arrived in Hue after a brief stop in Ho Chi Minh City, greeted warmly by the CEO of Alba Hotels at the airport. After dropping my bags at the hotel’s sister property, the Alba Hotel, at 4 PM I went straight to the construction site. There, the Vietnamese architect awaited me eagerly, unfurling A3 scrolls of blueprints with a wide smile.

“I have been waiting for you!” he announced in broken English.

“Well,” I replied, “I’m not great with drawings. Let me see the property first.”

A two-hour inspection revealed a surprising sight: many floors still housed furniture, fixtures, and equipment from the previous operations, some pieces dating back 20 years to the hotel’s opening.
When I asked about plans for the contents, I was met with an unexpected answer:

“We are waiting for you to tell us.”

**Clearing Out the Past**

The next day, I assembled a crew and got to work. Every floor, room, restaurant, and storeroom was emptied. We meticulously sorted items into categories: keep, repurpose, and discard.

The CEO suggested an unconventional approach for disposing of the unwanted furniture: sell it on the street to local cyclo drivers. Sceptical but intrigued, I agreed. The following morning, nearly 200 pieces—mattresses, minibars, curtains, and furniture—were laid out in the hotel’s parking lot.

The sale, announced on Facebook, turned into a lively spectacle.

At times, 30 people crowded the lot, bargaining animatedly.

Shouts, gestures, and haggling echoed up to the 10th floor.

By evening, only a few forlorn pieces of wood remained.

We repeated this process with soft furnishings, sorting reusable items and selling the rest. Within a week, the hotel was cleared out, paving the way for construction to begin in earnest.

**A four weeks Race**

With the hotel emptied, I finally sat down with the architect to review the plans.

Together, we tackled operational logistics: socket locations, furniture layouts, door placements, and more.
The rest of the month was a blur of activity:

Supervising construction crews.

Cleaning post-construction debris.

Overseeing software upgrades.

Rehiring staff for vacant positions.

Amid the chaos, my measly original task—preparing the renovation budget and timeline—became a late-night endeavour, on the side affair, completed by the second week.

Six weeks after my arrival, Alba Spa Hotel reopened its doors, a transformed space ready to welcome guests once more. What was intended to be a simple advisory role had turned into an all-encompassing sprint to revitalize a property. The month was nothing short of madness. Yet, the satisfaction of seeing the hotel fully operational made it all worthwhile.

**Monastic Luxury at Inle Lake**

Inle Lake, remote and serene, invites visitors to disconnect from the wider world. The resort concept sought to embody this spirit, drawing inspiration from monastic life. Arches and cloisters, with their elegant simplicity, referenced the contemplative essence of monasteries. The design aimed to blend the spiritual with the secular, offering a space for reflection while catering to modern luxury travellers.

However, projecting the austerity of monastic life—marked by silence, abstinence, fasting, and prayer—onto the indulgent expectations of luxury hospitality was a monumental challenge.

**French Design & German Logic**

The architect, deeply invested in his vision, often clashed with the operational needs of a high-end resort. One contentious design choice was the use of large iron keys for room entrances. While the idea evoked a sense of old-world romance, it was utterly impractical for a 5-star operation, where convenience and seamless experiences are paramount.

Another source of conflict involved the Abbey Suite, which initially featured small oval windows that mimicked the austere style of a monastery. While this design element fit the monastic theme, it failed to capitalize on the breathtaking lake views. During one of the owner’s visits, I pointed this out, much to the chagrin of the architect. Standing on the ground floor, he yelled up at me:

“Don’t mess with my design, or I mess with you!”

Whereas the owners responded “No business of yours, you are only the operator and have no experience in this.”

Despite my protests, the oval windows were installed. Just when the interior was installed and short before the exterior building was painted, someone found that the suites are too dark, and ultimately replaced the oval monastery windows with large panoramic windows, allowing guests to enjoy the stunning vistas—a decision that transformed the suite into a standout feature of the resort.

**Matching Monastic Ideas with Luxury Travel**

Executing a concept as abstract as a monastery in the context of luxury hospitality was fraught with contradictions. While the idea of detox retreats and wellness stays has gained traction, the heart of luxury travel lies elsewhere:

Good food and drink

Scenic experiences

Entertainment

Exotic flavours

Comfort and convenience

Interestingly, monastic traditions themselves offered inspiration. For centuries, monks and nuns have produced culinary delights, from alcoholic brews to baked goods, tying spirituality with gastronomy.

This gave rise to some of my own concept ideas:

Homemade draft beer

Infused tonics

Rhum arrangé: a maceration of fruits in rum to create unique flavours

Cooked rabbit

While the designer advocated for monk robes, narrow windows, and iron keys, I leaned toward something more practical—and tasty. Just 5 km from the hotel, an American couple bred large, healthy rabbits. Initially, the idea of serving rabbit faced resistance:

The kitchen staff didn’t know how to cook it.

Nobody in Myanmar eats rabbit.
Guests will not eat rabbit, which is a misconception, in many Western countries it is a delicacy.

Undeterred, I included it in the very first menu testing, disguised as “meat/beef.” To my utter surprise, the first 10 kg of rabbit disappeared so quickly that the meat on the plate didn’t have a chance to cool down. The dish became a favourite, proving that even the most unusual ideas could resonate when executed well.

In the end, the Inle Lake resort found its balance, blending the contemplative essence of monastic life with the indulgent elements of luxury travel. While the journey was filled with fiery debates, creative experiments, and cultural resistance, it underscored an important lesson: the best hospitality concepts respect tradition while embracing modern expectations.

**Tamarind Jam anyone?**

During my time working at Sanctum Inle Resort, I stayed in the charming village of Nyaungshwe, a bustling gateway to the serene waters of Inle Lake. My temporary home was a cosy hotel, just 10 km from the construction site. To ensure my independence, I rented a small scooter upon arrival.

My neighbour at the hotel was a British pilot for Oriental Balloons, often flying over the region’s picturesque landscapes. He sported a sleek 150cc Kawasaki Enduro and a GPS that he used for balloon navigation—perfect for adventurous motorbike trips. Soon, I upgraded to a 250cc Kenbo bike, bought from the construction manager in Bagan, and joined the balloon pilot for some unforgettable excursions into the surrounding countryside.

**Strange Noises in the Night**

About three-quarters into construction, a few months before Thingyan (the Burmese New Year), I had a particularly long day on-site. After sunset, as I walked toward my bike, strange noises emerged from the bushes around the property walls—whispering, rustling leaves, and the occasional thud.

The next morning, curiosity got the better of me, and I investigated. I discovered the source: 13 massive tamarind trees scattered across the property, their branches heavy with fat, ripe tamarinds.

The commotion the night before? Local villagers sneaking onto the grounds to climb the trees and harvest the fruit.

**A sweet Experiment**

I’ve always enjoyed tamarinds, though my experience with them was limited to tamarind juice. Western cooking rarely uses the fruit, so encountering these sweet, plump pods was a delightful surprise. I couldn’t eat enough of them.

Since the resort had staff hired but not yet operational, I enlisted the gardeners to harvest the remaining fruit—around 40 kg of tamarinds. The kitchen and service staff spent several days sitting on the floor, peeling and deseeding the fruit. It was painstaking work, but I had a plan.

I turned to our Filipina pastry chef and suggested we make tamarind jam. Her eyes widened in disbelief. “Tamarind jam? I’ve never made that before. Are you kidding me? But… let’s try.”

We experimented with a small batch first. Since the tamarind was naturally sweet, I asked her to go easy on the sugar. When the pastry chef brought me the first sample, the result was a revelation: a tangy-sweet delight unlike anything I’d tasted before.

**Tamarind Treasures**

Over the next week, the pastry chef and the team worked tirelessly to transform all 40 kg of tamarinds into jam. The process was labour-intensive, but the final product was worth it. We jarred the jam in simple glass containers, and I decided to incorporate it into the New Year’s gifts.

Instead of traditional gift baskets, I had wooden boards made; each paired with a glass of homemade tamarind jam and freshly baked bread. The gifts were a hit.

Soon after, travel agents and partners who received the baskets started calling, curious about the unique jam. “Where did you get this tamarind jam? Can we buy some?”

I laughed, explaining that it was homemade at the resort, a labour of love from the tamarind trees on our property.

“If you send us good bookings this year,” I teased, “you might get some more with next year’s harvest.”

This small adventure encapsulates what makes hospitality so special: the ability to blend local culture, creativity, and personal touches into a memorable experience. What began as a curious discovery—ripe tamarinds hanging over a construction site—became a unique culinary delicacy that brought joy to our staff, our guests, and our partners.

**The Cloister Bar - Rhum Arrangé, from Madagascar to Myanmar**

The Cloister Bar at Sanctum Inle Resort featured a stunning dark brown shelf that stretched from the bar counter to the ceiling. While beautiful in its natural wood design, the towering shelves were glaringly empty. The resort’s interior designer suggested filling the space with ceramics, but my practical German mindset balked: “Who will look at them, and who will dust them?”

The shelves stayed barren for months, awaiting a better idea. Little did I know that a shipping mishap would eventually solve the problem in the most unexpected way.

**A Mission for Sustainability**

My quest to eliminate plastic water bottles at the resort began with ambition but faced financial constraints. A full sterilization and refill system cost a daunting $100,000—far beyond the budget.

I was determined to be a pioneer in saving the environment from our plastic bottles and searched for alternative ways to make this happen at a lesser price. With guidance by disseminating the 100,000$ quotation I first appointed and designed a room especially for this operation. Then I devised a flow system: Dirty bottles would enter on the left side of the designated room. They’d be washed in the centre.

Clean bottles to be refilled would emerge ready for reuse on the right side.

Kind of like a flow for a laundry system, dirty laundry in on one side and clean laundry out on the other side.

After extensive research, I sourced a bottle washing machine from Canada, designed stainless steel tables made to order locally in Myanmar at a reasonable price and ordered 2,000 reusable glass bottles printed with an environmental message from a factory in China.

To fill up the shipping container, which was not entirely full with 2000 glass bottles I browsed the supplier’s catalogue, when I stumbled upon 5-liter glass jars with spouts—perfect for juice service at breakfast.
At just $10 each, I ordered 20, envisioning their use for banquets and as spares.

**A Shipping Mishap turns into an Opportunity**

When the shipment arrived, it included the jars—but without the necessary spouts. The supplier replaced the jars with the correct model but didn’t want the original ones returned. My staff suggested storing the extras in the storeroom, out of sight, but I insisted to keep them in the cloister bar, because if they go to storage I would forget about them. For at least one week, the jars sat prominently in the bar as I pondered their purpose.

**Inspiration from Madagascar**

In 2008, I travelled to Madagascar and fell in love with the island’s vibrant culture and its unique Rhum Arrangé. This traditional drink involves macerating rum with ripe fruits and botanicals, a tradition that originated in the French Caribbean and spread to islands like Mauritius and Réunion. Sweet, aromatic, and bursting with flavour, it left a lasting impression on me.

My bouts of creativity usually happen after a long workday on my ride home on my motorbike.

One evening, while riding my motorbike home after a long day, inspiration struck. I thought of Madagascar’s rhum arrangé, the abundance of tropical fruits at Inle Lake—pineapples, mangosteens, jackfruit—and the 20 unused glass jars.

**The Birth of Inle Lake’s Rhum Arrangé**

The next day, I embarked on a secret mission to Mandalay. I drove to Mandalay on my motorbike, with the mission of testing the local rum, quietly without telling anyone about my plans, on my day off. Five days later, 6 boxes, 72 bottles of Mandalay Rum were delivered to Sanctum Inle Resort. Ten days later, the empty Cloister Bar shelves were filled up, now proudly displaying 10 jars of colourful, fruit-infused rum.

Each jar featured a different tropical fruit, pineapple, perfect for crafting unforgettable Piña Coladas.

adding a rich, exotic aroma to any cocktail.

Jackfruit, Lychees, Rambutan, and even Durian, daring yet delightful found their way into the jars.

During the resort's soft opening celebration, the pineapple rum stole the show.
The Piña Coladas, crafted with this homemade infusion, were nothing short of magical.

A year later, I received a note from the new French General Manager:

“What exactly is floating in these jars? Can it be thrown out?”

The inquiry struck a bittersweet chord. To me, those jars represented creativity, sustainability, and a deep connection to both the local influences that shaped the resort. But as with all things, passions differ, and the jars perhaps lacked meaning for someone who hadn’t been part of their journey.

The Cloister Bar’s empty shelves turned into a tale of sustainability and innovative hospitality.

While the jars of rhum arrangé may not have survived the change in management, it shows that even the most ordinary objects can hold extraordinary potential when paired with a spark of creativity.

**With the Go-Kart to Taunggyi**

Myanmar's charm lies in its simplicity and underdevelopment. Unlike its neighbours, Thailand and Vietnam, cars are a rare sight on its roads, and even the highways feel like countryside paths. Traffic lights are a novelty, and the traffic in Yangon is unparalleled quiet to any big city in the world.
Even the most remote roads in Vietnam or Thailand seem wider and better maintained in comparison.

A comparison of road motor vehicles per 1,000 inhabitants in Asian and Western countries

Myanmar: 123 Thailand: 527 Vietnam: 539

Finland: 949 USA: 863 Switzerland: 714

With a predominantly poor population, vehicles are a luxury, and manual cars dominate the roads. Recruiting drivers for businesses, hotels, or resorts can be a challenge, as experienced drivers are few and far between.

Shan State, a sprawling hilly plateau, borders China to the north, Laos to the east, and Thailand to the south. Its capital, Taunggyi, sits at 4,712 feet (1,436 meters) above sea level on the Thazi-Kyaingtong road, just north of the picturesque Shwenyaung and Inle Lake.

During my stay at the Sanctum Inle Resort, we needed a driver for a company car. Human Resources eventually found and tested a local recruit. Since I typically rode my motorbike, I had little interaction with the driver, who was mostly tasked with airport pickups and drop-offs. He performed his job quietly, and there was little reason for me to think much about his driving skills. None of the guests ever made a comment or remark.

**A Jarring Ride**

One day, I needed to pick up something from Taunggyi and decided to take the car with the driver.

The initial stretch out of Nyaung Shwe was uneventful—a flat and straightforward road, but he drove very slow. Not thinking of anything I enjoyed the landscape and thought that he might want to demonstrate what a safe driver he is. However, as we approached the steep, winding ascent past Shwenyaung, things took a turn.

The driver constantly shifted between first and second gear, causing the car to lurch like a go-kart.

The relentless shaking left me bewildered. I attempted to ask how long he'd been driving, but he didn’t understand English. After enduring 15 minutes of this nerve-wracking ride, I resorted to Google Translate to ask him to pull over.

Stepping out to calm the situation, I then slid into the driver’s seat myself. With ease, I navigated the curves and steep inclines, (I am from the black forest so it is business as usual for me) smoothly shifting into fourth gear, and we reached Taunggyi in no time.

The driver looked stunned but, thankfully, did not quit on the spot. Seeing a female manning the steering wheel with such ease left him speechless. For many of us from the West, driving feels instinctive—second nature, even. For many Burmese, however, it remains a rare and specialized skill.

**Welcome back to Vietnam**

***Alma Oasis Long Hai, Vietnam, 2015***

In June 2015 my contract with Apple Tree Asia in Myanmar was finished and I really wanted to see what I created opening, but the stress levels created between the owners were high. From my side rather unplanned I returned to Vietnam to follow an opportunity with Serenity, in the south 100 km from HCMC.
The offer came from a Dutch man, who I met as a guest at La Residence in Hue.

In the previous three years I had opened 3 resorts in two different countries including assisting the Green Elephant Restaurants in Myanmar and was honestly yearning for a break, even only one day in HCMC to reconnect with Vietnam. However, the Human Resources Manager who insisted to pick me up from the airport like a precious cargo that might get lost on the way was eager on an immediate start. Even one night staying in HCMC was off the charts, arriving from Yangon I was picked up by the company car and whisked away to Long Hai. Arriving in the late afternoon on a Saturday the Human Resources Manager excused himself to go to the office which was on top of the hill for 15 minutes before checking me in. This was very ok with me, giving me the opportunity of a quick incognito round before anyone knew who I was. First impression, the piles of lose, dirty linen which lined the walkways at 4 PM were a rapid introduction to a Vietnamese high season. I saw receptionists frantically dashing in and out of dirty rooms with brooms and mops, and occasionally someone would ask me if they can assist me.
How big was their surprise the next Monday morning when I was introduced at the General Manager.

When I left Hue in 2010 domestic market did not exist, Vietnamese could not afford to travel. Domestic airplanes were filled either with tourists or domestic business people. Needless to say, the first weeks after my arrival the piles of linen on the street disappeared, so did the 7 foreigners who worked at the hotel and by the end of the first year I achieved a solid occupancy with an average rate over 100$.

The concept at Alma Oasis Long Hai was lovely and engaging, the employees were called stars, staff parties were star events, employees of the months were the stars of the months and the canteen was the star Restaurant. A room attendant was called a room stylist and the Spa therapist was a fuionista.

**A blue Christmas – Reinventing Traditions**

My first Christmas and New Year’s Eve at the resort were anything but smooth. Arriving during Vietnam’s high season from June to August, I spent the quieter months from September to December refining operations with not much time preparing for the festivities. The process was challenging—entertainment options were scarce, and securing bands from Ho Chi Minh City came at a steep cost. I cobbled together a program using my team, a stressful yet necessary endeavour.

By the time the second festive season rolled around, I was more organized and determined to create something truly memorable for our guests.

Christmas at the resort was a relatively simple affair, typically consisting of a Cocktail Reception with guests mingling before dinner and Christmas carols sung by the children of our staff. Paired with elegant music from a guitar and violin duo and a festive dinner, a carefully curated meal complemented by fine wine.

To add a playful twist, I reserved 15 minutes for a Santa Claus appearance to distribute presents to the children. But this time, I wanted to try something bold—a hip-hopping Santa Claus.

While passing through Ba Ria, a city 20 kilometres from Long Hai, I noticed a group of teenagers dancing hip-hop on the street. I approached them with a proposal: Could one of them play Santa Claus and perform a hip-hop routine during our Christmas Eve festivities?

At first, they were sceptical. “A hip-hopping Santa Claus? How would that even work?” they asked.

“Exactly like what you’re doing now,” I explained, “but in a Santa Claus costume.”

One of the boys agreed for VND 500,000 (about $25), and I eagerly set the plan in motion.

Since the resort didn’t have a Santa Claus costume, I had to buy one. Inspired by the resort’s signature colours—white and turquoise—I opted for a turquoise Santa Claus outfit.

Two weeks before Christmas, the hip-hopping Santa Claus arrived at the resort for a rehearsal. Upon seeing the blue costume, his reaction was immediate: “This is...different. I’ll need VND 200,000 more.”

Despite the unexpected price hike, I agreed. The idea of a blue, hip-hopping Santa Claus was unconventional, but I felt it would create a unique, joyful memory for our guests.

On Christmas Eve, the turquoise Santa Claus, accompanied by a blue helper, hip-hopped onto the stage, delivering gifts to the children with flair and energy. The laughter, astonishment, and applause from the guests were beyond anything I had anticipated.

The festive atmosphere was electric. Guests clapped along with the beat, children beamed with delight, and the unconventional performance became the highlight of the evening.

Creating unforgettable experiences often means taking risks and thinking outside the box. The blue, hip-hopping Santa Claus was a gamble, but it paid off in ways I couldn’t have imagined. The joy and amazement it brought to our guests made it a moment to cherish—a Christmas celebration that was anything but ordinary.

**A New Year’s Eve Story – The unprofessional Saxophone Player**

New Year’s Eve at a resort is always a high-stakes affair, where meticulous planning met unpredictable challenges. For this year, we aimed to keep guests entertained non-stop from the 7:30 PM welcome cocktail until well past midnight, culminating in the much-anticipated countdown. However, with lower-than-expected bookings in late December, staying within budget became crucial.

We focused on assembling a diverse line-up of local artists, including a Lion Dance and a winning performance from our staff talent show. By carefully planning throughout the year, we pieced together an engaging program that offered variety without breaking the bank.

By December 29th, the guest list stood at 80—about 50% occupancy. Adjusting room rates was not an option since the New Year’s Eve dinner was already included in the pricing, and fairness to existing guests was paramount.

Our booking cut off was set for December 30th at 6 PM, but as the deadline neared, reservations picked up pace. By midday on December 31st, I extended the deadline to accommodate late inquiries until noon time, much to the dismay of our Executive Chef.

The momentum continued, and we filled the final room at 5 PM, achieving 100% occupancy.
With dinner tables, décor, and logistics already set for a more modest turnout, we scrambled to make adjustments for a full house of 200 guests.

The evening was designed to take guests through multiple locations to create a sense of movement and excitement. The cocktail party held by the large swimming pool, offering an elegant and lively start to the evening. The dinner would be served on the grass near the beach, under a starlit sky.

To fill the time and maintain variety, we opted for live entertainment throughout the evening.
However, with a full hotel, I felt that background music, as originally planned for the cocktail party wasn’t enough.

**The Saxophone Surprise**

On the morning of December 30th, my IT Manager mentioned a friend who played the saxophone. “He’s not professional,” he warned. After some back-and-forth about qualifications and concerns, I decided to take the chance. A few simple tunes for 30 minutes would be perfect for the cocktail reception.

In a spur-of-the-moment inspiration, I suggested he perform in the pool for added visual impact. Initially, he dismissed the idea, citing the inconvenience. After some negotiation—and agreeing to a modest increase in payment—he agreed.

At 7:30 PM, the evening began as guests trickled to the pool. The scene was set: waiters moved gracefully with trays of cocktails, wine, beer, and canapés, while the soft hum of 200 guests filled the air.

Then, the saxophone player entered the pool. With his pant legs rolled up, he waded in and raised the saxophone to his lips.

The first notes silenced the crowd. Conversations stopped mid-sentence, and all eyes turned to the performer. The hauntingly beautiful melody floated across the pool, mesmerizing everyone. Though self-proclaimed as “non-professional,” his sound rivalled that of Kenny G.

The saxophonist captivated the guests so much that they begged for an encore during dinner. By the end of the night, he had become an unexpected star of the evening.

Extending booking deadlines and adjusting plans ensured the event reached its full potential.

The unorthodox decision to place a saxophone player in the pool created a magical, unforgettable moment.

By tapping into local artists, we delivered a program that was both engaging and budget-conscious.

Most memorable moments often come from bold, unconventional ideas—and the willingness to say “yes” to the unexpected.

Keywords
Settings: Worldwide

Characters Hoteliers, Guests

Character role Female
Plot Themes Funny Situations with guests, staff, in hotels, on cruise ships

Story tones Humour, Iight, playful

***HOSPITALITY* Chronicles**

**70 Short Essays on Hospitality**

**By Bella Mar**

An eye-opening, packed into seventy short stories memoir, of a life spent in the hotel industry.

Bella never intended to go into the hotel business, her mother wanted her to study and become a doctor. Yet, rising through the ranks, she ended up working in hospitality for more almost 40 years, doing everything from cleaning cabins on the cruise ships to being a General Manager. Hospitality Chronicles are a collection of funny happenings during Bella’s hospitality career, for outsiders they are a playful introduction to hospitality.

The Hospitality Chronicles are funny, authentic, and irreverent chronicle of the highs and lows of hotel and cruise ship life, told by a keenly observant insider who’s seen it all. Prepare to be amused —not to mention the strange activities of the guests, who are sometimes not on their best behaviour. Maintaining a semblance of sanity while working in any department in the hospitality can present a daily challenge.

In this book Bella gives a glimpse into her personal journey in the industry through short stories, the giant wave which picked her up in Germany in 1985 and now seems to have spit her out in Vietnam in 2024, almost 40 years later.

Next Book

How to survive hospitality