

POWER LIST 2017

CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE IN THE
HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY



RAHUL PANDIT

MD & CEO, Ginger Hotels

Sometimes, life comes full circle! And that is the feeling that gets on looking at Rahul Pandit's career graph. Starting as a management trainee with Choice Hotels, he moved to join the Taj Group of Hotels as a resort manager. Subsequently, he worked at Spectramind, a technology company, before his stint at the Intercontinental Hotels Group. He then joined the founding team of Lemon Tree Hotels and later led that business as president and executive director. This life-changing moment came in 2015, when Pandit was appointed as CEO of Roots Corporation, which operates Ginger Hotels, the wholly-owned subsidiary of Tata Group controlled Indian Hotels Company Limited.

The first thing he did on taking charge was understand the budget brand's customers, partners and employees and their aspirations. This was to gain strategic insights as his team propelled the brand forward but also helped tweak the business model to ensure Ginger delivered better returns.

"The impact of these insights is today reflected across the brand's touchpoints - from a holistic approach to development including green fields, leases and management contracts. It has helped accelerate our development pipeline, focus on strengthening our

Under Rahul Pandit's stewardship Ginger Hotel operates 41 properties across 30 cities in India and has a dozen hotels in the pipeline. Its combined inventory would be around 4,500 keys.

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B2C market share and delivering a superior customer service experience. These results have been made possible by the team's constant engagement with associates and an ongoing dialogue with our service partners across the country," Pandit stated.

When Ginger Hotels started operations in 2003, few chains, like Sarovar Hotels and Resorts, were tapping the economy and budget market. Seeing this segment's potential, other brands like The Lemon Tree Hotels, Four Points by Sheraton, ibis, etc, jumped into the fray. Did Ginger get left behind?

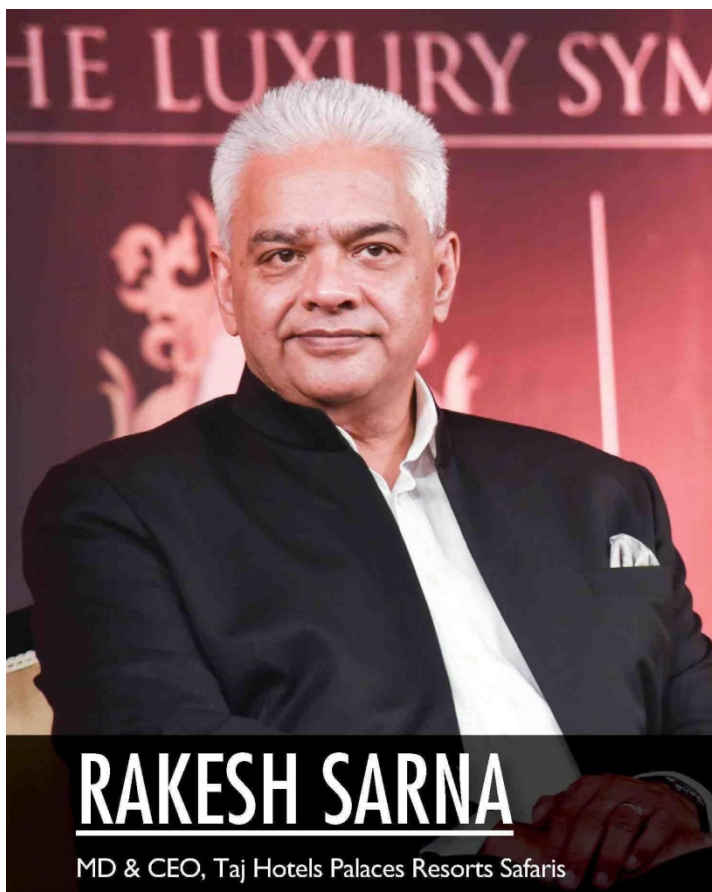
Pandit disagreed. He pointed out that the brand pioneered budget lodging in India and was born of Ratan Tata's vision of creating superior value experience to consumers. "Though the brand has maintained a relatively low retail profile, its constant focus is on the consumer, its national footprint, low development costs and consistent delivery of assured essentials. This has ensured that it is today the country's largest budget brand," he emphasised.

Additionally, he added that different brands have varied approaches towards growth and many that came in had to fold up within few years or are currently on the block. "Instead of targeting the fashionable 'asset-light' approach, we maintained a disciplined and well-rounded investment strategy across owning, leasing and management contracts. We also stayed true to the budget model and not opportunistically strayed into other categories. This has helped us create a tight operating structure which gives our partners hotels with very healthy bottom-lines. Our growth over the last couple of years and the forward pipeline exhibit this strength," he pointed out.

At the same time Pandit has realised that improvising is critical in the hospitality business. Hence, to win over new-age travellers, last year, a new 2.0 design template was created for Ginger Hotels and launched in July at its new 142-room hotel in Mumbai. It also opened a new Ginger Hotel at Gurgaon, besides two in Ahmedabad and is set to launch Ginger Lucknow soon. This would be followed by new launches later this year in Aurangabad, Baroda and Surat.

Leveraging his IT background and Tata's technology arm, TCS, Ginger Hotels has an IT partnership with the latter to support and maintain its technology infrastructure including the data centre. "We are connected across the country on cloud-hosted SAP enterprise besides serving customers through an MPLS PMS. Our partners and employees are connected on their smartphones through the secure FB@Work (Work-Place) platform," noted Pandit. The company is now working towards paper-free processes like check-in and check-out to drive guest satisfaction. After all, Pandit strongly believes that great brands are built by consistently delivering superior customer experience and not by mouthing platitudes.

By Vinita Bhatia



RAKESH SARNA

MD & CEO, Taj Hotels Palaces Resorts Safaris

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Rakesh Sarna has almost four decades of global experience in the hospitality sector in different leadership roles. Prior to joining Indian Hotels Company Ltd (IHCL), Sarna worked with Hyatt Hotels Corporation, where he developed and managed all owned, managed, and franchised hotels across all Hyatt brands as group president, Americas, and as chief operating officer for Hyatt International for five years before that.

At IHCL, he has sought his inspiration from Jarnetji Tata and his vision for the Tata group. Sarna has helped strengthen his legacy and has redefined the Taj brand to truly celebrate India's hospitality heritage while building optimism about its tomorrow.

As managing director and chief executive officer of Taj Hotels Palaces Resorts Safaris, Sarna successfully accomplished a financial turnaround for the group, by focusing on an asset right strategy, being globally reputable as against globally present, digital transformation of the group, and empowering teams apart from a renewed focus on its food and beverage offerings. During his tenure, Sarna's robust turnaround has delivered strong results for all stakeholders. Following divestments of its loss-making properties and reducing the debt burden, the group has emerged financially stronger with a positive EBIDTA and has significantly pared its losses.

As Sarna moves on, many people will remember him for many different reasons. I have my own: Sarna was a man who was never afraid to speak his mind and someone who went beyond the call of duty to reach out.

Sarna has led the company in articulating Tajness, its holistic brand and operations philosophy that now binds together all Taj hotels, and is "inspired by the nobility of the heritage and traditions of India". Tajness assures a sense of authentic heritage and leads to Taj's brand promise of sincerely caring for all stakeholders. With this vision, Sarna has also restructured the Taj brand architecture, focused on creating value for the entire stakeholder ecosystem. The new structure has brought the 98 Taj hotels across 61 destinations in India and around the world under one branded house identity – Taj Hotels Palaces Resorts Safaris.

Under Sarna's guidance IHCL has created a strong pipeline of ideas and plans to take advantage of prevailing growth opportunities. With a renewed focus on India and its adjacent fast growth markets, the Taj brand has expanded to new geographies in the sub-continent and beyond – Amritsar, Shimla, Jim Corbett National Park, the Andamans, Chitwan (Nepal) and Dubai. Taj's industry-first alliance with Hong Kong-based Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts, Warmer Welcomes, is aimed at mutually widening their reach, and offering guests a wide choice of destinations in the two biggest outbound travel markets – China and India.

Sarna's tenure has also seen the culinary offerings of the Taj at its best, with differentiated food experiences for guests and setting benchmarks through a series of culinary experiences. From the most recent events created by Taj's own Michelin stars to bringing back an era of nostalgia by unveiling the new avatar of Shamiana and launching a new gastro pub at Taj Lands End, Mumbai, Taj hotels continue to indulge guests with gourmet experiences.

To connect with its evolving well-travelled contemporary guests, Taj has enhanced its focus on building and expanding its own robust digital infrastructure. For Taj, the traveller experience begins with the company's digital touch points – the all-new tajhotels.com and the new mobile app Taj.live, the company's new social media command centre that enables it to organically engage a wider audience through omnichannel trend tracking and analysis.

As Hotelier India went to press, IHCL announced the appointment of Puneet Chhatwal as the new CEO and MD on August 29. Sarna steps down later this month, leaving Chhatwal to strengthen and expand Taj's position in the market.

As Sarna moves on, many people will remember him for many different reasons. I have my own: Sarna was a man who was never afraid to speak his mind and someone who went beyond the call of duty to reach out. Here's wishing him all the very best in his future endeavours. Wherever he may be, one thing is for sure: we will remain friends.

By Shafquat Ali