BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

Captain Krishnan Nair
The Leela Hotel Group

Many people remember this phrase from the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*. But they probably said it about arid Las Vegas before they built the casinos and it would certainly apply to the Leela Hotel Group and the vision of its founder, Captain Krishnan Nair.

His first hotel was the Leela Mumbai in 1983. He had some 'useless' land not far from the airport and it was a suggestion from his wife, who said 'why don't you build a hotel there so people will not have to suffer the long and chaotic ride into the city?'

Today it is a hugely popular hostelry and is now surrounded by offices, apartments and, not so strangely, by a dozen other hotel brands.

Mumbai was the first of eight palace hotels, city hotels and resorts, with as many more in the pipeline. And they are not just hotels: most are among the grandest and luxurious buildings in India. And all are built in unconventional locations.

The extraordinary thing about Captain Nair is that he did not go into the hotel business until he was 65 years old, an age when most people are thinking about retirement. Just this year, he stepped down as active head of the company and is now known as the Chairman Emeritus. He is, however, still very much involved – at the age of 91.

MillionaireAsia's Graham Pearce meets 'The Chairman'

"What are you wearing to meet the Chairman?" asks the corporate PR lady when we meet at the Leela Mumbai. "The Chairman is very visual."

A confronting question when you have just spent a week or so crawling around monuments, dusty old palaces and busy bazaars – literally in the thick of the 'heat and dust' of India. The meeting was unexpected so it prompted a dash to the suitcase to see what was left – and clean. I should have just asked my butler in the Royal Club at the hotel – he knows everything! "Your white shirt and dark red trousers will be fine," he tells me. Right again, as when the Chairman arrives, he gives me a very obvious once-over to check the whole image. He nods approvingly and sits down. (Thanks, Bibhuti, the best butler in India.)

Captain Nair is one of those people in the world who exude a presence when they walk into a room. He is youthful, practically wrinkle-free and his round glasses add to the effect of groovy agelessness (the inspiration for the spectacles was his political idol and key figure in India's independence, Subhas Chandra Bose).

He is dapper and modern, affable and avuncular. He is wearing a Brioni suit and silk shirt. No tie but a kerchief and the UN Environment Program gold medal in his buttonhole. A glance at his watch is surprising. Not one of your usual brands but a

With the President of India

With the Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama's gift

The Leela Palace Chennai

With the Obamas

beautifully simple lapis and gold one from H. Stern in Brazil; he found it on a visit to Rio.

Travel, in fact, has been a very large part of this man's life.

"I have visited almost every country in the world, seen diverse cities and enjoyed the food," he says. "But the one place that occupies an unforgettable place in my heart is New York. You see my love affair with luxury hotels began on my first fabric-selling trip to New York in the '50s when I stayed at the Waldorf Astoria and it was here that I became inspired to build similar, if not better, hotels in India."

Back to the present day in Mumbai, he is obviously a man who has enjoyed life and it is obvious he is still enjoying it – in his new 'elder statesman' role.

The staff at Jamavar, Leela's Indian restaurant, is fussing over our visit (the Chairman ordered the normally-closed-for-lunch restaurant open especially for our get-together.) But Captain Nair is a simple eater and the food he has ordered is delicious. He has also asked for a bottle of the particular Italian red wine called Solaia, made near Florence, that he loves. Being lunch, I thought a glass of white would be less detrimental to concentration: he orders me a bottle of fine Mersault.

Obviously he is now used to some of the very finest things in life and midway through several concurrent reminiscences, he mentions that it was the wife of his commanding officer in the army, General D. S. Brar, who taught him 'how to be a gentleman.' "I was a country boy and there was very little time for life's niceties until I joined the army," he recalls.

I ask him if life in the army provided a discipline he might apply in the civilian business world?

"Thanks to my life in the army, discipline for me is a lifestyle not just a practice," he states. At 91, I still wake up every morning at five a.m. and start my day with a game of volleyball followed by my regimen at the gym. This includes 10 minutes of cycling. I exert the same military precision when it comes to business meetings or handling changing issues of the day. Nothing bothers me because the army imparted the mindset that we shall overcome and prevail," he says.

As the conversation becomes lively, it is fascinating to meet a man who is a walking reference library of the events and people that have shaped modern India. And he does *not* flatter all of them…'but that is off the record,' he laughs. Through many business and political friendships built up through the years (beginning with V.P Menon, political adviser to India's last Viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten and later to the independent government), he has personally developed along with his country. He became close to every prime minister from Nehru onwards. He actually lunched with Lord Mountbatten in London who, to his credit, noted the discomfort of Mrs. Nair when she was confronted with cutlery. "Don't worry," he said. "We are all eating with our hands."

Through his hotels, he has met just about everyone in the world worth meeting. From presidents, to kings, to cricket heroes, to business magnates, to film stars – to his favourite perhaps, the Dali Lama. "He always stays with us," says Captain Nair. "And we have become great friends. One of my most treasured possessions is a Buddha wrapped in yellow silk and blessed by him. It sits in my office still today."

Most of the well-known people he now meets come to India but he was also fascinated by the pomp of imperial Tokyo when he went to receive his membership of the Global 500 Laureate Roll of Honour by United Nations Environment Program, which was presented to him by Emperor Akihito.

Army days

With sons Vivek and Dinesh

LIFE

Padmabhushan (an Indian Government title for service to the country) Captain (from his army days) Chittarath Poovakkatt (traditional names from his parents' home towns) Krishnan Nair just this year stepped down as executive chairman to become Chairman Emeritus and Founder Chairman of Hotel Leelaventure Limited.

I think on this one occasion, we can be forgiven the cliché that his is a 'rags to riches' story. In fact, Krishnan Nair made his first fortune in what rough and ready New Yorkers indeed christened the 'rag trade.'

The young Krishnan was one of the eight children of a government bill collector in Kerala. He was born on 9 February 1922 and his early education was at a small elementary school in his native village of Kannur. But he was born a rebel and he organized a student union and later joined the Freedom Movement at the age of 13.

In 1942, he got a job as a civilian wireless officer with the military in Abbottabad, now part of Pakistan and recently famous as the place where they killed Osama Bin Laden. Later he joined the Indian Army proper – and army life suited him very well.

But some time in 1951, it was Leela (daughter of a textile manufacturer) who urged him to leave the army (which he regretfully did) and go into business. "What is this career that involves little else but saluting?" she asked.

The following year, he started a handloom marketing company to sell the products of a variety of manufacturers, including his father-in-law. "A group of us formed the All India Handloom Board and tried to reform the handloom sector. We met Mr. Nehru (in 1952) and told him we wanted to modernize the industry and make sure the weavers and everybody got a fair share. The Prime Minister loved the idea," recalls Captain Nair.

It was V. P. Menon again whom he fondly called Uncle VP, who introduced him to Laurence Mitchell, the managing director of a Scottish lace firm. Their agreement was to make lace for the international market. In 1972, Leela Scottish Ltd became India's biggest garment factory.

Around that same time, he became a famous pioneer in marketing Bleeding Madras fabric (the stuff that changes colour after every wash) and joined hands with Brooks Brothers, the American menswear company, to make Bleeding Madras into clothing, a move that led to later clients like Tommy Hilfiger, Wal-Mart, Liz Claiborne and Macy's. "I used to export millions of yards to America; such was the rage for the fabric there," he says.

These were the times he stayed at the Waldorf - the time and the place he had the epiphany that India needed five star hotels that could measure up to any international standards.

Back home, Nair went to the State Bank of India to ask for a loan. He had only 5,000 rupees to his name; everything else was tied up in the textile business. The bank refused on the grounds he would not be able to raise capital so he called upon some American contacts from his textile business network. Some 200 of them contributed $5,000 each – a hefty sum back then and many still hold shares in the company today.

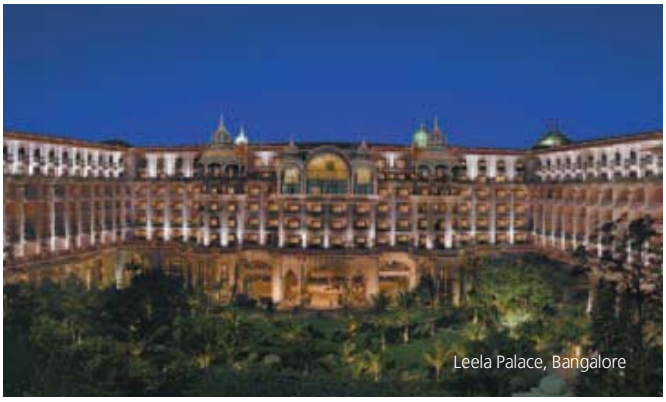
In Bombay, as it then was, he named the hotel Leela after his beloved wife, who is still also his business advisor, supporter and, not least, fabulous cook: some of her recipes are still served in the Jamavar Indian restaurants that are a feature in all his hotels. They have been married for nearly 70 years.

Leela Goa

THE HOTELS

Hotels are obviously a passion more than a business with Captain Krishnan Nair. With the success of the first hotel in Mumbai, he started scouting for other locations: "I went back

Leela Resort, Kovalam


Leela Palace, Bangalore

to Goa around 1990 and I found this piece of land, again not in a conventional location but on the beach down south, with the sea in front, a river behind and a fantastic view of the mountains behind."

"Then the main tourist area was in north Goa but I always thought a little outside the box," he says. "When I built the place, nobody came so I launched a marketing campaign that simply said 'the last man who walked on this beach was Vasco da Gama. Don't you want to be here?' It resulted in not less than a thousand enquiries on the first day. And then the resort was sold out for months."

Today, there are eight luxury Leela properties: in Bangalore, Chennai, Mumbai, Gurgaon (Delhi), Udaipur, Goa, Kovalam and New Delhi: this newest one sits on a coveted piece of land in the capital's Diplomatic Enclave. It was put up for auction and Captain Nair, against fierce competition, was the successful bidder. With the luxurious build, it holds the record as the most expensive hotel in India.

With eight hotels, he could be said to be a small player in India, especially compared with the Taj and Oberoi groups. But the Chairman is not bothered with the competition: "My desire was to create India's most opulent hotel chain with the highest revenue per room. I have achieved that," he says.

No less than eight more a planned – in Jaipur (opens 2014), Agra, Coimbatore and Lake Ashtamudi in Kerala, Dubai and London. He also has his sights set on Jodhpur, Bhartiya City (Bangalore's IT hub), a palace hotel at Supertech's largest mixed-use development at Noida, Jaisalmer, Hyderabad, Pune – and a mysterious fascination still lies with Bali. He smiles and is very reluctant to spill the beans because, just like in India, negotiations for land, renting and the bureaucracy can be tricky. "Let's just say I love the place; I have been there many times and I think a Leela would be a valuable addition to the tourist scene there."

The group now has marketing alliances with German-based Kempinski hotels, the Preferred Hotels & Resorts from the U.S. and is a member of the Global Hotel Alliance based in Geneva.

RISK

In business, especially the luxury and tourism business, there are risks like in no other area (political, natural, financial and, as recent events in Mumbai proved, the possible target of a terrorist attack).

"Risk? Of course in business you are always taking risks. But if you are earnest and honest, you will be all right," says Captain Nair. "Dream big! Believe in yourself. Act on your instincts. There's nothing that you cannot achieve."

At his recent endowment at Jodhpur National University with an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters, he spoke to the graduating students.

"To you, my message is simple and straightforward. Nothing is guaranteed, and everything is possible. Go forth with courage and resilience. Life will not be necessarily smooth – but its script is yours to write."

CREATING LUXURY

Unlike others, Captain Nair has stayed away from middle and budget hotels to focus very much on luxury – just walk into the lobby of any of his hotels, especially the palace brand, and you will be transported to a new and now mostly unreachable world of ambient opulence.

Over the years he has employed the world's top architects, designers, landscape artists and interior decorators. His daughter in law, Madhu, has taken on the responsibility of sourcing the massive supply of antiques, artworks and decorative furniture for the properties. And there is no stinting here. If you look in the garden of the Leela Palace in Delhi, for example, there is a huge bust of a goddess by the artist Satish Gupta. "It cost us almost a crore of rupees," he says. (About $220,000).

All this, and impeccable service, is reflected in the myriad awards Leela has received over the years. In fact, Leela Palace New Delhi has just been named in the *Robb Report's* Best of the Best list.

"Hotels are not heartless mansions but have a soul and a life" – Captain Krishnan Nair.

GREEN

Long before "environment" and "ecosystem" became buzzwords, Captain Nair had a vision for green spaces.

Apart from his UN award, Captain Nair's green moves have earned him awards such as 'Green Hotelier of the Decade' by *Gulf Connoisseur*; the 'Green Hotelier' Award by the Geneva-based International Hotel and Restaurant Association and the Maharana Mewar Foundation's Uday Singh Award for "Outstanding Practical Achievements in the Protection and Improvement of the Environment."

Leela Palace, Chennai

"Maybe this is why my second designation is chief gardener of The Leela Group," he smiles.

"Twenty five years ago, The Leela Mumbai was built in the middle of 100 barren acres. We, my wife Leela and I, actually handpicked plants and flowers, from Plumeria and Banyan trees to dainty lilies and orchids to King and Queen palms, and then decided where to plant each one of them systematically - one sapling at a time. As the saying goes the hands that help are holier than the lips that pray. Our daily gardening slowly turned the whole deserted area into a green oasis which soon began spilling into the adjoining neighborhoods."

"Over the years, Leela and I personally supervised the greening of each hotel. Our dream was to create green havens in the heart of our sprawling cities as well as on our resorts. In fact, we issued an internal mandate from the very start that at least thirty percent of every Leela hotel must be marked as a 'green haven' where instead of using space for extra rooms or business inventories, it must be filled with trees, plants, foliage, and gardens," says Captain Nair.

CSR

Apart from his intense interest in business and ecology, the Captain also spends a great deal of time with his favourite charity.

"The A.K.Nair Memorial Endowment is a forum that celebrates those who have contributed towards advancement of modern India. It also provides scholarship to the sons and daughters of handloom workers and weavers for higher college-level education."

"Every year, the endowment hosts a function in my home town, Kannur, and names the recipient with the honour that rewards matters important to trade and industry, culture, or science," he says proudly.

"This year, each of our properties further strengthened partnerships with local NGOs to ensure charitable donations where uniforms, books and magazines, kitchen utensils are donated to the underprivileged. Each property also launched a training program called *Hunar Se Rozgar Tak*, to create employable skills in young adults. These courses cover diverse skill sets, from food and beverage service to housekeeping to teaching behavior in a global hospitality sense."

OFF DUTY

At 91 (92 in February), Captain Nair can be forgiven for slowing down a little.

With his 'retirement from active duty,' the executive chairmanship has devolved upon his son Vivek, along with the title of Managing Director. His younger son, Dinesh is now Co-Chairman and Joint Managing Director. It seems it will remain a family business as the two brothers are said to have made a gentlemen's agreement not to sell without one giving the other first right of refusal.

"Now the new generation is already involved," says Captain Nair. "Apart from my two sons, my grandchildren have followed me into the business." He is particularly proud of granddaughter Aishwarya who put herself through hotel school in New York and is now the company's corporate food and wine consultant.

I ask him what his advice to the next (and next) generation of Nairs would be in the hotel business.

"Follow your passion and you will overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. Don't do anything anti-national, unethical or irrational and unbecoming of my deepest beliefs. Whatever you do…make me proud."

Meantime, his interest in many other aspects of life has not diminished with the years.

He never forgets his roots in South India, especially its particular form of famous dancing.

"I am a big fan of art forms that reflect the glory of Indian traditions," he says. "For example, Kathakali from Kerala is riveting. The performers with their larger-than-life masks that pulsate with colour are marvellous. And their dancing conveys such drama. For me, it's like watching grand opera."

"Tanjore painting is another favorite and I have been collecting them for years. In fact, I have dedicated an entire wall at the new Leela Palace in Chennai as a tribute to this ancient and classical art form of Tamil Nadu. Two of my personal favorites hang in my office, one in the sitting and another in the dining area".

INDIA

In our (now nearly four-hour long conversation) it is obvious Captain Nair is a very proud Indian. So I venture to ask him for his personal wish for India's future?

"I am Indian above everything else. Though I have visited almost every country in the world, the thought of leaving India, even for a few years has never crossed my mind," he states emphatically.

"I have had an unshakeable faith in India's ability to compete with the best in the world as an equal. But if you ask what I long for personally: firstly, a fully literate India where every child is given a compulsory free education. I wish for a 'green India' that worships nature and the environment as our ancestors did in the earliest known scriptures – the Vedas. A 'world class India!' Beginning with infrastructure: I want a well thought- through network of roads that connects the smallest towns with the biggest cities. A connected India that is so advanced with technology that it outpaces even countries like America that have created technological history ahead of everybody else. And, on a truly personal note, a great nation is judged by many things, including

With Maharaja Gaj Singh of Jodhpur

Captain and Mrs. Nair with the Emperor and Empress of Japan

the hospitality it extends to the world. We are three generations of hoteliers and I like to think our hotels are up there with the best of them."

TODAY

Captain Krishnan Nair cannot seem to retire completely. Every day he makes the leisurely walk from his bungalow to the office he still keeps in the Leela Mumbai. He is still formulating plans; still thinking of ways to improve things; still thinking of new touches – like Le Cirque restaurant in his Delhi hotel. Good food remains a passion.

He does take time, however, for a little personal indulgence. Another passion is for fine cars. He has had many over the years but he has settled on the best of British, a pair of Rolls-Royces.

"I suppose I think back to the days when I had to walk miles each day to high school and how the years have changed things. Now, every evening, I go for a leisurely drive with my wife Leela either in my 1973 Silver Shadow or my new Phantom," he smiles.

It is a pleasure talking to this man – his stories are legion enough for a book (and whisper is there is one under way). Life and business do not seem a trial but a constant pleasure for him. His life must be complicated yet he likes to keep things simple. A good example: he intimates that after we leave, he will hang up his suit and change to his traditional private office attire of kurta and mundu. But the kurta (long shirt) is ivory silk and the mundu (sarong) is hand-woven with a beautiful stripe of gold.

I feel kind of bad admiring them as he then insists his valet bring me a spare of each to take home – with the promise I will send him a photo of me actually wearing them. On second thought, they are a warm (and visual) memory of this friendliest of men, an exuberant participant in this turbulent journey we call life.

Captain Nair has collected countless personal awards over the years but three of the most prestigious came back-to-back in 2011. One was for Lifetime Achievement at the Hotelier India Awards; another the Lifetime Achievement at the *Condé Nast Traveler* Awards. He was also named Hotelier of the Century by the International Hotel & Restaurant Association in Geneva.

But we think the one to go out on came in 2008 when *U.S. Business Week* listed him among the 50 global octogenarians who still 'rock the world'.

Make that nonagenarian!

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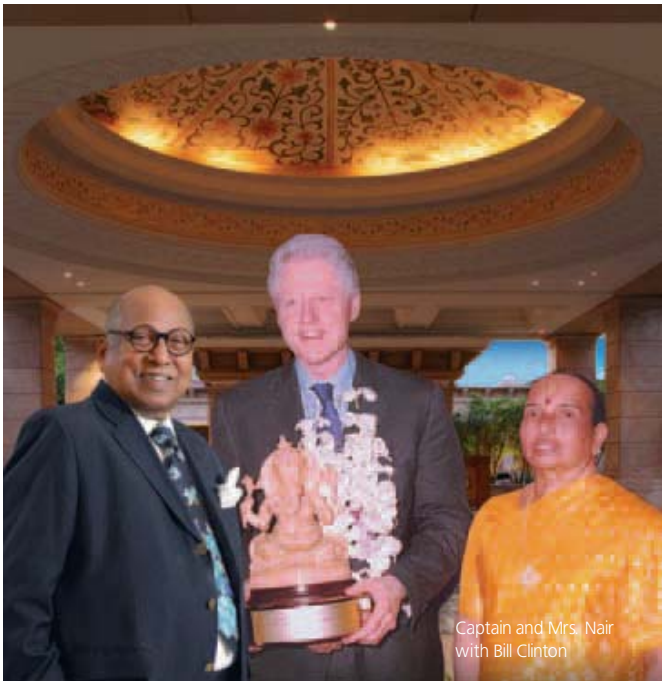
Captain and Mrs. Nair with Bill Clinton

Graham Pearce with Captain Nair in Mumbai