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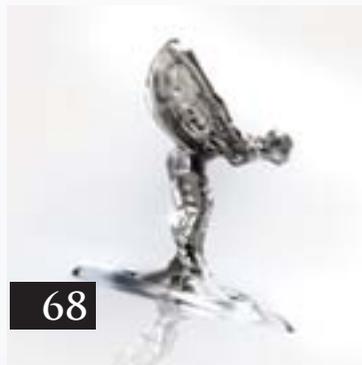
Making success happen

JAHID FAZAL-KARIM • JETCRAFT OWNER & CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

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LUXURY AS A BRAND!

Jane Stanbury, BAM's Global Luxury Correspondent, talks to Anthony McDonald, founder and CEO of Bespoke Hospitality Management Asia

Q: What led you launching the X2 brand in Thailand?

A: I came to Thailand 27 years ago to support the business development of Land Rover and Mini. I then got involved working with several international and Thai companies before developing the hospitality business, Bespoke Hospitality Management Asia. This was a business that my wife, Ms Kaewaji Phaoenchoke, and I invested in, launched, and now run together. My background is the commercial sector, hers is real estate, so the combination provided a strong foundation on which to build a hospitality business.

I believe that it is a real benefit to have a deep knowledge of the culture within which you operate, so being a long-time resident here has been very beneficial. Our understanding of how Thai businesses operate, as well as how the international economy works has been essential to our growth. We now have a team of 35 in our Bangkok head office and we are confident we will continue to scale the business upwards.

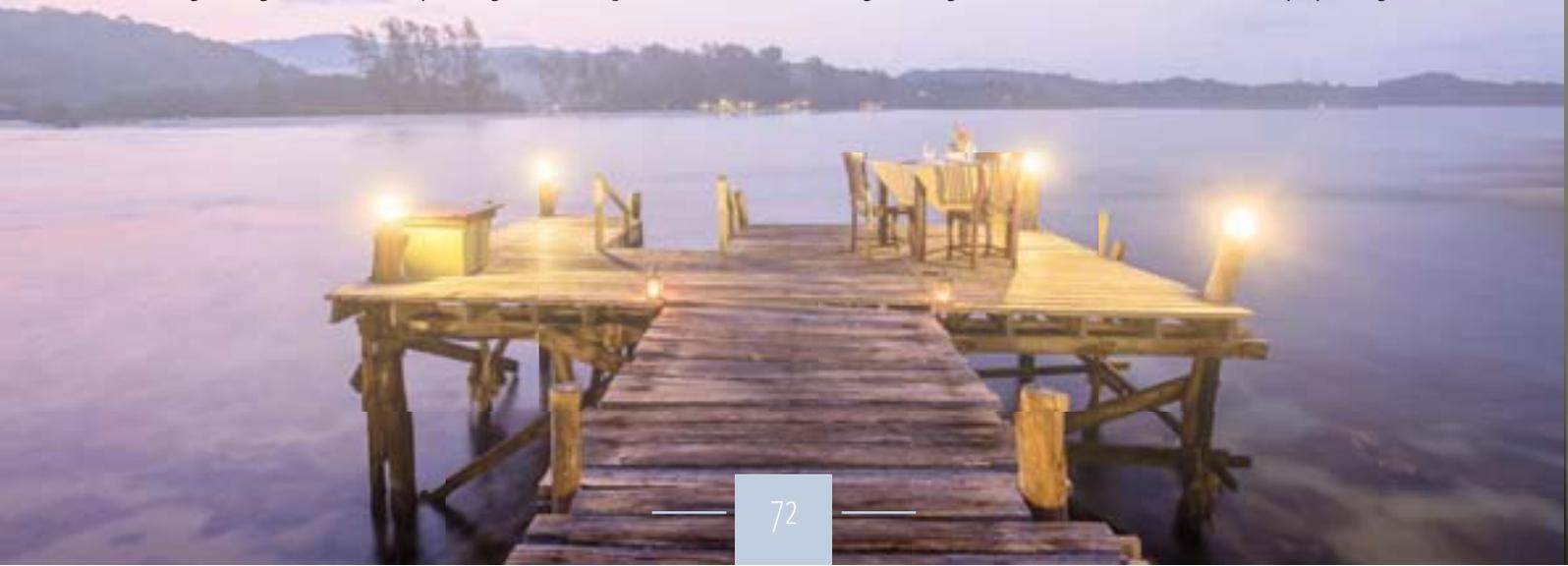
Q: What led you to creating Bespoke Hospitality Management Asia?

A: Many of my roles in the past have related to founding and growing internationally recognised companies. I've

specialised in creating feasibility studies for new business; worked on financial planning; generated funding; sourced properties for business and been involved in evaluation and acquisition; as well as hotel and resort design. I didn't plan to be a hotel operator but over the years I began to receive requests from various hotel owners who recognised that this combination of experience offers them practical and bespoke solutions to help them bring their visions to reality. So, that's how I became involved.

Q: What encouraged you to develop the X2 brand?

A: I felt like I was plodding along working on various hotel projects as part of the Bespoke Hospitality Management Business when I had that 'light bulb' moment. We recognised that travellers wanted something more than the traditional luxury offering and that they'd become disillusioned with some of the over-the-top lavish opulence. This is where we started to define X2 – pronounced 'Cross-to' - as not just a name, but a way of experiencing life and travel. The idea was to encourage high net worth travellers to 'Cross to' another way of travelling, luxurious but with a real life-style feel! It began as a life-style built around design hotels and is now the largest design hotel chain in Asia. It is "Luxury by Design"





“ I believe that it is a real benefit to have a deep knowledge of the culture within which you operate, so being a long-time resident here has been very beneficial.”



Our management understands that the twenty-first century luxury traveller identifies not just with a lifestyle, but with experiential, authentic travel, and wants to be treated honestly and transparently. That is the vision for the business to create a brand that combines the lifestyle aspirations of the clients and the culture of the destination to deliver an authentic, complete experience that provides a sense of place, whilst satisfying the needs of the client. X2 guests like to explore and take the roads less travelled but to do so in stylish luxury.

Q: How are you maximising the brand to best effect?

A: We recognised it was a brand that we could easily transfer across a wider product range than just hotels. That is when we started to develop the extended business which incorporates not just the properties but luxury yachts, our private jet offering, and our private residences. It even extends to our transfers between these options, whether that be by helicopter, car or river boat. It really is about creating that luxurious end-to-end experience for our extremely discerning, wealthy client base.

We developed the X2 concept over a period of time and opened our first property, X2 Kui Buri resort, on 5 December 2007. As we started to open more properties we learned that guests, business partners and friends, all loved the brand. They said that they found it sexy, exciting and different. The market reacted incredibly well to it and we thought, if we've created a brand, within the region, that is so well liked, why not expand it. Why constrict our vision to just hotels? Let's broaden it and make the brand all about hospitality.



In the process, we've branded everything from our water to our coffee. Our restaurants and bars are all called 4k, pronounced 'Fork' and they are a sub-brand within X2. We decided to look at a full 360 view to create a brand we could use for related businesses, not just accommodation. It also made us think about looking further afield too.

Q: So, what is the vision for the X2 brand and how are you fulfilling it?

A: Kui Buri and Koh Samui were the first two X2 resorts we launched and from there we defined what other hospitality offerings we could bring inside the X2 brand. We felt the concept of design and lifestyle didn't really exist in the region. Yes, there were all the traditional palm tree resorts which are appealing, but we wanted to create our own space, a collection of design hotels that were not run of the mill and that were defined by this difference.



The business strategy was to deliver luxury in a different sense to a newly wealthy clientele looking for a distinct definition of luxury that not only delivered the expected details but also redefined the space in which they lodge. We wanted our clients to cross a bridge from the traditional luxury hospitality sector to our brand. It's all about space, blending with nature, exclusivity and privacy. The privacy is essential and most of our properties feature private pool villas at the exclusive resorts. That is the DNA of our brand and it has struck a chord with our client base.



“Our objective is to keep growing and to grow in the region not just Thailand. There are plans to add half a dozen more projects, hotels and villas, in Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Sri Lanka. It’s a very exciting time for X2.”





Q: How is business for you today – is it going as you expected?

A: It's going well actually. We have a real mix of clients which reflects the growing number of wealthy South East Asian travellers. Thailand itself is consistently ranked high in many of the tourism surveys and the demographics of the visitors have changed in recent years with many more Chinese and local regional travellers now visiting the nation. We are tapping into that newly wealthy Asian market.

We have built up an impressive network of connections in the region and that has also been the springboard for our customer base, so I'd say we are more weighted to attracting regional customers. However, we see this region as offering enormous potential as travellers from neighbouring countries are attracted to our specific lifestyle brand.

We also recognise that Thailand is a truly global destination and as such we are beginning to reach out more and more to international audiences. We're forming relationships with leading luxury travel operators and are beginning to attend the dedicated luxury travel markets, such as the International Luxury Travel Market in Cannes. We want to make sure we are appealing to the world's high net worth individuals.

Q: Why does X2 appeal to this market?

A: Through our X2 brand we are creating an elite set of experiences, destinations and transport options for our clients that cannot be found elsewhere in the region. The latest addition to our offering is our week-long air tour of Thailand by private jet. The tour has been created to pull together all the elements of our offering as it is the ultimate in the single branded experience. We have wrapped up the air transport, villas, and our wonderful resorts into a single offering. It takes in seven destinations over seven days including Hua Hin's rolling vineyards, the exotic Andaman Islands, the jungles of Kanchanaburi, spiritual Chiang Mai and incorporates a cruise around the Gulf of Thailand on one of our luxury yachts. Guests stay in either private pool villas at our luxury resorts or in private residences, with one night spent on one of our three luxurious yachts.

The branded jet is a Gulfstream G200 and as a super midsize jet it perfectly combines comfort, performance, safety and cabin speed. The cabin is divided into two separate luxurious areas with a state of the art entertainment system and our own X2 Flight Attendant. It is owned by a personal friend and operated by M Jets which has a similar brand ethos to us, so we know our passengers will travel in safety, luxury and style. In addition, we can also tailor the trip to our client's needs, so we can use smaller or larger aircraft depending on the client's preferences, which we then brand as X2. It is the ultimate in what we do and exemplifies what X2 is all about.

Q: What is the plan for the next five years?

A: Quite simply our objective is to keep growing and to grow in the region not just Thailand. There are plans to add half a dozen more projects, hotels and villas, in Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Sri Lanka. It's a very exciting time for X2. |BAM

