

PRESTIGE

THE CELEBRATION ISSUE

SINGAPORE
NOVEMBER 2023

RACE WONG

DREAM HOMES DO COME TRUE

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Sonu Shivdasani and his wife Eva Malmström opened their first resort Soneva Fushi (top right) in 1995.



SONU'S SECRET

The next Soneva resort in the Maldives will raise luxury standards in the archipelago, as Soneva CEO Sonu Shivdasani reveals while reflecting on his career as a hotelier.

Words: MAVIS TEO

Come next January, Sonu Shivdasani will finally realise a dream that is 30 years in the making. He will open Soneva Secret, a 14-villa resort on Haa Dhaalu Atoll, the most remote islands in the Maldives.

Since he opened Soneva Fushi in 1995 with his wife Eva Malmström on the deserted Maldivian island of Kunfunadhoo, Shivdasani has dreamt of building an ultra-luxe resort in the archipelago that provides bespoke services that, according to him, is peerless in luxury.

Each villa in Soneva Secret will have its own private chef and a roof that slides open to reveal star-strewn skies. The resort houses

Crusoe Villas, which are accessible only by boat, and the Castaway, a floating villa that can be moved from one site to another.

While Shivdasani is tight-lipped about Castaway's mechanics, he says that guests staying there can wake up at any of Soneva Secret's five designated sites. The ability to dream big and realise fantasies is a trait that has got Shivdasani this far in his career as a hotelier. He chats to *Prestige* during a stopover in Singapore to meet investors.

KNOW YOUR NICHE

Shivdasani's story started with Soneva Fushi. "Eva introduced me to the Maldives in 1987," he recalls. "We love it so much that

we decided to lease an island in 1990." Five years later, the couple — neither of whom had any hospitality background — opened their first resort, Soneva Fushi. And thus began the first boutique luxury hotel brand in the Maldives dedicated to sustainability. His leap of faith paid off.

"We opened Soneva Fushi in October 1995, and were fully booked for Christmas. By the end of March 1996, the end of our first financial year, we had made a profit," recalls Shivdasani, 58, beaming at the memory.

It seems that he has the Midas touch. In the same year that Soneva Fushi welcomed its first guests, he and Malmström launched Six Senses Resorts & Spas, followed by the



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Evason hotels group in 1997, with properties across South-east Asia and Europe. By 2011, Six Senses had become a globally-recognised luxury spa and resorts chain. In 2012, the couple sold Evason and Six Senses – as part of their “One Owner, One Operator, One Philosophy” strategy – and focus on Soneva.

OUTSIDER'S MINDSET

“Sometimes it’s better that way,” Shivdasani says about his decision to go boutique. “I have an outsider’s mindset.” To be sure, he has an uncanny ability to step away from convention and see things from a different perspective. Prior to launching Soneva, his only work experience after graduating from Oxford with a Master’s degree in English literature was at the Geneva branch of his father’s trading company.

In decision-making, he was more guided by passion and ethics than hospitality principles or formal training. So far, this

approach has served him well. Shivdasani was honoured this year as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for his service to tourism, sustainability and charity.

Shivdasani and Malmström founded the Soneva Foundation in 2010 to support community projects with social, environmental and economic impact.

Two months ago, he was awarded the SevenRooms Icon Award at the inaugural World’s Best 50 Hotels ceremony.

The couple have pioneered quite a few concepts in hospitality, such as the “barefoot luxury” concept, where guests are encouraged to kick off their shoes upon arrival at a Soneva resort, sink their toes into the sand and relax.

Sustainability underpins all operations at Soneva resorts. In 2008, before carbon tax gained momentum, Shivdasani introduced a carbon levy on all guest stays. The proceeds have funded the planting of 500,000 trees in



Soneva guests get to experience Shivdasani’s vision of refined, conscientious luxury.

Thailand, the distribution of energy-efficient cookstoves to almost 300,000 people in rural communities in Myanmar and Darfur, and the construction of a 1.5-megawatt windmill in India.

As more hotels jump on the sustainable luxury bandwagon, Shivdasani redefines the meaning of luxury. “Providing intelligent luxury is giving guests the things they desire that cannot be bought with money,” he explains. “For example, a tycoon living in London may live in a multimillion-dollar mansion but he is not able to enjoy an outdoor shower surrounded by palm trees.

“Intelligent tourism is about creating an

environment for people who like to holiday in luxury but also want to protect and improve the destination at the same time.” According to a survey by travel platform Virtuoso, 78 per cent of luxury customers are interested in sustainable travel.

STAY TO HEAL

In 2018, Shivdasani was diagnosed with Stage IV Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, with a 50 per cent chance of recovery with chemotherapy. He checked into an integrated Istanbul hospital, acknowledging that the move upset his doctor in London.

“I spoke to 20 people who had cancer

and found that most who had received traditional Western medical treatment in top cancer hospitals didn’t have good results,” he explains.

The Turkish hospital used an integrative approach to treat cancer, combining chemotherapy with other treatments such as a modified diet and complementary therapies to support the immune system. Shivdasani’s cancer went into remission. “I believe complementary therapies played an important role in my recovery and I told Eva that we must do more to help others.”

His findings were integrated into Soneva Soul, the spa at Soneva resorts, which is now

staffed with a doctor who combines ancient healing philosophies with the latest medical technologies such as high-dose vitamin therapy, platelet-rich plasma and hyperbaric oxygen treatments.

After Singapore, Shivdasani will head to Japan, where possibly more than one Soneva will open in the coming years. “But Andermatt will happen first – after Soneva Secret,” he shares, referring to his next property.

Whether its in Japan or Switzerland, guests of Soneva can be sure they will experience Shivdasani’s vision of refined, conscientious luxury. □