

LUXURY WITHOUT COMPROMISE

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The Zen Issue

Perfect peace, perfect place



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FEATURING

Laguna National Golf Resort Club



ON THE EDGE

Ho Kwon Ping, founder and executive chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings, on the necessity of staying edgy.

Words: Joel Chua

THE ROOTS OF Banyan Tree Holdings date back to when a young Ho Kwon Ping and his wife – he a budding journalist, she a graduate student – lived in a fishing village called Banyan Tree Bay in Hong Kong. Idyllic times with “no cars, just bicycles”, which proved to be one of the most formative periods of their lives. To them, Banyan Tree evoked the romance of travel; the discovery of different cultures and the beauty of the natural environment. As a concept, however, it was “never really well written down”, Ho reveals. “We had to find our way and discover what we wanted – and had – to do, which happily coincided with what people were leaning towards.”

And he was right. Today, Banyan Tree is one of the world's leading independent, multi-branded hospitality groups, with additions like Banyan Tree Escape, Banyan Tree Veya, Dhawa, Garrya and Homm under its fold. Its upward trajectory tells of a certain willingness – resolve, even – to live, as it were, on the edge, not afraid of testing the water and stretching beyond its comfort zone in order to stay relevant.

A brand is never established just once. It's very much alive and organic, needing to be fed and nurtured. There are real risks to any brand and there's no guarantee that a successful brand today will sit at the top tomorrow. If you think that your brand consists only of a logo, pricing and advertising, then it's going to die out very quickly. Never assume that just because you've created something great, people will love it forever.

To continually reinvent itself, a brand needs to be edgy rather than stodgy. Edginess is the ability to constantly interact with your consumer, so there's a healthy, ongoing conversation about the direction a brand should be headed towards. A brand can try to be edgy, but if consumers think it's being cliché, it must also be ready to pivot. We

all know of cases where brands have become too commercialised. The key is to identify a brand's core attributes so it can stay loyal to its basic character while being innovative enough to attract new consumers.

Success means living a purposeful life and feeling you've achieved something that – in your own small way – you're proud of. In the case of Banyan Tree, our success is rooted in the fact that we're a brand of Asian origins. There aren't many Asian hospitality brands that have succeeded internationally. Ultimately, this means that we've been able to remove many of the existing glass ceilings in the industry – such as appointing the first Thai woman to be the general manager of a luxury hotel (Nopparat Aumpa at Banyan Tree Bangkok) – and challenged the unspoken ‘rule’ that luxury tourism is headed by Westerners.

A common mistake people make is to equate a good manager with a good leader. It's crucial to recognise that there's a vital difference between the two. A good manager is someone who optimises whatever resources they have to achieve the greatest measurable result. A good leader, on the other hand, is someone who can inspire people to aspire beyond themselves. Whether in politics, religion or business, a good leader inspires others to look beyond their own selfish needs, so they're willing to come together and work as a community.

Finding Zen involves an acute awareness of your present state so you're mindful of everything you do. It doesn't have to entail grand notions of cosmic unity. Rather, it's about practising mindfulness even in the mundane occurrences of everyday life. When people aren't mindful, they tend to live a life that's blunted and relatively shallow, like a robot. Throughout the day, I try to have moments of stillness where I'm highly aware of what I'm doing so I'm more perceptive of the world around me. ■