Personalised hospitality in Kuching, Sarawak

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After opening less than one year ago, The Ranee, located in the heart of Kuching along the Sarawak River, says it has developed a niche for itself catering to visitors looking for a more personalised experience. As a pioneer of boutique hotels in Sarawak, The Ranee has brought a whole new meaning to hospitality in Kuching through its unique style of luxury. Inside Investor asked Rosemarie Wong, managing director of The Ranee, about the hotel's involvement in hosting business travelers.

Q: Why did you name your hotel after Margeret Brooke, the second Ranee of Sarawak?

A: There are several decorative pieces in the boutique that have this royal feel to them in a way which would be accepted by the wife of a rajah, a ranee. The large iron door we have in the main lobby is taken from an old fort, for example. The royal title, ranee, is especially important in Sarawak because of its history, recalling a time when dynastic families from the UK ruled Borneo.

Q: Where do the majority of your guests come from and how would you classify them?

A: The majority of our guests come from EU countries, the UK, Australia, the US and Singapore. They tend to be either young or pensioners. If they are young, they are professionals who are looking for something different, while the retirees are looking to explore Asia. Occasionally, some guests have stayed up to two weeks, so you could say we don't just attract your one-day stop-and-go type of tourists. We have even received guests from the UK that were ex-British Army officers who previously served in Sarawak, returning to reminisce on their past experiences.

Q: The Ranee is a pioneer in the Kuching boutique hotel segment. Why did you choose a boutique-style hotel?

A: Although there are boutique-style hotels in Kuching, we wanted to be the pioneer in the niche market for boutique-style luxury hotels – with that touch of class, hospitality, ambience and décor found nowhere else in Kuching. And with a perfect location right in the midst of tourist spots, The Ranee Boutique Suites was born. Under our Caldecott group of companies, it has always been our vision to be on the forefront of some industries, such as our Arena Sukan Multi Sports Complex – two large (and soon to expand to three) standalone buildings, housing nine badminton courts, four futsal courts, an Activities Room and a 24-hour fitness gym (the first 24-hour gym in Kuching).

Q: Considering the potential that MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions) has in Kuching, how would you consider handling this segment and developing the hotel that direction?

A: Considering how MICE tourists are a growing segment, in comparison to mainstream hotels, The Ranee can offer a positive atypical experience with a more personalised and mellow vibe, an attribute best visualised through our unique rooms, which are each customised and completely different from one another. So far, The Ranee has been approached by a couple of conference organisations that asked if we would like to be listed down as the appointed boutique hotel for their participants. There has been a lot of keen interest in conference organisers wanting to list The Ranee as one of their appointed boutique hotel for their overseas participants. With a built-in projection screen and projector that can be used for power point presentations, The Ranee is capable of hosting intimate cocktail receptions, product launches, small events, team building, informal business functions, exclusive fashion shows - all on a discreet scale. Visitors/corporates can also book the entire hotel with all its 24 rooms for any event or function.

Q: What do you consider the largest challenge in Kuching's hospitality industry?

A: Flight connectivity is by far the largest challenge for us so far. The fact that there are no direct flights to Kuching from major international airports means that tourists have to transit in Kuala Lumpur, Kota Kinabalu or Singapore. Additionally, we suffer from a severe manpower shortage. Those experienced in the hospitality industry are working overseas or on international cruise ships. Hence whenever a new hotel opens in Kuching, we see a great shift of staff in the industry. I hope the government can implement a long-term vision plan for tourism that can be followed through despite cabinet reshuffles.

Q: What is The Ranee's reception by travel partners?

A: AirAsia just published an exciting article on The Ranee, and, even though we are a newcomer to the boutique hotel industry, we have been very well received and perceived by our guests and business travelers as seen through our comments on Trip Advisor, which is the leading website in travel recommendations. We're also industry partners with other online travel agents, such as Agoda, Bookings.com, Expedia, Wotif Group (Asia Webs, Late Stay) and Asia Rooms (Late Rooms), etc. Of course we also work closely with our local and overseas travel agents to try and promote The Ranee and more importantly Sarawak. Guests are always pleasantly surprised with what Kuching has to offer; it's a bit of a hidden gem – the friendliness of our locals and nostalgic old charm as reflected in our heritage buildings and laid back lifestyle captivates visitors, yet we remain connected on an international platform. Come experience it all for yourself!

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