

TRAVEL WEEKLY ASIA

Making A Difference

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Asia's Integrated Resorts

These massively entertaining wonderlands offer an assemblage of activities suited for the young and old alike. Here, we bring you the latest updates.

Elegance and creativity go hand-in-hand in Hanoi

Do Van Dan founded Vietnam's Elegance Hotels Group, starting with a small property in Hanoi's Old Quarter and reaching seven boutique hotels and a luxury Hoi An resort today. And there's more to come.

By Ian Jarrett



"We are able to combine a five-star experience with a down-to-earth personality."

– Do Van Dan, founder, Elegance Hotels Group

How was Elegance Hospitality group born?

I guess you could say that my journey has been a classic tale of rags to riches. I was born into a poor farming family just outside Hanoi. Although my father worked very hard to support my mother and my siblings, there was not a lot of spare money around to fund our studies.

As such, I had to work long hours

in a series of part time jobs to save money. I even gave up my dream of becoming an architect because I could not afford the university fees. As I was working in hotels, I could see the huge potential for growth of a quality product in Hanoi and that became my focus.

Eventually, I managed to save enough money to invest in a small property in the Old Quarter and the

business has blossomed from there.

I am pleased to say that we are now one of the most successful hotel chains in Vietnam with seven boutique hotels in Hanoi and one luxury resort in Hoi An.

How would you describe your role?

In the early days, I rolled up my sleeves and got involved in everything. I realised I needed to have experience in each and every area, as the team we had at that time was so small. As we started opening more properties, I could not multi-task to quite the same extent.

At first, it was difficult to let go and I needed to be very careful not to micromanage. Now, in my role as group chairman, I am the chief strategist and face of the business: the ideas man and the person overseeing the Elegance Hotel Group brand.

How have you created something different?

When we launched our first property, consistency of service and quality of design were not serious priorities for the majority of hoteliers in Hanoi.

We created something new right from the start.

We got creative with the look and feel of our hotel. Taking a forward thinking approach enabled us take a lead in developing what we knew Hanoi needed. Now we are viewed as a trendsetter.

We are able to combine a five-star experience with a down-to-earth personality.

What's more important – service or product?

We cannot have one without the other. However, if I am pushed to choose, at the end of the day, a guest looks for tangible criteria when booking a hotel so the product itself has to be excellent.

You are very hands-on in running the group. What does this involve?

I lead on strategy so I need to be fully aware of what is going on daily in every property. I also believe in working by example. For example, when we opened the new east wing at La Siesta Resort & Spa in Hoi An, I was there with the housekeeping and maintenance teams cleaning and helping with the finishing touches.

What is your approach to getting the best out of people?

Although I think it is important to demonstrate strong leadership, I also believe that a consultative style of management can achieve better results. Our employees have opportunities to better themselves as part of close-knit family.

What is your business philosophy?

I believe that every successful business has a fundamental core philosophy. And for EHG, it is the goal of attaining perfection in customer service.

What are the issues that need addressing in tourism in Vietnam?

Unlike regional rivals such as Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, our cities are not major hubs for air travel. So we have to battle against that situation.

Another issue is Vietnam's reputation for "rip-offs" and scams. Tourists complain of overcharging and inconsistency in prices and services.

Also, the hotel industry here lacks a systematic universal rating system. Very often facilities, standards and services do not meet the expectations of guests. Another issue is over-exploitation and over-development. There needs to be a more systematic approach to tourism country-wide. ■