

The Roads We Travel

by Bernard VanCuylenburg (Melbourne)

Over the years you and I have exchanged travelogues of our journeys to far flung destinations which have been mutually nurturing, soul satisfying and at the same time creating a greater thirst for those far horizons....In August this year I did an eighteen day archaeological tour to the land of the Inca - Peru - which ranks as one of the best trips I have ever done. However, a very special journey I made to Sri Lanka - quite unexpectedly, hardly two weeks after I returned from Peru is one which will forever remain etched in my memory. To set the scene for this travel odyssey I have to wind the clock back to my working days in Sri Lanka because that is where this fairy tale had its genesis.

The Company I worked for was Mercantile Investments Limited. To be specific this was the 'Mother Company' as I liked to refer to her, because I was attached to one of the Hotels of this Company namely the Nilaveli Beach Hotel, at Nilaveli, eleven miles from Trincomalee. The other hotels in the group are the Tangerine Beach Hotel, the 5 - Star Royal Palms hotel in Kalutara, and the 5 Star Grand hotel in Nuwaraeliya. When I joined Nilaveli Beach Hotels Limited in March 1973, I was the first employee of the company, and the hotel was then under construction. It had a 'soft opening' towards the end of March 1974 with 29 rooms. On the 20th September 1974, the hotel was officially declared opened by the then Minister of tourism, the Hon.P.B.G.Kalugalle. THE NILAVELI BEACH HOTEL WAS THE FIRST CEYLON TOURIST BOARD APPROVED HOTEL ON THE EAST COAST. My Boss was Mr.George Ondaatjie the Chairman of the Group, but he was more than that. Over the years he was my mentor, my counsellor, and also a very bright guiding light on a career path which still holds very precious memories for me to this day. I joined the company as a 'Travel Assistant' and in just four years was promoted to Administrative Manager. As I once said, he was an employee's dream.

Hardly a week after I returned from Peru I received an invitation from the present Managing Director of Nilaveli Beach Hotels (PVT)Limited, Mr.Travice Ondaatjie to join in the fortieth anniversary celebrations of the hotel which was to be held on the 20th September. I acquiesced with pleasure and took off for the resplendent isle on the 16th September. My former employers rolled out the proverbial red carpet of welcome for me, and this time the carpet had a very dark shade of red. This was a welcome from the heart and I was deeply touched. On the 19th September we took off for Nilaveli by plane from Ratmalana, thanks to an air service operated by the Air Force and reached China Bay airport Trincomalee, in 45 minutes ! At the hotel "Let the celebrations begin !" was the buzz word of the day. There were a range of activities lined up for all to enjoy- a surfing competition, a fishing competition, and a swimming competition to mention a few. All these were preceeded by religious activities catering to all faiths which were held over a two day period. Saturday the 20th - the actual day of the anniversary - was a typical Nilaveli day, with Mother Nature firmly on our side. Nature ran riot with her paintbrush painting the landscape with radiant colours

no artist could depict on a canvas.....Golden sunshine, colours of varying shades of green highlighting the lush foliage of the beautiful gardens of the hotel, a deep blue sea , a darker blue sky above and white silver sands on a beach that holiday makers dream about. I recall one visitor telling me many years ago that this was the only hotel in his opinion that looked better than any picture post card ! From 11.00 pm a three piece jazz band entertained guests and invitees to toe tapping music at the beach bar where brunch was served. The highlight of the evening was a cordon bleu buffet dinner served by the beach followed by a dazzling fireworks display which enchanted everyone present. Celebrations on this very romantic and memorable evening went on deep into the night.

The following day commenced with Holy Mass at 9.00 am, followed by a buffet breakfast. There was a tree planting ceremony in which my former Boss and Chairman of the Group Mr.George Ondaatjie participated. The minor staff of the hotel were then treated to a taste bud tingling buffet lunch in the restaurant, after which employees who had served a period of 25 years and over, were presented with a gold sovereign and a Long Service Award in appreciation of their dedicated service by Mr.Travice Ondaatjie, the Managing Director of Nilaveli Beach Hotel (PVT) Limited. This special anniversary lunch is an annual event in the hotels belonging to the group, and is usually served on "Staff Day" - it is an indication of the strong bond which the hotels have with their employees.



From Nilaveli my next port of call was the luxurious Tangerine Beach Hotel in Kalutara and in the course of my stay here I also visited the 5 Star Royal Palms hotel next door. Both hotels are a touch of Paradise in their own right with many superlative features too numerous to enumerate in this article. On the 27th September I found myself at the Colombo Fort railway station waiting to board the "Udarata Menike" to Nanuoya. An article which I wrote about this train a few months ago went viral much to my astonishment, and I received requests from readers in the USA and Canada for copies. This time, thanks to my former workplace I was riding the rails in style. This train has an 'Observation Car' at the rear, but behind the locomotive there are two luxury compartments classed Super De-Luxe and De-Luxe, which as the advertisement states is "Train travel

redefined". Finding myself in seat number 3D of the De-Luxe compartment I coined the phrase the "Dreamliner of the rails.....". The compartment is spotlessly clean with a complement of 48 passengers in luxury cushioned seats and there is a staff of two who cater to one's every need. Meals are served in your seat which are similar to the seating in an airliner, plus there is tea and coffee on demand at any time. The spectacular scenery on this journey does the rest. This particular train journey from Colombo to Badulla should rank as one of the great train journeys of the world if only the authorities concerned fine tune their act, and initiate an effective advertising and marketing campaign through Sri Lankan embassies overseas.



The Grand Hotel (Nuwara Eliya)

From Nanuoya I was picked up by car for the short drive to the magnificent Grand Hotel, Nuwaraeliya. Stepping into this hotel which is appropriately named, I found myself in a wonderland of light, exquisite decor, elegant corridors, and halls with an ambience of colonial charm and modern comfort - in short a dreamworld designed to satisfy the most discerning traveller. The hotel has a Thai restaurant, an Indian restaurant, plus a very popular Tea Lounge serving up a "high Tea" every afternoon. So popular is the latter that I had to wait for over eight minutes to get a seat one afternoon when I fancied the cup that cheers. Apart from the delectable tea that is served, the highlight of the "High Tea" is the range of pastries and savouries served which are a gastronomic delight. By the time this article is complete the new Coffee Shop which was scheduled to open on the 12th October should be doing wonders with the little red bean to satisfy the most fastidious coffee drinker or caffeine cravers. The renovated rooms tastefully designed and furnished, plus the cordon bleu meals by a Chef serving up a symphony of culinary delights to tease and titillate the palate, will only enhance one's holiday. The spectacular tourist attractions in the vicinity are also a drawcard for many visitors. There is also a treasure trove of excellent photographs of the Grand Hotel in its heyday and colonial grandeur down the ages, right down to the present day highlighting the past history of the hotel.

Include these hotels on your itinerary when you next plan to visit Sri Lanka - you will not be disappointed. At the end of my visit I was deeply humbled and felt very honoured when I was offered a place on the Board of Directors of Nilaveli Beach Hotels (PVT) Limited. This was finalised at a special board meeting held at the Head office when I was appointed an honorary Director. I feel very proud to have worked for this great Company

which nurtured and bound its staff to realise their full potential. And this is one Organisation which - as I observed in my working years - took the word "Philanthropy" to new dimensions. The word 'generosity' had no limits as I observed working with my former Boss Mr. George Ondaatje. Many benefited from his benevolence and I remember coining a phrase at the time to the effect that "his right hand did not know what his right hand was doing!".

There is also a strong Antonian link with this Company. Mihindu Keerthiratne was the architect of the Nilaveli Beach Hotel and Tangerine Beach Hotels. The current President of the Old Antonians Club in Melbourne Afzal Laphir, did the structural engineering work on the Royal Palms hotel when he worked for Mihindu Keerthiratne Associates. Neville Paul was the first Manager of the Royal Palms Hotel, and then later at Nilaveli Beach Hotel. Gary Alston was the Assistant Chef at Nilaveli Beach Hotel, and Blair Blom was the Housekeeper in the mid seventies and early eighties. Britto Singharayer was the Resident Engineer at Tangerine Beach Hotel during its construction and thereafter. Anthonians all! As often happens, all these persons mentioned have now gone their separate ways down life's road. Which is why I find myself writing this article from Australia which I now call "Home"!

Picture those "Red sails in the sunset" at the close of a long day. Then linger on by the Beach Bar at Nilaveli Beach Hotel as the gold of the day surrenders to the blue of the night. Let your imagination drift away and you will see those silver sails on moonlit waters.....Forget about the Honolulu moon or the Carolina moon waxed lyrical in song. It is the Nilaveli Moon which will weave its magic spell on you, bathing the landscape in surreal light. And as the waves gently lap the sandy shore and the wind softly caresses your face you will drift off to slumberland. But when the blue of the night gives way to the gold of the dawn or, as I like to put it 'when softly dawns the golden light', you awaken to another magical day full of promise in this Shangrila by the beach - The Nilaveli Beach Hotel. The bounties of nature and this Hotel work in tandem to create your dream. It is a priceless experience. I can still 'hear' those waves beat upon a far and distant lonely island shore - Pigeon Island - a short distance away from the hotel..... It is your dream. You can make it happen.

I conclude with a slight variation to the famous lines by the Poet, Robert Frost

" I wrote this 'story' with a sigh
As ages and ages hence
Two roads diverged in a wood - and I
I took the one less travelled by
And that has made all the difference.....to me"

I am so proud to have worked for Nilaveli Beach Hotels (PVT) Limited and was the first member of their staff. In some way, I still am because although I left the services of this fine Company as life destined, the Company and all that it stands for never left me. With apologies to the Poet Robert Frost, I wrote this article with more than a sigh - I crafted it engulfed by waves of nostalgia.