

# THE RISE OF THE KAMAT SCION



Vishal Vithal Kamat, Executive Director of Kamat Hotels, talks to Hotelier India about how he started working from I3, his passion for hospitality, steering the illustrious 'Kamat' brand and more...

BY VINODINI RAO

When legendary restaurateur Dr Vithal Kamat (of the famous Kamat chain of restaurants) opened Asia's first ecotel hotel The Orchid in Mumbai in the late 90s, he wanted to give back to society. He designed it with utmost care to the environment. Today, it stands tall as one of the best sustainable hotels in the country.

What started with the opening of a small vegetarian family restaurant (Kamat's - that soon grew into one of India's largest South Indian chain of restaurants) to becoming the Chairman of Asia's first ecotel hotel and growing the brand across India, Dr Kamat has earned himself the revered title of being a 'Green Hotelier'.

Taking the rich legacy forward is his son Vishal Vithal Kamat, now the Executive Director of the Kamat Hotels India Ltd. A graduate from the prestigious IHMCTAN Mumbai, Vishal has over 15 years of experience in the hospitality sector, and currently oversees the company's operational functions, management portfolio and overall performance at corporate and property levels.

He leads the team of industry professionals to spearhead Kamat Hotels India Ltd flagship brands - The Orchid, Fort JadhavGadh, Maharashtra's only fort heritage hotel, and the newly-launched IRA By Orchid Hotels - the brand-new mid segment chain of hotels.

"If I have earned, I have to give back," is the work philosophy that Vishal holds on to firmly too. Their new brand IRA reiterates this, "Whatever we are earning here, 1% is given for girl child education," says Vishal.

In a heartwarming tete-a-tete with Hotelier India, the young hotelier tells us all about his passion for hospitality, carrying forward the rich legacy, battling its ups and downs and more... Read on...

**Born to veteran hotelier Dr Vithal Kamath (the face behind Kamat hotels), was hospitality, as a career, something you were naturally attracted towards?**

Since my childhood, I've been exposed to the world of business, thanks to my grandfather and father who were actively involved in this field. My mother's father, who had a general store, also played a significant role in shaping my early experiences. During my vacations, I would spend time in my grandfather's general store, learning not only the intricacies of running a business but also gaining insight into the human aspects of entrepreneurship. So, I attribute my understanding of the value of hard work and the multifaceted nature of business to the influence of my grandfathers and father during my formative years.

**Apparently, you started working from the young age of 13. Tell us more about it...**

The concept of mere 'work' doesn't fully capture what I experienced. It was more about instilling the right habits and attitudes, which had been nurtured in me even before the age of 13. However, it was at the age of 13 when my father sent me to work at my aunt Shardha Kamath's restaurant in Singapore, that I first started working. The reason for this was that in Mumbai, it would have been challenging to gain the kind of experience and knowledge he wished for me. During my time at her restaurant, I would spend the entire day working alongside her. This period proved to be immensely valuable for both learning and forging a strong bond. She assigned me to various sections, providing me with a comprehensive



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**What was your first professional tryst with hotels?**

My initial introduction to the world of hospitality occurred when I enrolled at IHM Mumbai, fondly recognized as the Dadar Catering College, renowned not only in India but across the globe. This institution, the pioneer in shaping exceptional talents within the hospitality sphere, has a rich legacy. It was within these hallowed halls that I imbibed professionalism and developed a profound appreciation for our industry. I owe a substantial debt of gratitude to my college.

During my tenure at the college, I had the privilege and good fortune to engage with prestigious organizations in the hospitality sector, including renowned names like Taj and Oberoi Hotels. In fact, my internship was undertaken at the Oberois, an experience for which I remain profoundly indebted - to the dedicated



📍 Fort JadhavGadh



With his father Dr Vithal Kamat

mentors who invested their time and expertise in teaching me. The lessons I learned during this period continue to be a source of valuable knowledge even to this day.

**Fort Jadhavgadh, incidentally, is your baby, right? Tell us more about how it all started? So also the work that went into completing it...**

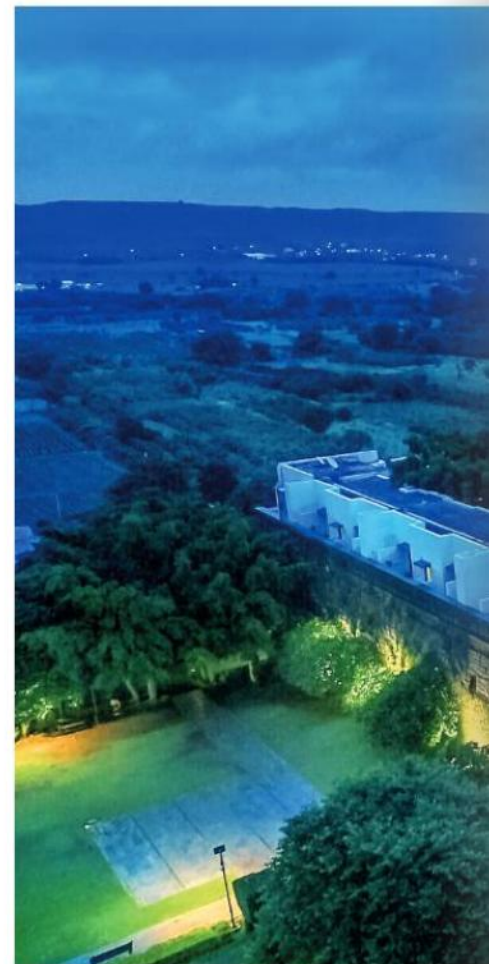
Fort Jadhavgadh (FJD) is just one of our many endeavors, each of which holds a special place in my heart. Comparing them is akin to asking a parent to choose a favorite child, a secret they may know but would never openly admit. My involvement in FJD began in 2014, though credit for its incredible museum 'Aai', an iconic part of Fort JadhavGadh's identity, goes to my father, who played a pivotal role during its construction.

The fort was already an extraordinary and memorable place,

but the challenge lay in making our guests carry these memories home and share them with others, for there's no better marketing than word-of-mouth. I believe that my efforts primarily contributed to elevating FJD to greater heights.

Presently, we have several exciting initiatives in the pipeline that will take our offerings to the next level. We're proud to introduce properties near the Konark Sun Temple in Orissa, another one called 'The Orchid Toyam' in Pune, and many more in exotic locations like Rishikesh and Dehradun. These new additions are designed to provide unique, upscale, and experiential experiences for our guests.

**As a second generation restaurateur, what are the challenges you face in the business? How do you go about overcoming them?**



Between 2005 and 2009, I played a pivotal role in revitalizing the Vithal Kamats Restaurant chain across India. However, as India's economy continues to rise and evolve, I made a conscious decision to align my focus with my personal aspirations and the direction in which I envision my career. This is why I've directed my attention towards our upscale and luxury properties, including The Orchid, Fort JadhavGadh, Lotus Resorts, and our new venture in the aspiring upper mid-market hotel segment known as IRA by Orchid Hotels.

The success of IRA by Orchid Hotels has been remarkable, with the chain rapidly expanding to four hotels in a relatively short time. By the end of the year, we anticipate that this number will grow to approximately 11, reflecting our commitment to providing exceptional experiences in this particular market segment.

**What are the innovations you are bringing to your brand? Tell us also about the challenges you have faced...**

Many of the enhancements we've made may not be immediately visible, but they are centered around digital advancements in areas such as accounting, sales, and customer engagement. In the realm of hospitality, there is a limit to how extensively we can employ technology in direct guest interactions. Yet, it



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is these behind-the-scenes improvements that hold the potential for substantial impact, and they constitute a primary focus of our efforts.

We have diligently addressed challenges related to administrative tasks and compliance, streamlining these processes to be more efficient. Furthermore, our close integration with channel partners and sales associates has led to swifter conversion rates and enhanced analytics, allowing us to not only grow our business but also gain a deeper understanding of lost opportunities.

**One of the challenges the company faced was being debt-heavy. How did you turn the tide over?**

Yes, it was an issue but we have evened out. With a lot of restructuring in the last few years, we have managed to pay off our debts, and by March '25, we'll be net zero. We don't want to take any loans. We will continue to grow on our own steam, and tomorrow, even if COVID comes back, we have the ability to take care of our teams and staff.

We are right now around 22 hotels, by the end of next year we, will be reaching 40. And we are only going strong.

**What are your personal work principles/ philosophies that you believe in strongly? And what are the work norms you set for your teams?**

The essence of our journey is rooted in the enduring principles set by my grandfather and father. Over the past 15 years, our core ethos has remained unwavering, as it transcends mere jargon – it's our guiding philosophy. Straying from this path leads to challenges. It's about the simple yet powerful values of frugality, genuine hospitality, financial prudence while supporting others and our team members, and reducing food wastage without compromising the enjoyment of those savoring our offerings. These small but profound principles have become ingrained in the very fabric of our staff, setting our Kamat Khandaan members apart from the rest. ■

