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**Executive Focus**

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**RAMESH RAMANATHAN**

**MANAGING DIRECTOR, STERLING HOLIDAY RESORTS**

**Date of Birth:** 21 April 1955  
**Education:** BA (Economics), Madras University, 1995; MBA, Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, 1977  
**Career:** Shalimar Paints Ltd (a unit of International Paint plc, UK): management trainee 1978, assistant general manager, decorative, 1988; Bakelite Hylam Ltd: all-India sales & marketing manager, surface textures, 1989; Sterling Holiday Resorts: vice-president, sales, marketing, customer service, HR & resort operations, 1991; Mahindra Holiday Resorts: founding president & CEO, 1996; Sify Ltd: president, internet access 2000; RPG: managing director, CEAT-Kelani Associated Holdings, 2002, president, Foodworld Supermarkets Ltd and Health & Glow 2003; managing director & CEO, Mahindra Holidays & Resorts India Ltd, 2004; managing director & CEO, Sterling Holiday Resorts, 2011



## Bouncing back

A six-year stint with Sterling Holiday Resorts two decades ago instilled in Ramesh Ramanathan a love for the holidays industry, which brought him back to it after a break of a mere four years in Sify and the RPG group. "My stints in hospitality have been the best and the most interesting part of my career, as they have allowed me to realise my dreams and be creative," he says, adding: "Besides, I get paid in the bargain!"

Ramanathan, who began his career in 1978 as a management trainee at Shalimar Paints Ltd – a unit of International Paint, plc, UK – after earning his BA in economics from Madras University and MBA from the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, stayed on for 10 years and rose to become assistant general manager, decoratives. Moving on to Bakelite Hylam Ltd as all-India sales and marketing manager

for surface textures, he made his next shift after only three years, to join Sterling as vice president, sales, marketing, customer service, human resources & resort operations. Five years on, he got an offer he couldn't refuse: the Mahindras were getting into the same business, and he became founding president & chief executive officer of Mahindra Holiday Resorts in 1996.

"I set up Club Mahindra from scratch, but then I decided to explore other pastures – and joined Sify as president, Internet access, in 2000," he says. Two years later, he got an opportunity to move to the RPG group, as managing director, CEAT-Kelani Associated Holdings, Sri Lanka.

Ramanathan rates his one year there as the highlight of his learning in any job. "I was handed over a company with a poor performance record, and in an area which was known for trouble," he recalls. "This was my first stint in manufacturing, but I turned around the performance within 12 months."

Back in India with RPG as president, Foodworld Supermarkets and Health & Glow – however, he stayed in the position for only a year longer, before returning to the company he set up, Mahindra Holidays, as managing director & CEO in 2004. After taking the company through its IPO (initial public offering), Ramanathan took another step backward, to rejoin Sterling – 'by accident', he says.

The most important thing he has learned over his 40 years in corporate life, according to

**Professional Activities**

- Founder member & past chairman, All India Resort Developers Association (AIRDA)
- Served on the National Committee of Tourism and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII)
- Former member, Bombay Chamber of Commerce and Industry



Currently operating a mix of owned and leased properties, Sterling is now getting into property management for others, too

lakh per room. His efforts have borne fruit: 24 of the 32 resorts – nearly three times the 11 that existed when he took over – have been ranked ‘4’ or ‘5’ on TripAdvisor, the holy grail of any place that wants to promote itself as a holiday destination.

An earlier vote of confidence, even bigger than the travel website’s rating, was when Rakesh Jhunjhunwala invested in the company. “That allowed me to start off in a big way,” Ramanathan says. “In 2011 itself, we also updated our CRM (customer relationship management) totally: we had only the landline telephone numbers of most of the older clients, no e-mail IDs... we upgraded everything technically, with the help of CRM major salesforce.com, putting all the data directly on to their cloud.”

The new Sterling concentrates on holidays, not time-shares. “There is a vacant spot for a pure holiday company in India,” Ramanathan explains. “We have a room inventory that is larger than our membership list, so we have a 50:50 distribution of members and non-members who stay on our properties.” The new brand, he says, is ‘young, energetic and dynamic’, while the logo features beads of adrenalin with the three vibrant colours purple, orange and yellow to indicate how the market has moved to richness and discovery, warmth and earth. The tagline ‘Holiday Differently’ is reinforced by a huge sign in the Sterling office that proclaims PEPS: people,

experience, places, spark joy.

Part of the holiday package on offer is a variety of half-day outings. “Did you know that Goa has 30 types of bread for different occasions?” Ramanathan asks. “This is the kind of stuff you can discover on a Sterling holiday!” The team is also introducing holiday insurance with various partners, to cover a customer’s holiday from doorstep to doorstep. This will be complimentary in the first year, then charged.

Currently operating a mix of owned and leased properties, Sterling is now getting into property management for others, too. “We are talking to a number of people for this,” the company’s managing director says. “In the next three to four years, we will double our inventory to 4,500 rooms and become the single-largest pure holiday brand. It has been seven years now in Sterling, and my ‘itch’ to build a different brand, instead of starting, is getting fulfilled. Now, I am on to build the leader!”

Away from the office, Ramanathan has “three lovely ladies in the family, backing me! My wife, who is into music and social service and who feels that one person in the family working his ‘a’ off, is more than enough. My two daughters – one in San Francisco and the other in Sydney – who have not hesitated to take about-turns in their career and life, to realise what they hold dear.” As he enters his mid-60s, he’s leading a Sterling life, by all accounts.

• SEKSHAR SESHAN

sekshar.seshan@businessindia.com

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