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How Sterling's Ramesh Ramanathan turned the brand around- and plans to do it again

From planning to double Sterling's room inventory to unveiling 'Raja Rex'- a Dino-discovery mascot, Ramesh Ramanathan discusses all



**HOW RAMESH RAMANATHAN
TURNED STERLING AROUND**

**AND PLANS TO
DO IT AGAIN!**

Very few of us have the privilege to dodge daily drudgery and say we love what we do professionally. Sterling's [Ramesh Ramanathan](#) is one of the lucky few who belongs to this category.

Ramanathan, managing director, [Sterling Holiday Resorts Limited](#), is emblematic of the segment he represents: With over three decades of experience, ranging from consumer durables, tyres, organized retail, and IT, Ramanathan finally found his calling in the vacation ownership industry with Sterling Holiday Resorts in the early 1990s. He soon left the company to set up Mahindra Holidays and Resorts in 1996 but took a 180-degree turn and returned to Sterling in 2011, having served as its president 20 years earlier.

The industry veteran spoke to Brand Equity at the Thomas Cook-owned Sterling Holidays' brand relaunch event

Transformation is tricky business (But it pays off!)



Caption: "We didn't particularly have anything against the logo but it was other circumstances that made us change", explains Ramanathan.

Delving into the topic further, he says, "I spent a good 14 years at Club Mahindra, but when I came back to Sterling, the market was changing. Timeshare was okay with people occasionally taking annual vacations but the market has changed to the extent where people were taking many shorter holidays. Given that holiday patterns were changing so fast and so many young people in the country under the age of 35 were holidaying so differently, I thought why can't we grab that opportunity to become much larger than what we are today?"

When we took a survey we saw people talk about Thomas Cook and Cox and Kings being a holiday brand. Club Mahindra is another brand but it is available only to members. So we realised that there is a huge gap in a country like ours for a holiday brand.

We decided to move in and grab that space but we also realised to do that we have to grow bigger in size and not be known for the product we sell but the holidays we deliver. That is why we said we will make the change.

We also realised in the bargain that people have increasingly been taking room and food services for granted. Hygiene, however, is the new aspect that a lot of people are looking at. If your room doesn't have a clean sheet you get negative reviews but if you have a clean sheet you don't get any positive reviews.

While we deliver the room and food we also need to be delivering experiences and discoveries. It's what you carry back from a holiday".



The brand's new mascot, 'Raja Rex'

So far, reactions to the brand have been positive and we can't help but wonder if Sterling's new mascot has something to do with the reviews. Ramanathan introduces 'Raja Rex', Sterling's new 'discovery mascot', saying, "Raja Rex is modelled upon the [Rajasaurus](#) dinosaur found off the banks of the river Narmada. Being 'discovered' itself, it will now serve as our official discovery mascot". He goes on to assure us that the mascot is intended to have universal appeal and is not just restricted to being adored by children.

Sterling's turnaround story

Things, however, have not always been dandy for the holiday lifestyle company.

"Sterling has gone through a very chequered history. When I rejoined in 2011, the task given to me was to bring this brand around", said Ramanathan. Luckily for the MD, occupancy has shot up from 20% in 2011 to close to 72% in 2017. The company was also able to increase its average room rates by 36% in the first quarter.

Before its foray into the digital [marketing](#) space, the brand also battled with negative reviews online and lacked the digital infrastructure to keep up with its contemporaries. Ramanathan, upon his appointment, ensured that money was invested heavily in building its network and in IT – both hardware and software.

After its acquisition by Thomas Cook in 2014, the association with a global brand brought more stability to Sterling.

The global holidays brand now has 33 resorts in the country, with a room strength of 2,200. "We will expand this to 4,500 rooms in the next four to five years. The majority of the addition will come from management contracts. We might build our own resorts but not in large numbers. We are in talks with around ten owners to bring their asset to Sterling under a management contract. There will be no capital expenditure and the expansion will be faster," states Ramanathan.

Additionally, the vacation ownership company will take an asset-light route to double its room capacity to 4,500, through management contracts.

No need to battle BnB- There's room for everyone

When quizzed on how Sterling plans to stay ahead of digital native upstarts like [OYO Rooms](#) and [Stayzilla](#) crowding into the holiday resort space, here is what Ramanathan said:

"The simplest answer is to say that we will be everywhere but realistically that might not happen. If you have noticed in the last 6 to 7 years of [Airbnb](#)'s presence, I don't think other people have suffered; so there is a whole new category that has emerged. While things have grown it is not that the consumer has been static: their requirements have also grown. So there is a need for different types of holidays.

India is the fifth most vacation deprived nation so obviously, if you are vacation deprived, then things are only going to get better for the business.

I think thematic holidays are here to stay. We are into time share, but we are also into regular holidays. If there is a segment that needs to be tapped we will definitely look into it."



Glimpses into what the new and revamped Sterling has to offer

Two years ago Sterling picked up Nature Trails, a setup wildly popular with city dwellers (Mumbai) craving adventure thrills. Ramanathan revealed that the company is planning to retain the brand and not rename it to Sterling hinting at diversification.

"We will move into markets that appeal to us so tomorrow. If there is a market for homestays then we will follow the Airbnb model. Nothing is stopping us. I think the market is huge", he adds.

How to peddle vacations: Experience-led holiday advertising

While the brand has stayed relatively quiet in the digital arena over the last several years, they have recently been buzzing in the social media space.

"Six weeks before the launch of this campaign we released six destination films one after the other. These are all three-minute films done by different people".

All videos have been made in collaboration with travel bloggers and have clocked in over a million views. According to Ramanathan, this is reflective of the brand's growing dominion over the digital space.


"We don't take a picture to talk about our rooms. Instead, we change the route and focus more towards the destination and what happens there".

This is just as well, as Ramanathan tells a pretty good story. There's the one about the brand's recently opened property in Wayanad which is the north of Kerala- perhaps not as well known as the southern regions of the state.

"While taking a morning walk with the resort representative, what can I say other than the fact that it grows upside down. Don't imagine your regular tree. This is a parasitic tree but it doesn't start ground up it grows from the other tree on top. How? Birds eat from this tree and when they fly elsewhere, the seeds get dropped, growing downwards and enveloping the tree. These are tall forest trees, but when they grow to a height of 6 to 7 feet downwards, the local people cut them. I wondered if the locals did this to protect the trees, but the locals have something else on their minds- Elephants!

The elephants love to eat the roots. So, to prevent elephants from coming close to human settlements, they chop off the roots- This is what a holiday in India is all about- You need to know the place intimately".

The enthusiastic glint in his eye serves as the perfect punchline.

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Thomas Cook owned Sterling Holidays undergoes brand revamp to woo young travellers

Sterling Holiday's new logo has the company's name in royal purple written in a free flowing handwritten font, accompanied by the new tagline 'Holiday Differently'



Sterling Holidays currently operates 33 resorts in destinations like Goa, Gangtok, Corbett and Darjeeling, among others.


New Delhi: Sterling Holiday Resorts Ltd, a leisure hospitality company, Thursday unveiled a new brand identity targeting young travellers as it tries to deliver experience-based holidays.

Created by advertising agency Law & Kenneth Saachi and Saachi, its new logo has company's name Sterling in royal purple written in a free flowing handwritten font against a white background. It is supported by a dynamic 'Swirl' mnemonic, accompanied by the new tagline 'Holiday Differently'. The older logo unveiled in 2011 was a bright yellow with graphics, depicting the elements of nature surrounding the resort with the tagline 'It's a wonderful world'.

"We have moved away from the typical greens and yellows associated with a travel firm to a more warm palette in our logo. The objective is to appeal to a young set of travellers who are looking for rich experiences while holidaying. We want Sterling Holidays to be seen as a younger brand therefore we have decided to place a lot of emphasis on digital and social media in brand marketing," said Ramesh Ramanathan, managing director, Sterling Holiday Resorts Ltd.

The Chennai-based company currently operates 33 resorts in destinations like Goa, Gangtok, Corbett and Darjeeling, among others.

From time when friends or neighbours have experienced travellers, for each hospitality player it has become essential to go beyond accommodations and provide experiences. I also feel that in India there's still a large section of travellers who prefer to stay in a hotel or resort instead of an Airbnb," he added.

Publication:	
Date:	December 7th, 2017

Sterling Holiday to double room inventory to 4,500 rooms

New Delhi, Dec 6 (PTI) Sterling Holiday Resorts today said it is aiming to double its room inventory to around 4,500 and expand footprint to over 50 destinations in the next four to five years.

The company has over 2,200 rooms at its 33 resorts spread across the country.

"We are planning to double our room inventory to around 4,500 rooms across the country in the next four to five years. Going forward we will primarily follow an asset light model," Sterling Holiday Resorts MD Ramesh Ramanathan told reporters.

The future growth will be mainly driven by the management contract model, though from time to time the company will also develop some of its own properties, he added.

"We are actively talking to lots of people and are also looking for people who want to give their hotels," Ramanathan said.

He was speaking on the sidelines of the launch of the new brand identity of the company.

When asked about the investments for expansion, Ramanathan said as the company plans to follow an asset light model, there will be hardly any investment for properties under management contract.

"Our expenses going forward will be on the brand and making sure our customers are super happy. As and when we develop our own property, the cost is around Rs 65 to Rs 70 lakh a room," he added.

Going forward, the investments will be on technology, digitalisation, Ramanathan said.

"Our focus will be on delivery and service for all kind of holidayers. In the process we would also be contributing to the local economies and creating jobs," he added.

Founded in 1986, Sterling Holiday Resorts has a network of 33 resorts in destinations such as Agra, Daman, Darjeeling, Dharamshala, Gangtok, Goa, Kanha, Karwar, Kodaikanal, Kufri, Lonavala, Manali, Munnar, Mussoorie, Nainital, Ooty, Puri and Shirdi, among others. PTI AKT ANU

Publication:	BW HOTELIER
Date:	December 7th, 2017

Sterling Holiday Resorts Unveils New Brand Strategy



Sterling Holiday Resorts targets to double the size of the inventory and triple the revenues over the next five years.



RAMESH RAMANATHAN returned to Sterling Holiday Resorts as its Managing Director in 2011 – having served as the President for 20 years earlier – to scale up the brand and open up to a bigger market. “People are now looking for immersive holidays and want to discover new places with theme-based holidays - cycling, food, river, etc, to name a few. We decided to cater to the new-age market where experiencing holidays and destinations can become better for our guests. Hence, we decided to bring about some visible changes to the brand also,” says Ramesh Ramanathan, Managing Director, Sterling Holiday Resorts. Since his joining, he has added about 400 rooms to the already existing 1,200 rooms.

Sterling Holiday Resorts re-launched its identity with a new brand logo as well as changing the nature of business from a vacation ownership company to a genuine holiday company. “Consumer today wants holiday experiences that go beyond great rooms, outstanding location and wonderful service, and that is what we provide,” he said in an event unveiling the new brand and strategies.

Ramanathan also stated that, “Sterling is now poised to rapidly establish itself as an experience and discovery led holiday brand and grow into a leadership position in the holiday industry. The new brand logo is more ‘youthful, vibrant and contemporary with key logo colour, Purple, aligning with the brand promise of ‘discoveries and experiences.’”

Pumping an investment of ₹250 crore in refurbishing its rooms and best in class standard, the brand plans to focus on providing local experiences at all its destinations in line with their “PEP” (People Experience and Places) concept.

With their new resorts in Karwar in Karnataka; Anaikatti in Tamil Nadu; Dindi on the banks of the Godavari in Andhra Pradesh; Daman; Sariska, Wayanad added this year along with the soon-to-be-launched – Panchgani, Mount Abu, Gangtok, Udaipur, Coorg, Sterling now has 33 resorts with 2,200 rooms with 60% owned by the company itself. “The occupancy has gone up from 27 per cent to 70 per cent while members have gone up from 60,000 to 85,000,” added Ramanathan.

Sterling Holiday Resorts which has a mix of owned and leased properties will explore more management contracts with owners to scale up their footprint, he said. The target is to reach at least double the size of the inventory and triple the revenues over the next five years.

Publication:	ADGULLY
Date:	December 8th, 2017

Sterling Holiday Group launches new brand Identity; Raja Rex as new mascot



Mr. Ramesh Ramanathan-MD and Mr. Peshwa Acharya- CMO (Left to Right)

Sterling Holiday Resorts Limited has unveiled its new, contemporary brand in keeping with its new service philosophy of delivering Experiences & Discoveries. Riding on this, Sterling has charted a road map to become "The leading holiday brand in India".

Sterling is creating curated experiences in the areas of local cuisine, art, culture, history, nature, adventure etc. both within and outside the resort, for its customers. From night safaris and nature walks to authentic culinary experiences and culture trails, Sterling is seeking to offer its guests many different ways to have memorable

experiences and discoveries. The company is initiating a complete marketing and brand plan for the new Sterling.

"Holidays have become an integral part of our lifestyle. At Sterling, we are looking forward to being a part of this new India that is looking to have newer experiences and take away a little bit of what they see and feel when they holiday, discovering something new every time." says Ramanathan



The discoveries do not stop with the holiday experience. Sterling is the first holiday company in India to offer a doorstep to doorstep holiday insurance for all its customers and guests both for the travel and holiday period. This would be offered from the first quarter of 2018.

DOUBLING OF PROPERTIES AND ROOM CAPACITY

The brand launch is driven by a business transformation that involves a strategic pathway including focus on experience-led holidays, doubling of properties and room capacity, focus on service quality and new business models.

Sterling would be focussing on an asset optimized model as a route to

"Over the past few years, we have invested in revamp of existing resorts and launch of new ones. Our focus will be on delivery and service for all kinds of holidayers. In the process, we would also be contributing to the local economies, creating jobs and taking the brand abroad to places where Indians holiday," Ramanathan added.

Publication:	Outlook
Date:	December 7th, 2017

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The future growth will be mainly driven by the management contract model, though from time to time the company will also develop some of its own properties, he added.

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Publication:	OUTLOOK traveller
Date:	December 13, 2017

STERLING: HOLIDAY DIFFERENTLY!



Travel Updates

Sterling Holiday Resorts Ltd have undergone a revamp to deliver curated experiences Activa

Sterling Holiday Resorts Ltd last week unveiled its new and contemporary brand identity to appeal to young travelers. With a new service philosophy of delivering experiences and discoveries, Sterling has charted a road map to become the leading ‘holiday brand’ in the country.

In its new avatar, curated experiences offered by the company range from safaris, local cuisine, art, history, adventure and culture among others, both inside and outside the resort. For example, visitors at Sterling Dindi will get a chance to immerse themselves in Konaseema culture with a visit to a weaver’s village, eating local delicacies and getting a chance to visit the sight-seeing spots.



The new Sterling logo

The new design is vibrant and youthful. While Sterling is written in a free flowing handwritten font, it's supported by a dynamic 'Swirl' mnemonic that reminds one of the pinwheel. It represents movement and dynamism and gives the identity a sense of motion. Purple as the key logo colour, is quite unique, and connotes the brand promise of 'discoveries and experiences'.

With resorts in over 33 locations in the country, the company wants to increase the number to 14 more in the coming years. "Holidays have become an integral part of our lifestyle. At Sterling, we are looking forward to being a part of this new India that is looking to have newer experiences and take away a little bit of what they see and feel when they holiday, discovering something new every time," says Ramesh Ramanathan, Managing Director, Sterling Holiday Resorts Limited.



At the press conference in Delhi

Visitors at the results will get a chance to meet Sterling's new mascot – Raja Rex over the next couple of months who will help them discover new activities and experiences. The company will also offer a doorstep-to-doorstep holiday insurance for customers and guests both for the travel and holiday period. This would be offered from the first quarter of 2018. Sterling also owns 'Nature Trails Resorts Private Limited' – an adventure holiday company that operates resorts at four unique destinations in Maharashtra.

The new brand identity reflects this essence and proposition. The design is youthful, vibrant, and contemporary. "Sterling" is written in a free flowing handwritten font and is supported by a dynamic "Swirl" mnemonic that reminds one of the pinwheel. The Swirl represents movement and dynamism and gives the identity a sense of motion. Purple as the key logo colour, is quite unique, and connotes the brand promise of "discoveries and experiences".

Sterling's quest is not just for newer experiences and discoveries but also to increase the number of locations and to offer new destinations to its customers. Embodying the new service philosophy, Sterling strives to build destination expertise across all locations.

Mr Ramesh Ramanathan, Managing Director, Sterling Holiday Resorts Limited, said, "Today, we are opening not just a new chapter for Sterling but a new chapter in the Indian holiday market. We have been working on developing our new service philosophy and brand standards over the last few years and are now ready to make our customers "holiday differently". I am delighted to present the new Sterling Brand that will stand for great service, unique experiences and amazing discoveries."

"Holidays have become an integral part of our lifestyle. At Sterling, we are looking forward to being a part of this new India that is looking to have newer experiences and take away a little bit of what they see and feel when they holiday, discovering something new every time.", says Ramanathan.

Over the next couple of months, guests at resorts will also meet "Raja Rex", Sterling's new "discovery mascot" who will help them discover new activities and experiences.

The discoveries do not stop with the holiday experience. Sterling is the first holiday company in India to offer a doorstep to doorstep holiday insurance for all its customers and guests both for the travel and holiday period. This would be offered from the first quarter of 2018.

The brand launch is driven by a business transformation that involves a strategic pathway including focus on experience-led holidays, doubling of properties and room capacity, focus on service quality and new business models. Sterling would be focussing on an asset optimized model as a route to scale. Sterling will expand capacity through management contracts while providing guests the Sterling standard of service and brand assurance. As a consequence, Sterling expects to double room capacity and scale up to 50 properties over the next 4-5 years. To support the new expansion plans, the company has transformed its brand identity completely and launched the same today.

"Over the past few years, we have invested in revamp of existing resorts and launch of new ones. Our focus will be on delivery and service for all kinds of holidayers. In the process, we would also be contributing to the local economies, creating jobs and taking the brand abroad to places where Indians holiday," Ramanathan added.