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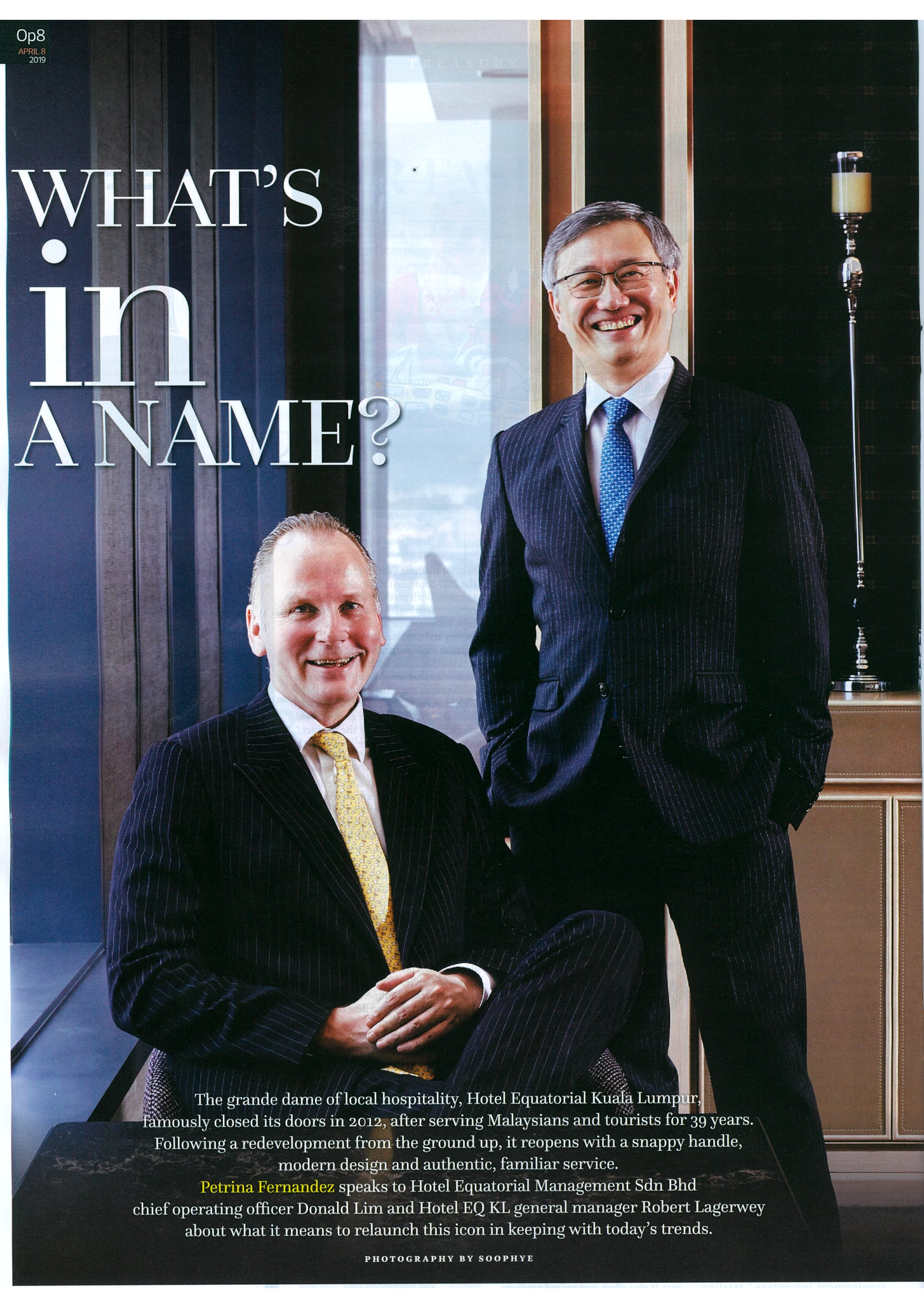
IN PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

The hospitality quotient

Hotel EQ Kuala Lumpur
COO Donald Lim and
general manager Robert Lagerwey
on the opening of the
rebranded Hotel Equatorial



WHAT'S in A NAME?

A photograph of two men in dark pinstriped suits. One man is seated on the left, wearing a yellow patterned tie, and the other is standing on the right, wearing a blue patterned tie and glasses. They are both smiling. The background shows a modern hotel lobby with a large window and a lamp.

The grande dame of local hospitality, Hotel Equatorial Kuala Lumpur, famously closed its doors in 2012, after serving Malaysians and tourists for 39 years. Following a redevelopment from the ground up, it reopens with a snappy handle, modern design and authentic, familiar service.

Petrina Fernandez speaks to Hotel Equatorial Management Sdn Bhd chief operating officer Donald Lim and Hotel EQ KL general manager Robert Lagerwey about what it means to relaunch this icon in keeping with today's trends.

March 2012 was an interesting month. George Clooney, Martin Luther King III and Al Green were arrested in Washington for protesting the blockade of humanitarian aid to Sudan. The Greek parliament voted in favour of an international bailout deal. Encyclopaedia Britannica announced it would no longer publish in print, Indian batsman Sachin Tendulkar became the first cricketer to score 100 international centuries and Canadian filmmaker James Cameron was the first person to visit Challenger Deep in the Mariana Trench in over 50 years.

Ordinarily, any of these would have been the focus of conversation among the journalists, diplomats and corporate movers and shakers who regularly gathered at Etoile coffee shop or all-day dining venue Nipah in Hotel Equatorial KL. While these were probably touched on, another topic was likely given prominence for its proximity: the imminent and much-mourned closing of the hotel.

Local watering hole, witness to numerous courtships and joyous family occasions, preferred address for entertaining, icon, landmark, legacy — ever since it opened its doors in 1973 as one of a handful of five-star hospitality brands here, Hotel Equatorial was inextricably woven into the social fabric of downtown KL. Agence France-Presse established its office on the hotel's ground floor, a convenient hub for visiting foreign correspondents, while *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Singapore Straits Times*, *Reuters* and *Asiaweek* were all in the neighbourhood, close to the diplomatic enclave.

Golden Phoenix served the finest Chinese cuisine in the city while Swiss restaurant Chalet evoked allure with a mean raclette and the must-have Sabayon Du Chalet. The latter was known as the “dancing dessert” for the parade of restaurant staff who took turns whipping the cold egg-based dish into shape while doing the twist, accompanied by a house band of folk singers. Patrick Teoh used to DJ at popular discothèque Blue Moon. Across its floors, Equatorial Hotel was at once down to earth and glamorous, bustling and relaxing, the place to see and be seen.

In 2012, Hotel Equatorial Management Sdn Bhd chairman Datuk Lim Kong Wai penned a letter titled “What goes down must come up”, announcing the closure of the hotel to allow for comprehensive redevelopment. “A brand new Hotel Equatorial will rise on the same site before too long,” it read. “The new Equatorial will be reflective of how the country has grown — bigger, stronger and better able to meet the challenges of this new century — yet possessing the same heart for hospitality.”

A farewell bash, fittingly called The Last Dance, on March 31 saw long-time patrons fly in from all over the world to bid adieu, while former staff did the same at a private party held a few days later. And with that, this spectator of many memories and changing times closed its doors and was levelled to the ground.

From the debris

In the economic boom of KL at the end of the 20th century, the changing skyline quickly rendered the 1970s façade of Hotel Equatorial nondescript by comparison and its stature increasingly stout as skyscrapers soared alongside it. No longer so, for its new silhouette rises elongated and angular, catching the light scintillatingly in a modern design intended to age well.

“It is funny, we were just talking about how we have gone from the shortest building on the street to one of the tallest,” says Donald Lim, scion of the Lim family of hoteliers and developers, and chief operating officer of the rebranded Hotel EQ. “Just before we closed, you would strain to even see sunlight; we were completely surrounded by taller buildings.”

The hotel proper comprises 440 rooms across the upper half of the 52-storey building while the lower floors function as office space, with Standard Chartered and American co-working space mammoth WeWork listed as primary tenants. Entrance via the lobby leads to the revamped all-day dining venue Nipah on the right, behind a beguiling spiral staircase. Upon closer inspection, its charm is revealed. Built out of marine-grade steel, a rigid material deftly manipulated to create a sense of fluidity, the staircase bears no support columns but stands alone, like a swirling sculpture.

Check-in takes place around the corner, hidden from public view. A bar — “We have a wine cellar with 600 bottles, featuring some of the finest wines in town that you cannot find elsewhere,” proclaims general manager Robert Lagerwey — encourages an aperitif before adjourning to Kampachi, the flagship of a premium Japanese restaurant chain that originated on this very site. Built for romance, pleasure and business, facilities include versatile halls with discreet blind effects on surrounding glass windows; a diamond-shaped ballroom with an upstairs gallery and a concealed

state-of-the-art sound room; and an entire floor dedicated to the spa with dreamy prints adorning the ceiling and heavy wooden doors that vanquish the outside world.

“The closing was unexpected,” muses Donald. “In response to growing competition, we were actually looking to refurbish but had structural changes in mind. City Hall looked over our building plans and suggested rebuilding entirely. While it was a lot more than we had initially planned for, it was in hindsight absolutely the right thing to do.”

In the hands of award-winning studios GDP Architects and Blu Water interior designers, the property took shape. However, not for nothing is the Lim family a successful Malaysian name in the hospitality and development industry: the Equatorial brand, for instance, has a presence in Melaka, Penang and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam.

“We are hoteliers, we have built hotels for others, and we are hotel users ourselves, so we hope we have learnt something from our experience,” says Donald.

On a tour of EQ, he points out how business travellers who share a room with a colleague will benefit from the reimagined layout that offers greater comfort and privacy, including almost Queen-sized beds. Deep-set room doors off the corridors create an illusion of seclusion akin to returning to a private apartment.

Public spaces, too, have been designed with similar intuition and ingenuity. The ballroom's roof is a verdant garden terrace from which to take in the surrounding concrete jungle, an ideal spot for an alfresco lunch or even an intimate wedding. The Forum, a United Nations-style meeting room fashioned as an atrium, maintains formality while exuding serenity with a wraparound glass wall and massive skylight. A large hall with an attached kitchen will host private functions or pop-up restaurants with rotating or guest chefs.



Among the shorter buildings on the street at time of demolition, the new and shiny EQ now towers with the best of them

“This building is actually certified Gold in the Green Building Index,” shares Donald, of this feat uncharacteristic of hotels. “We are reusing filtered water, instead of fresh water, to run our cooling towers and have energy-saving and heat-recovery systems. Another example of how we sweat the details is the swimming pool. We redesigned it to incorporate a heat exchange process. The water runs past some mechanical rooms and cools the machinery while heating the water on the way to the pool, so when someone dives in, it is a comfortable temperature. Our consultants shook their heads and said no one has ever done things like this, but it just makes sense. And if there is anyone we need to acknowledge, it is our chairman, who set the foundation for everything we do today.”

On the same wavelength

The Lim family is famously low-profile, a trait Donald appears to have inherited. He declines a request to be featured alone on the cover, saying, “I have this thing about photographs. It’s not about me, it’s about the business, the hotel. No solo pictures, please.”

Instead, he ropes in a sporting Lagerwey, who assumes the spokesperson role the COO shies away from. Lagerwey brings with him 25 years of experience, leaving the Pontiac Land Group where he was regional vice-president of operations for the Capella Hotel Group Asia. He started from the proverbial bottom as a dishwasher and used a degree in hospitality from the Hotel School The Hague to work his way up in an award-winning career that spans Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, London and Seoul, as well as the exclusive BVLGARI Resort Bali.

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The two have a strong rapport, born of mutual respect and a shared vision of the heights attainable for the family-owned hotel.

"We do not come with a universal product or brand name, but where we operate, people know the brand," says Donald. "I told Robert that when he introduces himself as being from Equatorial, chances are people will have something to say about it: 'Oh, I got married there,' or 'That was where we used to go on dates.' It was a hotel that was very much part of society."

"And I found that to be true," picks up Lagerwey. "There is a huge emotional attachment to the brand, which means its legacy is enormous. Nostalgia creates extraordinarily high expectations. We were talking recently about how the brand continues to survive over time while other hotels around this street have changed hands or ceased operations. So our discussion was centred on how to marry the old with the new."

Culinary excellence was a pillar of the original hotel and Lagerwey was keen to transfer that DNA to the new EQ, whose soft opening last month was the talk of the town.

"Many asked if Chalet was coming back; they missed the raclette, the sabayon, the tableside preparations that nobody does anymore. It won't, but some of its elements will be retained," says the general manager. "Our rooftop restaurant, Sabayon, has a petite Chalet menu in tribute. Together with executive chef Andreas Ertle, we discussed what we wanted from the food."

This included debates about the merits of kampung and farmed chicken — they decided to offer guests a choice — and finding local fishermen as exclusive suppliers in addition to air-flown products from Japan for use in Kampachi.

"It was one of our hallmarks and we want to maintain it as a benchmark of Japanese fine dining in Malaysia," says Donald of Kampachi. Testament to that commitment is a solid enoki wood counter carved from a century-old tree. Donald flew to Japan to pick out the tree himself in a sustainably-planted forest and the wood, from which emanates the faint scent of cedar, did not come cheap.

"You could buy a house for this price," he continues. "It is found only in the top sushi restaurants in the world. I cannot think of many restaurants here that have upheld a reputation for decades, so we are very proud of our legacy, but are determined to improve. What is the point of only doing what



Waiting to bear witness to more happy occasions is a state-of-the-art ballroom

we did back in 1973? We need to push ahead, and we do, with options for line-caught fish in addition to industrially-sourced ones, and specialties such as Matsusaka beef. We won't have a Chinese restaurant à la the former Golden Phoenix because we want to focus on banquets, but Nipah used to host the most popular buka puasa events and we have designed it with that in mind, with space for a grill outside and a pizza oven and wok station inside."

By virtue of being family owned and inherently Malaysian, EQ does not subscribe to a cookie-cutter operational formula typical of international chains.

"We can allow customers to define their experience," elaborates Lagerwey. "It is nothing revolutionary, just simple logic. In another company, you would call this 'anticipation and compliance with guests' needs', which is a mouthful. We are training staff to read guests like they would a book to understand their preferences and tailor their experience accordingly. A chatty lady in a beautiful hat and flowered sundress here on her honeymoon would want a different experience than a business traveller in a serious pinstriped suit with an aversion to small talk."

Similar to the intensive deliberations on food sourcing were devilish details, such as if pillowcases should have flanges, the preferred thread count for bedsheets and the ideal feather combinations in the pillows.

"It was insane but beautiful," says the veteran general manager with a gleam in his eye. "We talked about everything, prepared for every possibility, from the CEO who wants a duplex conducive for work to organising a surprise for someone in a beautiful suite with its own bar and bubble bath. What I loved was the collaborative spirit, which involved listening and learning."

"We recognised that we didn't know the answers to everything," adds Donald. "This product is like nothing we have done before, and Robert filled in a lot of the blanks for us with his experience. There are going to be a lot of skills that we need to level up on and with the help of Robert and the team he has put together, including former employees for whom this is a homecoming of sorts, we are on our way."

NOTABLE QUOTES

“Every old journalist worth his salt would have an Equatorial story. There were many attractions — the restaurants, the privacy, the convenient location near the diplomatic enclave and news offices, and it had an aura, like our own Rick’s Café. Diplomats would gather at the Equatorial to pick up snippets of gossip to telex back to their home office and some of the more seasoned journalists would have good fun floating a rumour. It is said they would pick a gullible diplomat or another journalist to spread a story. By the time the story had made its rounds at the bar and got back to them, they knew it was time to go back to the kids and family. When the hotel was about to close, CEO Lim Kong Yong invited all the regulars to a party. Fifty-three journalists and diplomats, many retired by then, came from all corners of the globe to celebrate until the wee hours of the morning.”

DATUK SERI KALIMULLAH HASSAN,
former deputy chairman of
New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd

“It was a meeting place for the foreign press and politicians, and where they gravitated, diplomats would too. Former information minister Tok Mat [Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat] was a regular at the Equatorial, which drew in other Cabinet ministers, political secretaries and hangers-on. That’s where you went to see him for a quote or to know what was going on. I used to have long chats with him there, and his very charming wife. My office was on the same floor as Nipah, where most people used to hang out at since Blue Moon served alcohol. Kampachi used to attract patrons like (Tun Dr) Mahathir (Mohamad) and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. When (CEO Lim) Kong Yong gave a big farewell bash before they tore it down, correspondents flew in from London, the US — I came down from Hong Kong to attend. I guess that says a lot about the management, doesn’t it? They are very nice people.”

MERVIN NAMBIAR,
former bureau chief of
AFP Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei

Something old, something new

Rebranding the hotel as EQ coincidentally ties in with a renewed emphasis on emotional intelligence in operations and service. The Lim family hired a branding consultancy to temporarily package its edgier image. The consultants returned to inform them a fitting name already existed: in the parlance of patrons, the hotel had been informally known as EQ for decades.

"We believe this new incarnation of EQ will continue that legacy of being at the forefront of the industry," says Donald, whose shyness belies a strong sense of humour. "This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Equatorial brand. We knew the KL hotel was important to regulars but we didn't know how important until the letter announcing its closure ran. We received so many phone calls and emails; it was very heart-warming."

"And then the farewell ... The party we threw for guests was great, it really was. But even more impactful was the party several days later for employees and former staff who helped make the brand successful over the decades. News passed on purely through word of mouth, and people flew in from Singapore, Australia, even Switzerland, just to celebrate with us. There was a lot of laughter, a few tears — I don't have the words to describe it, it was very emotional. I don't think anybody has ever closed a hotel quite that way here."

It was a moving experience for him personally, having grown up around the hotel. "My earliest memory of Equatorial?" he repeats. After a pause, he says thoughtfully, "Earliest memories for me fall into two categories: either events of great joy or great trauma. Equatorial was always a source of joy. I remember trailing my father around. He had a hard hat on, and I watched him look over the smallest details as the hotel was being built. You can't do that kind of thing anymore, safety requirements are a lot more stringent now. It was a different era. I also remember swimming in the pool. Back then, there was not a whole lot of development around the hotel. The turf club was behind it and on Sundays, if you stood by the pool, you could hear the commentary from the PA system as the horses were racing."

He opens a folder with two typed letters inside. "I brought this along," he says, pulling out the first, the announcement of the hotel's closure in 2012. "This ran in a publication you might be familiar with, it's called *The Edge*," he deadpans.

"Never heard of it," I shrug, and we laugh.

"It's an unusual way to announce a shutdown, it was very personal and resonated with people who knew us. And this is the new creative, with our new branding, announcing the reopening," he says, pulling out the second sheet. "It talks about the fulfilment of a promise we made, about returning bigger and better than before. I don't think many hotels out there can engage with their guests at this level. You can see the similarities as well as the new finesse."

"What goes down must come up," announced the brand seven years ago, and in response is a new letter headlined, "What went down has come up." It certainly has. **E**