



**AT A GLANCE:** **PURI**      **AGE:** **56**

**CAREER SNAPSHOT:** Held various positions with The Peninsula Hotels, Rosewood Hotels & Resorts, The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Co., The Halekulani in Honolulu, Raffles Hotels International, Hyatt Regency Chicago and The Fairmont Chicago.

CEO of Nira Hotels & Resorts, London, which he launched in 2009.

Consultant to Orient-Express Hotels on global F&B operations.

Head of Americas for GHM Hotels and opening general manager of The Setai, South Beach.

Opening chief operating officer for The Fullerton, Singapore.

# FOCUSED SERVICE

of a

# DIFFERENT KIND

By Adam Kirby, contributing editor

**PURI, FOUNDING CEO OF THE LONDON-BASED NIRA BRAND, BELIEVES THE MOST IMPORTANT GUEST AMENITY IS HAPPINESS.**

Having established himself as an icon of the hospitality industry over nearly four decades in leadership positions at some of the world's most famous hotels, MPS Puri in 2009 set out on his own to launch a new standard in the ultra-luxury boutique hotel space.

His Nira Hotels & Resorts is based on the tenets of Asian-style hospitality, with an emphasis on personalized and heartfelt service. And while that is a catch-all, perhaps overused descriptor,

Puri genuinely subscribes to it. For him, hospitality is a way of life and providing guest service a privilege. Through Nira, he has created a hotel experience in which luxury is defined not by opulence and formality, but by attentiveness and joy.

Nira has followed the heralded 2009 opening of its Shanti Maurice, Mauritius, with the recent conversions of Nira Alpina just outside the glamorous ski resort of St. Moritz, Switzerland, and Nira Caledonia in Edinburgh. The

## NIRA HOTELS & RESORTS AT A GLANCE:

Three hotels open (Shanti Maurice, Mauritius; Nira Alpina, St. Moritz, Switzerland; and Nira Caledonia, Edinburgh), with 160 guestrooms total.

Future projects under development in Seychelles, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, China and Japan, with additional projects expected to be announced next year in Greece and Italy.

Portfolio also includes a freestanding Indian restaurant in London, Moti Mahal. Nira is positioned as an ultra-luxury boutique brand with a focus on Asian-style hospitality and extraordinarily personalized service.



The Nira Alpina in St. Moritz, Switzerland

**“TODAY, IF YOU WANT TO SEE TRENDSETTING STUFF, YOU NO LONGER LOOK TO THE WEST, YOU LOOK TO THE EAST.”**

160-key portfolio will turn in fiscal year 2011 revenues of about US\$25 million, Puri says.

Nira will break ground next year on a project in Seychelles, and other resorts are under development in Vietnam, Sri Lanka, China and Japan. Puri says he is close to additional deals in Greece and Italy; his growth

strategy in Europe centers around acquisitions, while expansion in Asia is mainly greenfield projects. Exclusively a developer-operator, Nira does not do third-party management deals. Its capital comes primarily from a dedicated investment company, Shanti Hospitality Group, London, which owns the properties.

Puri — who generally goes by only his first name — talks with **HOTELS** about luxury hotelkeeping, the importance of the value proposition, the keys to acquiring customer loyalty and why Western luxury hoteliers are at an institutional disadvantage to their Asian counterparts.

**HOTELS: Talk about the Nira concept and your philosophy for luxury hotelkeeping.**

Puri: The philosophy of Nira is very simple. I wanted to do a brand where there are three core values: service, value for money and relationships. Those are the three things that I value the most. Similarly, the relationships that you have with your business partners, with your employees, with your

owners, with all the key stakeholders, are really the success of any business. That relationship as paramount is really what I focused on.

The other one is the value proposition. When I opened The Setai and said our opening rates were going to be US\$1,000, nobody blinked. Those days are gone. Today, everyone wants to be able to see the value proposition. The average European middle-class person has an average salary every month of about €3,000 (US\$4,200 at press time) — that’s the reality. People want to spend money, they want to go away on holiday, but they need to be able to get the value proposition. Everybody needs to be able to see the value, and when they see the value, it is great fun.

We are devoted to pleasure for our guests. We achieve that by a simple philosophy: Guests arrive as residents, they leave as friends and return as family. When they come back, they’re part of the Nira community, and they’re already family. When you go on TripAdvisor and you read reviews



The Nira Caledonia, Edinburgh

for Shanti Maurice, you see that guests have written, “We look forward to returning as family,” because that’s how they’re treated. When you achieve that sort of culture, it’s from listening and observing and delivering. By the third day in our resort, if the guest has to ask in the morning that he wants tea and not coffee, then we’re not doing our job. We talk a lot about “guest is god.” We talk a lot about details. We talk about how the culinary art is sacred — you must be able to come to one of our hotels and eat well. We talk a lot about trust and how trust is built on loyalty — to the guest, to our suppliers, our staff and colleagues. It is indeed an honor and a privilege to be a host, and I’ve never forgotten that.

**H: How has the role of the luxury hotel segment changed in recent years?**

Puri: If you talk about ultra-luxury boutique hotels, I think there was a fresh paradigm at one point, when Adrian Zecha (Amanresorts) really started all of this. Today, it’s a bit of a regurgitation of the same thing — everyone’s trying to get the most famous architect and the most famous interior designer and so on. There isn’t a huge point of differentiation that one sees anymore. When someone tells me about the thread count of the sheets and the Bang & Olufsen televisions and

the expensive china and glassware and so on, I have to laugh for a moment, because the guest probably already has that at home and is not that impressed with it. And secondly, that’s not what it’s all about; it’s all about service. Even though they have all this money, what they don’t have at home is something like an authentic spa experience; what they don’t have at home is a fantastic breakfast in the morning; what they don’t have at home is great service, because most people don’t live that way. It’s not about the material things that impress these people; it’s about service that you give and the personality of the hotel that’s important.

Who’s the architect of my hotel in Mauritius? Nobody knows; nobody cares. It’s a local Mauritian person, and he did a nice job, but it doesn’t matter. But when the guest comes and the food isn’t right, or the service isn’t right, or the spa experience isn’t right, he or she definitely cares about it.

**H: How have the needs of luxury guests evolved since the downturn?**

Puri: They still want to drink a great bottle of wine. They still want to eat extremely well. They still want to live in the hotels very well. Their wants and needs haven’t changed that much, or really even evolved.

What has happened is when they’re

shopping and when they’re looking, they have a distinct advantage. Let’s say an article appears about Nira Alpina and they’re interested. They go on the website and are able to check, and then they call the hotel or go online and get a rate, and then they shop around, go on Expedia and see what rate they have.

Their buying habits have changed. The lead times have changed, with people waiting until the last moment, and all of us sit there and sweat, and then we all drop our pants because we’re so desperate to get the business. The guy that’s really winning is the guest who laughs that the later I book, the better the deal I’m going to get.

**H: Is conspicuous consumption dead?**

Puri: I don’t think conspicuous consumption is dead. I think it’s still there, but they’re just more careful. Because you don’t want to be politically incorrect and you don’t want to be seen to be flaunting, you do it more discreetly. The people who enjoy a good bottle of wine, they’re still drinking the good bottle of wine, but they’re drinking it because they genuinely enjoy that bottle of wine.

**H: How important is delivering happiness — offering more than just great hardware and service?**

Puri: The concept that I believe in is being the host. That is totally encompassing, and forgive me for saying this, but it’s not about ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen. It’s not about all these wonderful slogans that we all hear and great visions and mission statements. It’s about what’s really in your heart and knowing that you are the host and that when somebody comes to your hotel that you are the guest-keeper. It’s about making sure that every aspect of the guest experience is properly looked after. It’s not just the room — it’s the F&B experience, it’s the spa experience. Every attention to detail shows respect to the guest that you’re in my home and all of us are here to look after you. At every junction you feel that because every colleague working at the hotel is



committed to and delivering that.

**H: The Nira brand is rooted in Asian luxury hospitality. What are some things that Western hoteliers could learn from their Asian counterparts?**

**Puri:** I think Asia is so far ahead in culinary concepts, in service delivery, in some basic details and so on, that today if you see a hotel in Shanghai or a hotel in Hong Kong versus New York, New York is no longer the benchmark. Labor costs have become so prohibitive that hotels in Europe and the West are just surviving. But in the East, if you look at some of the design elements, it's some of the best design; if you take a look at the product, the services, the uniforms and everything, it's so far ahead. Today, if you want to see trendsetting stuff, you no longer look to the West, you look to the East.

It's really no fault of anybody in the West, it's just that the costs to operate have become so prohibitive that there's no longer the ability to do what people want to do. In general, the reason why you feel so good when you go to stay in a hotel in Shanghai or Hong Kong or Singapore or Tokyo or whatever is the service element.

Yes, labor costs are high, and yes, we need to make sure that we get the efficiency levels and so on. But there's

mediocrity, to tell you the truth, and people get paid the salary because that's the rate — it's not based on meritocracy.

**H: You're regarded as something of a visionary in the hotel F&B segment. What are some F&B trends you see coming up?**

**Puri:** On the one hand, I think people are enjoying the wave of molecular cuisine and so on and so forth, but on the other hand, authenticity is really what guests want. Our genuine desire is to be able to eat organic and eat fresh. That's why everything we serve is farmed, raised, caught or bred within a few miles. In Mauritius, for instance, 95% of our wines are South African wines; I don't want to ship wines from Italy to Mauritius. I want our guests, when they come to Africa, to taste and enjoy the bounty of Africa.

Give the people stuff that is fresh, and try to make things that are authentic. The Indian restaurant that we have in London — there's eight-and-a-half-thousand in the U.K. — so what I've done with my restaurant is to celebrate the culinary journey along the Grand Trunk Road that goes from Calcutta to Kabul and celebrate the rural bounty of India. It has had so much press, and the guests love it when they come and they travel that journey with us along

the Grand Trunk Road.

Stories are the social currency of the world — that's what we all pay for. I'm talking about emotion, where somebody says, "This particular vegetable that you're eating was farmed here by this farmer that produces only so much and is really committed to this. He's a fourth-generation farmer who produces this." That's fantastic.

**H: How much is sustainability about the story versus the desire to be green?**

**Puri:** It's a bit of both. Today, more than ever, we are much, much more cognizant of the environment and what we are going to leave for generations behind. So that's definitely there, but at the same time, it's also what the story is. Once there's a buzzword, everyone starts talking about sustainability, but there are people that — without the fanfare and the drama — have been doing it for generations. Those are the ones you celebrate, because it's a part of their culture.

**H: Are there any profound lessons that you've learned in nearly four decades in the hospitality industry?**

**Puri:** It's a people's business — that's it. That's how simple it is. My colleagues are people. My guests are people. My suppliers are people. Once you understand that it's a people's business and it's about relationships, that's really it. And not just saying this because it's the new buzzword, but genuinely believing and genuinely practicing and genuinely living it — then it all becomes quite simple. Because if you're naturally a host, and you're naturally a warm, caring person, then you're successful as a hotelier. Then, your guests love you. Then, the travel agents and the tour operators love you. That is really, singularly, the most important thing, because then it's all authentic, then it's all genuine, then it's all part of your makeup and your psyche. It's what you do. This business is about making money, and money is about customers, and customers only come when they are treated well. It's really people, and once you understand that, then this business is a charm.