

Mabuhay Ka!

By Vic Alcuaz

Hotelier Heinrich Maulbecker is a 'builder'

WHEN HEINRICH Maulbecker agreed to see me for this interview at the Paseo Uno of the Mandarin Oriental, he was in his usual 'joking mood' - starting our chit chat with a couple of hotelier jokes which set the mood on high gear from the very beginning.

On his 50th year as a hotelier - Heinrich like many seasoned hoteliers started his career from the ranks in his beloved country Germany at the age of 17. It was in 1978 when he was a resident manager of the Hyatt Bangkok that he got his marching orders from his bosses to go to the Philippines and check out a property called Baguio Terraces. His assignment was to study the viability of converting the hotel into a Hyatt brand. When he first saw the hotel, his first instinct was to pack his bags and head back to Thailand! The Baguio Terraces owner and his bosses were able to prevail upon Heinrich to stay and help turn around the property into a 5-star resort Baguio City and Hyatt could be proud of. After careful consideration Heinrich accepted the challenge and the Baguio Terraces was re-branded into the Hyatt Terraces Baguio. Heinrich was still hoping that this assignment would be temporary and that in 2 years he would be re-assigned somewhere else. Little did he know that he would soon fall in love with Baguio City and it's people so much so that any future attempts to move him to another Hyatt location were fiercely rejected by him. He remained the only general manager the hotel ever had until that fateful earthquake of 1990.

On that fateful day of 1990 - The earthquake that brought down the Hyatt Terraces Baguio killed 75 people, among them some expatriate and Filipino executives, hotel staff, guests and Heinrich's wife, Daisy Gomez. Heinrich still asks himself until today why he stepped out of the hotel 3 minutes before it went down. Then he answers his own question and says, "someone had to be in charge, can you imagine a hotel disaster as bad as this one without a general manager?" Even in the face of the worst time of his life, Heinrich was still in charge, ensuring that everyone and everything was in order. He did not like to make things any worse for the aggrieved. Heinrich has received numerous commendations and appreciation for the gargantuan task of retrieving bodies, coordinating with families, attending funerals, arranging payments, talking to media and government agencies and reporting to Hyatt International and the hotel owners. This unique and painful experience showed Heinrich how resilient the Filipino always is - despite the extreme emotional conditions all around, everyone was so focused on helping the survivors and the families of the victims, the best way they could. A couple of weeks after settling all that had to be done, Heinrich took a break in Manila and it was during this break when he was all by himself that the painful reality struck him like lightning. It was not easy. Anger, sorrow, depression, all these painful emotions could not be prevented. Heinrich then decided it was time to take a break from the Philippines and head back to Europe, for Heinrich life had to move on.

It did not take too long for Heinrich to realize that the Philippines was already his 2nd home. He continued to miss the friends he left behind in Baguio City,



and so he finally decided that "it was time to head back to my real home, the Philippines."

On his return to the city of pines in 1998 - After being away from Baguio City for 7 years, Heinrich got a call from the Fil-Estate Group, which was starting to convert Camp John Hay, once a US military base, into a multi-faceted tourist destination. In their search for an experienced hotelier, they stumbled into Heinrich and hired him as general manager, initially to open their Golf and Country Club and eventually the 200 room The Manor at Camp John Hay, which opened in 2001 and then the CAP Convention Center in time for the Advertising Congress in 2003. Today, Heinrich stands tall amongst his peers as the managing director of this facility which prides itself of being the only 5-star hotel in the city of pines. He has been honored by this city many times in the past but the best honor he has received thus far is the one given by the University of Baguio which conferred him with an honorary degree of Doctor in Humanities, honoris causa. The degree was given to Heinrich for his excellent achievements and expertise in the fields of hotel, restaurant and tourism management. The university further cited his contribution to the development of Baguio City during his residency in the city which spans 30 years.

On his hopes for the future of the tourism industry in the Philippines - Heinrich is bullish about the future of tourism in the Philippines. "Our neighbors are already attracting tourists in double digits compared to our measly 5 million yearly. There is no way but to go up. What we need is a comprehensive and well thought-out 'tourism policy' that will attract investors who will build the necessary infrastructure all over the country. Couple this with our numerous geographic destinations and an excellent human capital that includes great artists and performers, like Lea Salonga and Charice Pempengco. Plus a government that is now responsive and pro-active. How can we go wrong?" Heinrich, who has a reputation for being a 'builder' having transformed run-down hotels to money making properties in Turkey, Thailand and the Philippines, knows what he is talking about.

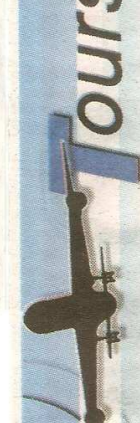
Before we parted ways that evening, Mr Maulbecker could not resist blurting out a couple more 'hotelier jokes' so I obliged. The laughter generated by these jokes between Heinrich and myself was enough to send us both to a great night slumber.

Mabuhay Ka Heinrich!

(Vic Alcuaz is a hospitality headhunter, trainer and consultant. His website is www.vicalcuaz.com)

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