



JW Marriott Hotel Kuala Lumpur

An exclusive report to be distributed with **THE INDEPENDENT**

Transcript of the interview with:

Mr Mahmoud Skaf

General Manager

WORLD REPORT: In your opinion, what is it about Malaysia that makes it a preferred tourism destination worldwide?

MR MAHMOUD SKAF: When compared to the rest of the world, Malaysia is still one of the most affordable countries for tourists to visit. The tourists who come to Malaysia are of many different ethnicities and cultures. Europeans, Americans and Middle Easterners all come here. And, it welcomes every religion. Christians can come to Malaysia and find that a lot of churches are present throughout the country. Muslims, especially from the Gulf, feel welcome in Malaysia because they are able to find people who practice their religion. Chinese and Indians, who come for both business and pleasure, find that it is still an affordable and enjoyable country. And, while this may seem odd to some, the Middle Easterners cherish the rain. They are the only tourists who stand at the window and watch the rain because it is hardly seen. There is a lot to offer, here, in Malaysia. The government has been promoting Malaysia to all types of tourists of all religions. I think everyone will feel welcome when they arrive in Malaysia.

WORLD REPORT: You mentioned that the government is promoting Malaysia and there are many initiatives to advance the tourism sector. Do

you believe that Malaysia has capitalised fully on its tourism potential or is the tourism sector one that will still be developing in the near future?

MR MAHMOUD SKAF: My four year experience in Malaysia tells me that in the past, the government concentrated on a certain market. However, in the last year or two, I have seen some changes. Historically, tourism operated seasonally. In July and August, Malaysia would expect the entire Middle East to travel here. They would concentrate and spend a lot of time, money and effort to attract Middle Eastern tourists during these months. Now, changes have been made. The newly appointed Minister of Tourism promotes Malaysia as one "Truly Asia." I have had the opportunity to be with her at a couple of events. She has a focus on the Middle East, but I see her exposing Malaysia to Chinese and European markets, as well. She is doing what has never been done before. She chooses not to travel as a delegate or diplomat. She travels with the people of Malaysia, taking them with her to introduce Malaysia to the rest of the world. There are so many opportunities that exist to expose Malaysian tourism to middle-class people like you and me. To travel from England to Australia will cost double than travelling to Malaysia. If people become aware of Malaysia, I think there is a big opportunity to receive more tourists.

WORLD REPORT: It is a big opportunity, of course, and what goes with that is a big opportunity for the hotel industry.

MR MAHMOUD SKAF: As a hotel operator, I believe that 100 per cent. Even the local company that owns the hotel believes this, as well. That is why I, and part of the ministry, visit the Middle East every year for about five weeks just to promote Malaysia. I go to a lot of meetings with Marriott; but I enjoy being a part of the ministry to promote Malaysia as a country. If Malaysia does well in receiving tourists, my hotel will benefit, of course. Our mentality at the hotel is if we want to do well, we should promote the country and not just the name of the hotel.

WORLD REPORT: Speaking more about the hotel industry in Malaysia, what types of developments do you expect to see? Is it going to be an MIC tourism development, vacationers, or more business operations? Which type of clients do you wish to attract to Malaysia?

MR MAHMOUD SKAF: The tourism industry in this country has the ability to grow further. The awareness of Malaysia needs to be introduced even more globally. For example, if you go to the Middle East in the months of May and June, on every television channel you will see “Malaysia, Truly Asia” commercials. But, if you go to London, you will not see the same amount being publicised. Globally, the Middle East is not the only region whose summer months are in July and August. It is summer for Europe and America, as well. Of course, I would like to see more tourists; but, I think Malaysia as a country should concentrate on conventions. Malaysia is a great destination for conventions and meetings.

WORLD REPORT: It is the gateway to Asia.

MR MAHMOUD SKAF: Exactly. Location-wise, destination-wise, Malaysia is one of the countries connected to the rest of the world. Malaysia also needs to promote its safety and stability. I have travelled a lot in my life. Before moving here, I came from America. My wife is American. And, my feeling after four years is that Malaysia is one of the safest countries, which still upholds family values. Malaysia was able to attract someone like me. It offers everything that you need. If you have children and are coming from abroad and desire for them to have an English education, there are English schools that are qualified by countries such as England, Australia and the US.

WORLD REPORT: You spoke about perception and safety. Malaysia is next to Indonesia, and sometimes the bad perception of Indonesia affects Malaysia. This misrepresentation cannot be beneficial because it is a safe country and Malaysia definitely needs to improve its global image.

MR MAHMOUD SKAF: Absolutely. That is one thing I hope the new administration will start building.

WORLD REPORT: Within this global web of tourist flows there is the JW Marriott. Could you tell us a bit more about the JW Marriott as opposed to the Marriott?

MR MAHMOUD SKAF: Marriott is the name of the holding company. You do not find JW Marriott everywhere you travel but you do find Marriott everywhere. Looking at standards within the hotel, JW Marriott is of a higher level than Marriott. The Marriott Hotel was created to be comfortable and consistent for the business traveller. In the United States, you do not see many JW Marriott hotels because the need or requirement does not really exist by an American traveller. But, internationally, the name Marriott adds value. Bill Marriott is the current head of the company, but JW was his father, who was the founder of Marriott internationally. He came up with an idea to do something for his father when he retired and made these hotels more special than other Marriott hotels. He added standards, upgraded products within the hotel, and named the hotel after his father. However, certain special customer service requirements need to be met in order to qualify for this name.

WORLD REPORT: It is a Marriott with a raised standard. In today's hotel industry how do you differentiate truly high standard hotels from just high standard hotels? How do you personally ensure that this JW Marriott meets the highest standards of your guests?

MR MAHMOUD SKAF: I am lucky to work for JW Marriott, in Malaysia, because we work hard to keep our service consistent on a day-to-day basis. However, what you find in Malaysia, and in Asia in general, cannot be found in the United States. As a brand, JW Marriott is recognised all over the world, which makes it easy for us because the guest who checks in already has expectations. Any time you fail to deliver, it will be the guest himself who

discovers this. A lot of people travel from the US or Europe, but there are a lot of hotel names in the city that aren't recognisable. Maybe they have heard of them but have never stayed there before. Anything received there will be a surprise to the guest. With JW Marriott, expectations are already there. My job is to make sure we deliver the JW Marriott standard to our guests and promote that to the local government and people. The name has a lot to do with it. You need good leadership and a good staff, but with that name on the building you have a lot going for you.

WORLD REPORT: Regarding your plans for this hotel and the role you would like it to fulfil within Malaysia's tourism sector, where would you like to lead the hotel? What would you like the hotel to be in the future?

MR MAHMOUD SKAF: In general, I think Malaysia could improve on 5-star standard hotels in the country. If you view the size and modernity of the city, how many recognisable 5-star names do you see around? Not many. About ten to fifteen years ago when they started building up the tourism industry, they did not concentrate enough on 5-star accommodations. This is what put them behind a lot of other countries and cities.

What I'd like to do in this hotel – and what I am currently doing – is to make sure that the 5-star standard is present. My job is to convince the Marriott brand and the owning company to keep spending the money so the hotel can remain qualified as a 5-star hotel. I think if all 5-star and 4-star hotels do the same we can improve the image of Malaysia. We do not need to increase the standards to compete with London, Shanghai or Dubai, but I think we can bring it up by 10 per cent, which will help everyone. In the hotel business, you are not going to see anyone spending money if there is not a return on investment. I think this is where the government can help by putting some laws and regulations in place. Two years ago, the government of Malaysia came up with something that stated 5-star hotels should not charge less than \$100/night. That was good but at the same time people are still ranking their hotels as 5-star hotels and they are only

charging \$70/night. It is not only about quality products; you also need quality people coming to your hotel.

WORLD REPORT: It is very encouraging to hear that there are people like yourself who are active in maintaining, promoting and developing the tourism industry. Can you tell us a bit more about yourself? You spent part of your life in the United States and then opened a JW Marriott in Peru. You seem to have quite a global career.

MR MAHMOUD SKAF: I am an American citizen, born in Syria, which is in the Middle East. I then got the opportunity to travel to the US and was there for thirty years. I have been with Marriott for 21 of those years. Most of my life I worked in the US, but when I decided to branch internationally, I chose Latin America, which is close to the US. At that time, the JW Marriott was opening in Lima, Peru. My background comes from the food and beverage industry in the hotel. I was the Director of Operations at that JW Marriott, responsible for the total operations of the hotel and casino. I enjoyed Latin America and I think it is a great place. It is beautiful and I enjoyed the language and food. But, of course, September 11th happened and it was the worst time, economically, in Latin America. As a part of Marriott's management team, we tried to re-engineer some of the positions. I was asked if I would like to travel and experience Asia and, hence, was offered to go to China. I was both excited and scared, but I was lucky to be a part of the opening of China as a country. I got to live in Shanghai for a little over two years and experience the change daily. I remember coming to Kuala Lumpur with my wife on vacation and we thought it wouldn't be a bad city in which to work. It is much easier than Shanghai, where you need to walk around with a book because the language barrier is very difficult. Three years later we received a phone call from my regional office, asking me to come to Kuala Lumpur. It was perfect. I experienced a lot in the US with Marriott and also worked for other companies, including Hilton and Hyatt. I can see the difference and I enjoy working for Marriott because I like their values. A lot of people say the hotel business is not easy. I always tell the younger generation, "If you don't like the job, find something else. You either

love it or hate it.” There is no in-between because you need someone who is willing to socialise and talk with guests, meet different people and accept different ways of life. You need to be open. And, in the hotel industry we take the good, the bad and the ugly.

WORLD REPORT: As a final message to the readers of *The Independent* what does Marriott stand for?

MR MAHMOUD SKAF: Marriott stands for one thing which we go by every day. “If you take care of your associates, they will take care of your customers.” In this hotel, or in any Marriott, we try to avoid a VIP list. Marriott’s philosophy is that every guest is a VIP. That is really something that we believe in and try to welcome everyone into this ‘home away from home’. Marriott, the associates and financiers all stand for the customer. As a Marriott employee, every day when I walk in, I go straight for the customers’ comments before checking my email or talking to anyone. We build our day based on the customer.

WORLD REPORT: Thank you very much for your comments.