



FAMILY OPPORTUNITIES

THE OPENING OF LUXURY VILLA RESORT THE SIAM RAISES THE BAR FOR HOTELS IN BANGKOK AND MARKS A DRAMATIC CHANGE OF DIRECTION FOR ITS OWNERS, THE SUKOSOL FAMILY. WE MEET THE CLAN TO TALK BUSINESS, ANTIQUES AND SHOWBIZ

Words Greg Lovsee Photos Guillaume Mégevand

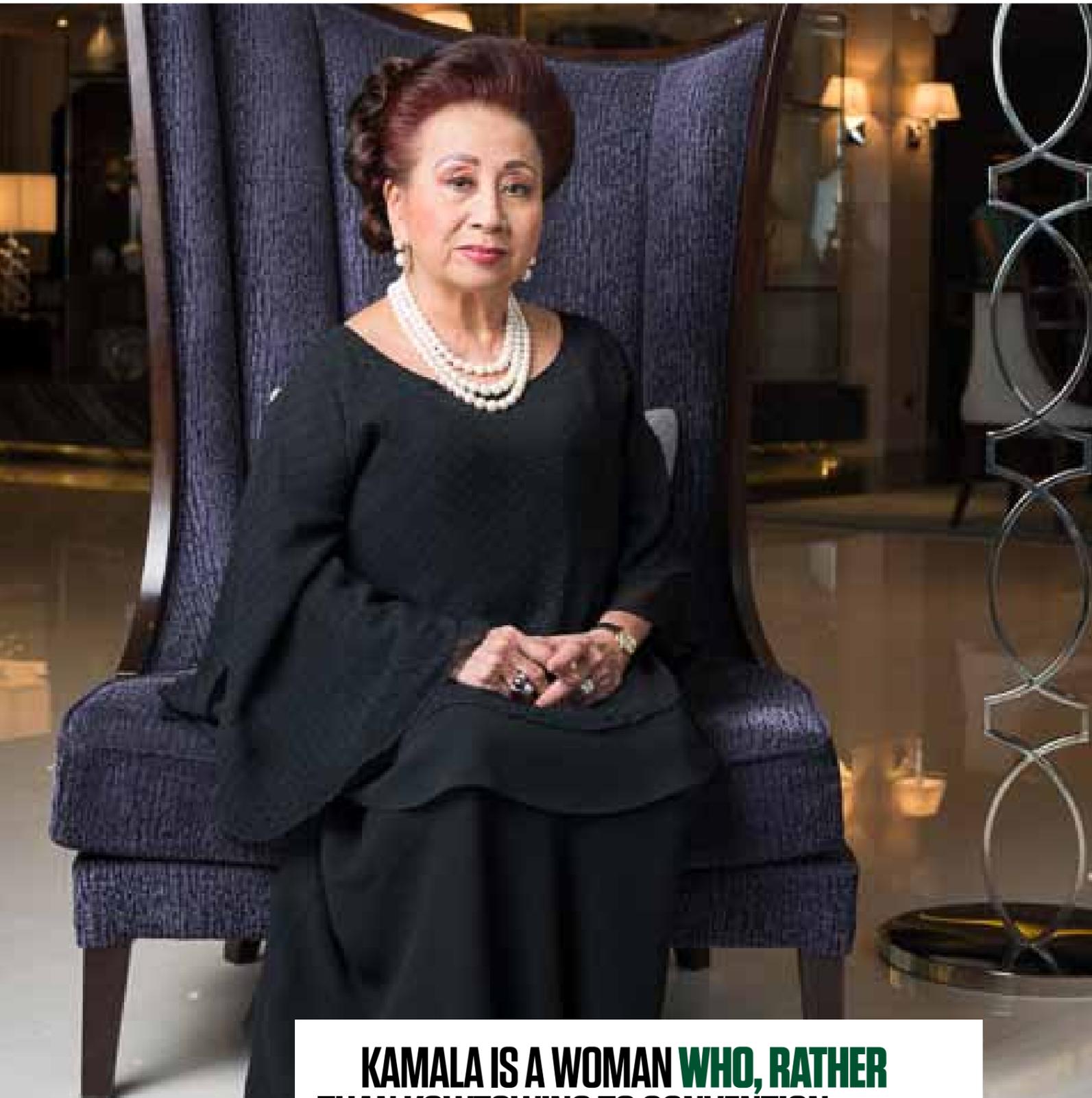
● It seems unusual for tears to be at the root of a luxury resort's creation, but it could be said that The Siam, a multi million-dollar luxury property in old Bangkok, has its origin in an emotional TV appearance by the eldest daughter of the Sukosol clan, which owns the project.

"She always had what I call 'first-child syndrome,'" says Kamala Sukosol, the 71-year-old matriarch of the family, whose business interests include hotels, electrical appliances, healthcare equipment and motor vehicles. Kamala is referring to her daughter Marisa Sukosol Nunbhakdi's appearance in a 2004 documentary, during which she broke down when discussing the pressures of running the family business and how those

pressures were amplified by a lack of support from her siblings.

"Marisa always complained about the others [her brothers Krissada "Kris" Sukosol Clapp and Kamol "Sukie" Sukosol Clapp and sister Daranee Sukosol Clapp], asking why everyone else worked for themselves while she had to shoulder the responsibility of helping me run the family business," Kamala says. "But she's been wonderful and the whole philosophy of the family coming together was down to her."

Marisa's televised plea for help seemed to do the trick. Daranee brought her experience as an investment banker into the company, which was known as Siam City Hotels & Resorts before being rebranded as Sukosol

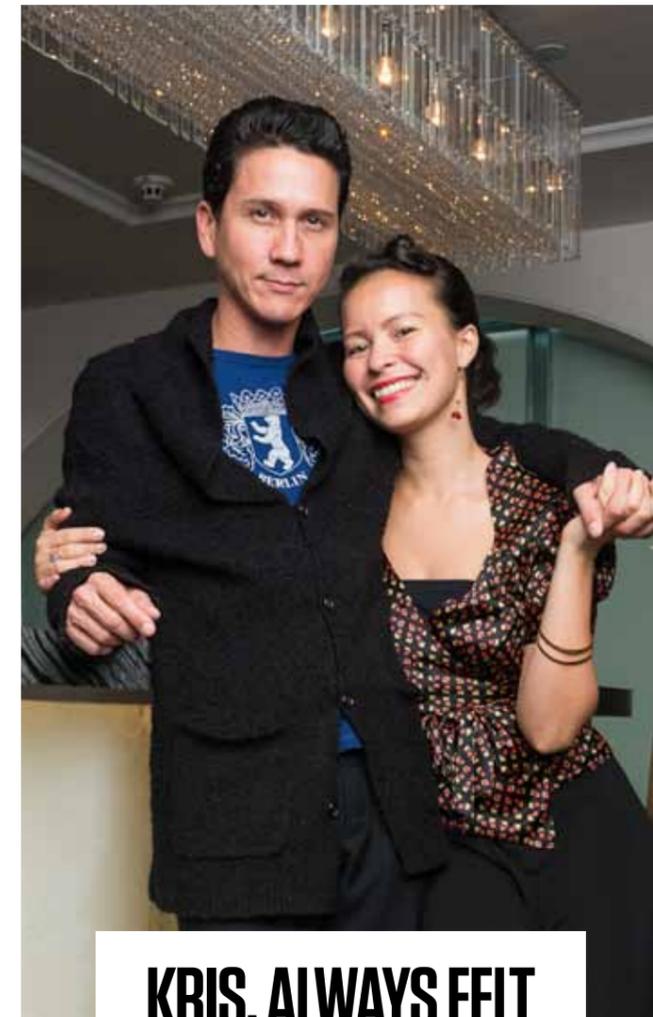


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Hotels earlier this year. Kris, an established actor and former lead singer of Thai band Pru, who had always felt a “little guilty” about pursuing his own interests, says The Siam project enabled him to put his passion to work in support of the family’s business endeavours. His elder brother Sukie, who founded Bakery, a pioneering indie music label, made the decision to come on board at about the same time in 2005.

As the four children, their mother and Kris’ wife, Melanie, discuss the roller-coaster ride of the past few years while seated in the Sapphire Bar at The Sukosol (formerly Siam City Hotel) in downtown Bangkok, it’s clear that they’re linked by a strong bond. Conversations multiply as the siblings recount the highs and lows involved in moving their brand into the uncharted waters of the luxury market. Before The Siam, the company’s portfolio consisted of the Siam City Hotel and two three-star properties in Pattaya. With more opinions at the table than family members, friendly disagreements abound and there’s more than a touch of boisterousness thrown into the mix.

There’s a maverick air to the family, evident from its members’ unorthodox, somewhat visceral approach to business and their refreshing candidness, credit for which clearly goes to the mother. Over the past 40 years or so, Kamala has built a reputation as a solid businesswoman. In 1972, she was given the go-ahead by her father to develop her first plot of land, which led to the opening of the Siam Bayview Hotel three years later. It was the family’s first foray into the hospitality sector and the first public indication that Kamala is a woman who, rather than kowtowing to convention, insists on blazing her own trail. A committed philanthropist who



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supports issues ranging from children’s health to conservation, she was listed by *Forbes Asia* as one of its 48 Heroes of Philanthropy in 2009. Kamala is also at the root of the family’s long-standing interest in music, having carved out a career as a jazz singer with more than 20 recordings to her name.

While Kamala is clearly pleased that she and her children have joined forces, she’s especially happy that this coming together occurred naturally. “I’ve never groomed them for the family business,” she says, “they mostly went off and found their own niches and have now gravitated back towards the family.

“My father always forced me to do something with his land. He always said, ‘Empty land is worth nothing’. I agree with that but it became a forced issue in my life. So when I had my own kids, I decided I wasn’t going to force them to do anything.”

Marisa adds that it was a “purely practical” decision for her siblings to become more involved in the day-to-day operations of the family business. The company was always well managed, she says, but more people were needed at the corporate level to enable the firm to expand and better meet the challenges of the highly competitive hotel sector.

It’s hard to think of a more striking outcome of this newfound spirit of collaboration than The Siam, which has not only set a new benchmark for six-star properties in the city, it has also taken the Sukosols far outside their comfort zone. The 39-room resort is located on the east bank of the Chao Phraya River in the Dusit district of Bangkok.

Designed by Bill Bensley, a leading resort architect, the project boasts individually designed suites and pool villas, four traditional Thai houses that were found in Ayutthaya by Jim Thompson, the American who revitalised Thailand’s flagging silk industry, plus interiors furnished with antiques from the family’s extensive collection. The Siam also offers guests a level of seclusion and anonymity that’s hard to find elsewhere in the city.

All of this, however, came at a staggering cost of THB2 billion (US\$65 million), of which roughly half was the value of the land. Even months after the resort’s opening, there’s still a palpable sense of shock, or at least amazement, around the table at the amount of cash that was spent. “It was horrendous, but it’s satisfying to see the product,” says Kamala. “What else can I say? It’s done. You can’t go back. At the beginning I was thinking of something like Rachamankha [a boutique resort in Chiang Mai], something simpler, which would cost about THB300 million. “It



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got out of hand, but it got out of hand in a good way.”

Daranee, who says she’s not “very happy” about the cost, expects the resort to break even within seven years. “The average cost per room [about US\$1 million] does not make sense from a financial perspective, but this property was not built from a financial or a return perspective,” she says. “In the long term, it’s going to make money. The goodwill and intangibles that the product will create for our brand are also extremely valuable.”

Kris, who handles the creative side of The Siam, says it wasn’t his intention to set a new standard for luxury resorts in the city or to put the resort in the position of counting the likes of The Oriental

and The Sukhothai as competitors. “It kind of spiralled,” he says, adding that his initial concept was nowhere near so grand.

In 2005, when Kris was looking to get more involved in the family business, Kamala grabbed the opportunity presented by the expiration of the lease for a restaurant located on the plot, which the family had owned since 1973. Given his love of antiques and old Bangkok, Kamala encouraged Kris visit the site to see if he could come up with any ideas on how to develop it. “I come from an indie background, I was an indie artist, so I thought why not build an indie hotel?” he says. “I knew it was going to be unique and filled with the antiques we’ve collected. I always knew it was

going to be called The Siam, because of its location. I also knew that with that name I was driven to deliver: to live up to the name and represent our culture.”

Commissioning Bill Bensley as The Siam’s architect ended up transforming both the project and the entire family business. Kris, a long-time collector of Thai antiques, was well aware of Bensley’s stellar reputation in architectural circles but, more importantly, recognised him as a fellow antiquarian. “I kept seeing his name bidding for the same pieces as me at auctions across the country, so I knew we had similar tastes,” Kris says. “Not everything, but we appreciated the same pieces. I appreciated his work. There’s a variety to it, of course, but there’s always a homeliness to his designs. He creates resorts that stand out for being comfortable, very down to earth. So I thought he’d be the right person for the job.”

However, Kris’s heart skipped a beat when Bensley returned from the drawing board with his first plans for the eight rai (roughly 13,000m²) development. “His vision was the total opposite of what I had in mind. It shared the same spirit, but it was much more grand in terms of scale. I was taken aback at the beginning and I knew right away that it was going to be more costly, but he presented me with something that I’d not seen before.”

Sukie says that he was initially concerned that the hotel was turning into a vanity project. “He [Kris] didn’t want it to be too grand, too opulent. And we were fighting with Bill over that at one point. Well, not fighting exactly but we felt it was too gaudy at first. But once we were moving in that direction with the grander scale, he wanted to do it right. That means not cutting corners. It means spending money.”

Though the family used to joke that it was not ambitious -- Kris now describes it as being “quietly ambitious” – it’s clear that the Sukosols were aiming high with The Siam. It’s just as obvious that they hit the mark. The property has already earned plaudits from leading publications ranging from the *Financial Times* to *Condé Nast Traveler* and word-of-



THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS INSPIRED THE FAMILY TO UP ITS GAME EVEN MORE

mouth recommendations have been responsible for attracting a healthy proportion of the resort's guests. The development process inspired the family to up its game even more by rebranding the company as Sukosol Hotels and positioning it as a more contemporary and stylish player in the hospitality industry. November sees the launch under the Sukosol Hotels brand of Wave in Pattaya, followed in 2014 by the opening of the Siam Arun in Bangkok and the inauguration of the Siam Plantation eco-resort in

Kanchanaburi sometime in 2015.

So, given the somewhat tumultuous but ultimately successful experience of building The Siam, and the fact that the family business has found a new direction, does Kamala feel she has finally established her legacy? "No, legacy isn't really part of my philosophy," she says. "I do whatever I feel like doing on a particular day at a particular time. I'm not really a schemer. At the end of the day, I just want to be happy, otherwise what's the point of living?" ①

โรงแรมส่วนมาก ไม่ได้เริ่มต้นกำเนิดจากเรื่องเคล้าเคล้าน้ำตา ทว่าโรงแรมเดอะสยามของตระกูลสุโกศล กลับมีจุดเริ่มต้นที่ ตระกูลสุโกศล ธุรกิจมากมาย ตั้งแต่โรงแรม เครื่องใช้ไฟฟ้า อุปกรณ์เพื่อสุขภาพและยานยนต์ คุณกมลลา สุโกศล หัวหน้าตระกูลสุโกศล กล่าวถึงคุณมารีลา ลูกสาวของเธอว่า มารีลามีนิสัยแบบฉบับของลูกคนโต ที่ชอบ บ่นว่า ทำไมหน่ะของเธอล่ะถึงมีโอกาสเลือกทำงานในสิ่งที่ตัวเองชอบ ในขณะที่เธอต้องแบกรับธุรกิจที่บ้าน คุณมารีลาถึงกับร้องไห้ระหว่างการถ่ายรายการโทรทัศน์ในปี 2004 เมื่อเธอพูดถึงความกดดันที่ได้รับจากการทำธุรกิจของครอบครัว

หลังจากที่รายการโทรทัศน์ออกอากาศไป ก็ทำให้พี่น้องคุณมารีลา เริ่มให้ความช่วยเหลือในธุรกิจมากขึ้น ทั้งคุณดารณี ที่นำความรู้เรื่องการลงทุนมาช่วยเหลือ คุณ กฤษดา นักแสดงและนักร้องเพลงวงพุ่ม และคุณกมล หรือลูกี้ แห่งค่ายเบเกอรี่ ต่างก็หันมาช่วยเหลือธุรกิจโรงแรมของครอบครัว

เป็นที่ชัดเจนว่า ครอบครัวสุโกศลรักใคร่กลมเกลียวกันมาก เมื่อทั้งครอบครัวปรึกษาหารือเรื่องธุรกิจโรงแรม เดอะ สุโกศล (เดิมชื่อโรงแรม สยาม ซิตี้) แม้ว่าความคิดเห็น ของแต่ละคนจะแตกต่างกัน ทว่าข้อได้เปรียบก็จบลงด้วยการหยอกหลอกกัน

โรงแรมแห่งใหม่ล่าสุดของครอบครัวสุโกศล คือโรงแรม เดอะ สยาม ที่ตั้งอยู่ริมแม่น้ำเจ้าพระยา ได้รับการออกแบบโดยคุณบิลล์ เบนส์เลย์ นักออกแบบโรงแรมด้วยง ที่ ออกแบบห้องพักแต่ละห้อง ตามแบบบ้านไทยโบราณในอยุธยาของคุณจิม ทอมป์สัน นอกจากนี้ ห้องพักแต่ละห้อง ยังตกแต่งด้วยเครื่องใช้โบราณ ที่ทางครอบครัวสุโกศล สะสมมาช้านานอีกด้วย งบประมาณในการก่อสร้างโรงแรมแห่งนี้ สูงถึงสองล้านล้านบาททีเดียว คุณกมลกล่าวไว้ ถึงแม้ว่าราคาจะสูงจนน่าตกใจ ทว่าเธอพึงพอใจกับ ผลงานที่ออกมามากที่สุด

การได้คุณบิลล์ เบนส์เลย์ มาเป็นผู้ออกแบบโรงแรม นับเป็นการเปลี่ยนแปลงครั้งใหญ่ ทั้งในแง่ของรูปแบบโรงแรม และธุรกิจของครอบครัวโดยรวม คุณกฤษดา หรือคุณ น้อย กล่าวไว้ ตัวเขาเองนั้น ชอบสะสมของโบราณอยู่แล้ว และได้รู้จักชื่อเสียงของคุณบิลล์ ก็เพราะทั้งสอง มักจะต้องประมูลราคาแข่งกัน ณ งานประมูลราคาของเก่าเสมอๆ ทำให้คุณน้อยรู้ว่า เขาและคุณบิลล์ มีรสนิยมคล้ายๆกัน

แม้ว่าโรงแรมเดอะสยาม จะยิ่งใหญ่ผิดจากที่คุณน้อยวาดภาพไว้ในตอนแรก ทว่า สิ่งผลลัพธ์ที่ได้นั้น ไม่น่าผิดหวังเลยทีเดียว โรงแรมเดอะสยาม ได้รับคำชื่นชมจากนิตยสาร นานาชาติ เช่น Financial Times ไปจนถึง Conde Nast Traveler และทำให้นักท่องเที่ยวต่างๆ พากันหลงใหลเข้าสู่โรงแรม