

Take the plunge

Life can be unpredictable, and Andreas Flückiger, general manager, Radisson SAS, Deira, has always challenged it head on. He sat down with Gulf Gourmet to share some of the lessons he has learned along the way

Umaima Tinwala

If there was one thing Andreas Flückiger regrets not doing, it's 'kissing the bride' at his wedding. But it wasn't cold feet that stopped him - rather the laws of the land where he got married. "Heidi and I got married in Kuwait because - and this may sound terribly unromantic - we needed a visa for her to stay on with me," he admits sheepishly.

But this kind of 'in the moment' passion is what drives Andreas, be it his personal life or professional. And it is this passion that has brought him to where he is, as General Manager of the Radisson SAS, Deira.

"To be offered this position in a hotel that has so much history, well, it's like a promotion. I was GM in Kuwait, but this position feels like a promotion really, because it has so many fresh challenges," he says.

And this from a man who, at 15, had no idea what he wanted to do. "In Switzerland, where I'm from, there is a lot more emphasis on practical learning than pure theory," he explains. So most people start their careers at the age of 15 or 16, go for work five days and class one day a week, and already have some experience on their resume by 18 or 20.

But Andreas was confused about what he wanted. "My sister had started her apprenticeship a year before, and she accidentally found herself in the kitchen. But she liked it, so I decided I'll go that way too. I really did not have any special interest in food at the time - I just chose it because my sister was already there. But I tried it, liked it, and worked in the kitchens of Switzerland and Norway for seven years," he smiles.

It was then that Andreas decided to formalise his career, and did a two-year course in food and beverage management. "I did my traineeship with SAS National Hotels, as it was called in those days - that was my first contact with the company - in Brussels," he says.

But his stint here was not in the kitchen. In fact, he admits, he did hotel management to get out of the kitchen. "I do love cooking and it will always be a passion. But I also figured I didn't want to spend all my life in the kitchen," he muses, adding cheekily, "And sometimes, I just take decisions in my life on impulse, without putting too much thought into it." And there are no regrets.

For Andreas, starting all over was not an issue he thought much about. His seven years of experience in the industry were washed away, and he started in F&B at a junior level. "Yes, today young people do come in at higher positions fresh from hotel school, but I firmly



Andreas Flückiger, General Manager, Radisson SAS, Deira, Dubai

GRILL OF THE MONTH



Andreas Flückiger - A team man

“I actually prefer Kuwait, for the simple reason that there are fewer expats there, so the interaction between different communities and nationalities is more. Also, because of the restrictions, life is more streamlined,” he says, adding, “To give you a simple example, my son is having trouble making friends here because he is not British.”

believe that if you don't know what's going on in operations, then you don't know what it feels for them when you get to a higher position. If you haven't served, cleaned, moved furniture and got your hands dirty, you cannot understand what it takes. So yes, it is important to start from scratch,” he explains.

“I'm not saying one needs to spend forever doing this,” he adds, “But there is a middle ground between the two.”

With his basics down pat, Andreas moved to Ecuador, South America, as Asst F&B Manager for a Oliverde, a small Swiss company, whose name literally translates to mean 'green gold', signifying the importance of the banana fruit in the region. Two years down the line, Asia was the next destination.

The Amari Group, a Thai company, offered him a job in Phuket as Resident Manager. Six months later, he quit. “I did not like the philosophy of the company. I found myself apologising for a whole lot. And unfortunately, I did not have the means at hand to change anything. If I did, I would have stuck on and taken it as a challenge to reach that light at the end of the tunnel. But I did not have that position, so I felt it was better to leave,” he explains.

The next stop was China, with the Holiday Inn in Urumuchi, the most land-locked city in the world. “When I got there, I saw the strangest thing. All literature was in Chinese, and Arabic!” he exclaims. But he was to later understand that Urumuchi was the capital of the Xinjiang province, which is predominantly Muslim – East Turks who still read and write in Arabic.

The experience was interesting, with two cultures living next to each other, not together as one, but still fairly tolerant of the others presence. “The food was most interesting, with oriental food and bread ovens to make Iranian bread,” he smiles.

Fifteen months later, he received a call from the same company for which he had worked in Ecuador. “They offered me the position of F&B Director for a new hotel in Peru, as part of the opening team. That was something I had never done before, so I accepted and packed my bags again and moved to Peru,” he smiles.

It was three years that gave Andreas many memories for the future. For, this was the place where he met the woman who would be his wife. “I hired her actually,” he says mischievously. Heidi was hired as F&B Manager as part of his team, and romance blossomed much later.

But it was not all play. “The first week, I must admit, I would go to work and scratch my head and think, what am I going to do today? But eventually, things started rolling, with help and guidance from the GM and others, and it all worked out,” he says.

A position of such responsibility is tough at any time, but opening a new hotel is a whole different ballgame. “But it's also a great learning ground. Because you are really setting the standards – the brand always has it's own but you add to it,” he says.

That's when Andreas started getting serious about his career. “I started looking at the offers I was getting with a little more concentration, and considered the future prospects they came with,” he says. But no, that had nothing to do with his girlfriend. “In fact, I never wanted to get married. We more or less split up when I moved out of Peru,” he smiles.

And he had a good choice. With four offers to consider, Andreas chose to go to Kuwait with the Radisson SAS group, where he was trained to take on a managerial position in the company. But there were other changes too. “I had decided when I was in Switzerland itself that I wanted to marry Heidi. So I sent her flowers and a note – she was still in Peru – and used a very common Spanish saying, and asked her, quite literally, if she would be the other half of my orange,” he smiles.

Needless to say, she said yes, and followed him to Kuwait a couple of months later. “In Kuwait, you can't stay together if you are not married, and I also needed a visa to keep her there. So the only option we had was, well, to get married.

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four years,” he laughs.

The decision was inspired by the simple fact that the hotel was, and still is, a very important property for the company, since the current CEO was the first GM of the hotel. So turning down an opportunity to become GM was not an option.

And after four successful years, he moved to Dubai to take over the Radisson SAS Deira as General Manager.

For Andreas though, it’s not the work challenges that worry him. “I’m not too happy with Dubai as a city. Yes, it has great facilities, you can go to bars and clubs, but it’s not the kind of lifestyle I’d like,” he shrugs.

With three little ones in tow - 5 -year-old Alexis, 3 1/2 -year-old Luca and 11-month-old Isabella - Andreas is more concerned about the kind of friends his family is making.

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Which is why Dubai is not the last stop for Andreas, and as and when the offer comes along, he will consider the change. Meanwhile, he is busy ensuring the Radisson SAS lives up to its history, both in terms of the brand, and for the property it has taken over. Here’s wishing him all the best.

consular way, which would be too time-consuming, and the second was in the Ministry, which was simple and quick. So we found a bishop who gave us an NOC, got it translated, and with two male witnesses and 30 USD, we went to the Ministry of Justice and got married. And no, I could not kiss the bride,” he says woefully.

The most unromantic wedding, as he puts it, did not end there. “The wedding party was dinner for two in the staff accommodation, and our marriage was only valid in Kuwait because the embassy was not involved,” he says. But he did make it official with the consulates

eventually, with plans for a renewal of vows, “when the kids are old enough to really be a part of it”.

Two years later, Andreas was promoted to operations manager, and moved back to a hotel in Switzerland. But the Middle East beckoned again, and he came back to Kuwait as General Manager.

“The first time I moved out of Kuwait, I actually never thought I’d go back. Some people were standing there waving their fingers at me, saying, yeah, I remember what you said. But I was there, and I stayed on for

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