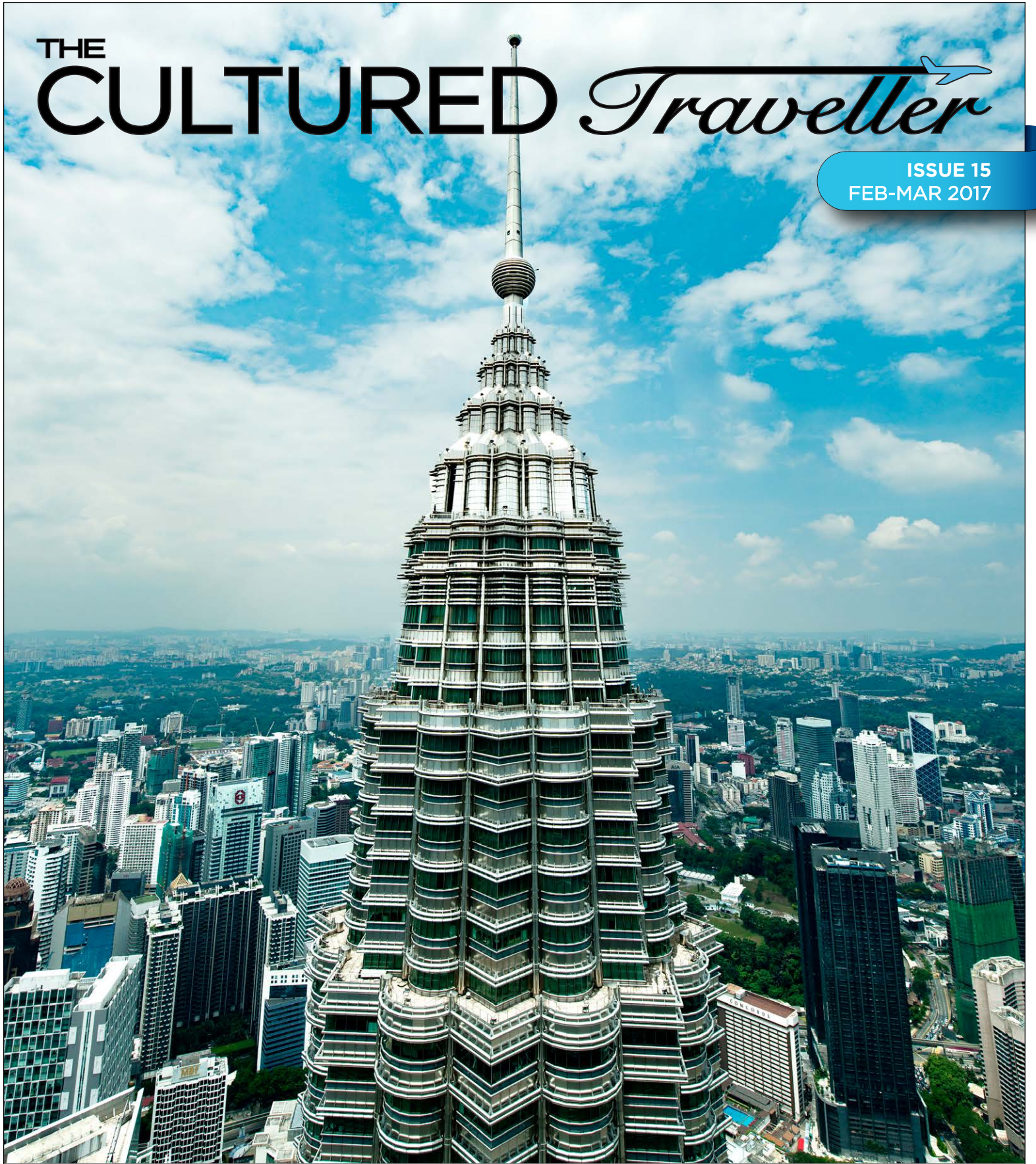


# THE CULTURED *Traveller*

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## KUALA LUMPUR

LANGKAWI • KOSRAE • JABAL AKHDAR

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THE  
CULTUREDCHAT  
WITH  
CHRIS K. FRANZEN

PART OF A FAMILY WITH A FINE HOSPITALITY PEDIGREE, IT'S LITTLE SURPRISE THAT SWISS-BORN HOTELIER, CHRIS FRANZEN, HAS MADE SUCH A NAME FOR HIMSELF IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY. THE SEASONED HYATT HOTEL OPERATOR CHATS WITH *THE CULTURED TRAVELLER* ABOUT HIS CAREER, OVERSEEING MULTIPLE PROPERTIES IN TWO COUNTRIES, AND JUGGLING HIS HECTIC SCHEDULE WITH A DEVOTED FAMILY AND TWO RESCUE DOGS





**GROWING-UP IN A HOSPITALITY ENVIRONMENT ALL I SAW WAS THE GLITZ AND GLAMOUR OF THE INDUSTRY. SINCE OUR GUESTS INCLUDED AUDREY HEPBURN, ROGER MOORE AND MADAME CARTIER, HOTELS HAD A CERTAIN ATTRACTION!**

calls today when I need advice, are Josef Kral and Ashwini Kumar. Josef was the General Manager of Hyatt Regency Dubai. Ashwini is currently the General Manager of Park Hyatt Jeddah, has been an invaluable mentor and I speak to him almost daily.

**Your first post for Hyatt was assistant revenue manager followed by front office manager at Hyatt Regency Dubai, which, back then, was the brand's**

**biggest operation in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Please tell us about this experience.**

Dubai was a different place in those days. There were a handful of 5-star hotels and everyone knew each other. There was great camaraderie in the hotel. We would not only spend our long working hours together, but we would also get together on our days off. In many ways even the guests were different. There was not as much leisure tourism as there is today and many business travellers were returning guests who became friends over the years. As in any hotel, we had exciting days and terrible days. Work was tough and we worked hard but it all paid off.

**After a 4-year stint at Grand Hyatt Muscat, your next posting was Director of Rooms at Ararat Park Hyatt Moscow in 2005. How did working in the capital of the world's largest nation differ from the Middle East and what did you glean from your time in Russia?**

We left beautiful 30°C blue-skied Muscat and landed in cold grey -30°C Moscow! The guest profile was completely different, and the colleagues I worked with were mainly Russian, whereas the work environment in Dubai was very multicultural. We had a tremendous time in Moscow. It is a fantastic albeit expensive city to live in, with people who have a lot to offer, combined with a fascinating history.

**You returned to the Middle East as Executive Assistant Manager at Grand Hyatt Dubai, and then General Manager of Grand Hyatt Muscat. Please tell us about your years in the Omani capital?**

Returning to Oman was simply a dream come true. The Sultanate holds a very special place in my family's hearts. The country is simply breathtaking, with the sea, mountains and fjord-like wadis in and around Muscat. As a passionate motor biker I also enjoyed Oman's beautiful mountain and coastal scenery from the back of my BMW adventure bike. Most importantly we treasure our Omani friends who are the more kind and warm people. We had two 4-year postings in Oman and our kids absolutely loved the place. They still miss it and often ask to visit friends there. On a professional level, for me Grand Hyatt Muscat is an Arabic hospitality gem. Its unique architecture, superb location and variety of restaurants are amongst my favourites of any hotel on the planet.

**How would you describe your management style, and what sets apart Chris Franzen from the thousands of other hotel GMs around the world?**

Being approachable and hands-on. I work alongside my ▶

teams and make swift decisions. There is nothing worse than managers who drag out processes because they are afraid to make decisions and take responsibility. I also enjoy forming relationships with guests – looking after many of them personally. At all times I always strive to add an extra touch of personal service.

**You've amassed a wealth of experience after two decades in the industry. How have you seen the role of a GM evolve over the years?**

We have to be careful that we, as GMs, are not moving from being guest centric to process driven. I sometimes feel that we are tangled up in administrative processes that keep us office bound instead of being visible in the hotel operation.

**As we all try to keep up with the Instagram era, is the convenience of touch-of-the-button technology beginning to surpass millennial travellers' needs for one-to-one interaction, or do guests still enjoy the personal touch?**

I do not believe so. On the contrary, it allows us to interact with our guests and fans even when they are not in the property. We can even stimulate a desire to travel if tools are used properly. We can emotionally engage with our guests

and colleagues through social media and be constantly present. We have also moved away from traditional job listings and changed the way we hire – producing videos of our staff that explain roles to potential employees.

**Since you took over as GM four years ago, Grand Hyatt Doha has become a hospitality landmark in the Qatari capital. How do you keep its service, offerings and ethos fresh in a city where brand new five-star hotels open regularly, and provide a unique and memorable guest experience?**

Being present, interacting with guests, evaluating and trying out new ideas and trends. Basically listening to the needs of guests help us to craft a unique experience and ensure we constantly evolve in what we do, how we do it and whom we want to touch. There was great potential when I arrived in Qatar, since I felt we had neglected people living in Doha and were too focused on too few elite hotel guests. We have changed this with great success.

**A year ago you were promoted to a regional role, looking after Hyatt's properties in Oman and Qatar. What is the difference as far as your challenges are concerned?**

As the Area Vice President for Qatar and Oman I travel a lot more and am involved to a greater degree with our owners. I also interact more frequently on a corporate level within Hyatt. These are all areas I tremendously enjoy being exposed to, since it gives me an opportunity to influence our hotels' directions and how we manage and improve guest and colleague experiences. Exploring new food and beverage concepts with my colleagues from Dubai regional office I also greatly enjoy.

**When a TripAdvisor review can often make or break a hotel's reputation, how have hoteliers adapted their marketing and customer service strategies to accommodate the digital deluge of today?**

There is no question that this technology has fundamentally changed the way guests book and travel. Guests are no longer gullible and can see, differentiate and make an educated decision as to whether a hotel will suit them or not. Both hoteliers and travellers have grown-up and learned to live with guest feedback via social media. We have processes in place to collect guest feedback, analyze it and pinpoint areas in a hotel for improvement. At the same time we also use these tools to see where we are excelling. We still come across guests who are unreasonable in their





**I WORK ALONGSIDE MY TEAMS AND MAKE SWIFT DECISIONS. THERE IS NOTHING WORSE THAN MANAGERS WHO DRAG OUT PROCESSES BECAUSE THEY ARE AFRAID TO MAKE DECISIONS AND TAKE RESPONSIBILITY**

demands and threaten us with a bad review on social media, but we have learnt how to ignore such individuals and keep on doing what we do best – looking after guests.

**You oversee a number of Hyatt properties in the region and are working on some new hotels in development. How do you maintain your energy levels and drive on a typical workday?**

A good night's sleep and a strict rule of having fun at work!

If you can achieve these two points you are halfway there. If I cannot change something I don't lose sleep over it. If I can make a difference I work on it. I apply this to everything I do and everyone I deal with. Being honest, down to earth and straightforward makes my daily processes and workload much easier to handle. I am also blessed by having a fantastic family, my wife Rachel and our children, Ashley and Lex, who support me all the way.

**Doha has attracted a number of celebrities during recent years. Please tell us about your most memorable encounter with one?**

I'm lucky to have met many stars from the movie and entertainment industries, as well as sports personalities and politicians. In Doha, I would probably say my favourite celebrity moment was meeting Kylie Minogue. On a day-to-day basis I meet many of my football heroes from when I was a kid, including Graeme Souness, Kevin Keegan, Peter Reid, Clive Alan, Alan Shearer and Ian Rush. My two favourites are beIN Sports presenters Andy Gray and Richard Keys who have become close friends.

**As someone who lives, sleeps and breathes five-star hospitality for a living, we want to know your favourite hotel in the world to stay (not a Hyatt) and why?**

I haven't found that hotel yet! But when I do, it will be perched atop a mountain with a fantastic host who raises a glass with his guests, the basics are spot on and luxury is left outside the door.

**You travel continuously for work yet are a dedicated family man with two kids. How difficult is it to make this work?**

My wife Rachel has worked in the industry so she knew what to expect when we married. In my job it is important to have an understanding spouse, otherwise one is not able to fully function and work the necessary hours. It's always great to return home to my wife and kids and our two rescue dogs, Chewbacca and Han Solo.

**Where and how does Chris Franzen best relax?**

On a motorbike – anywhere in the world. I have ridden in South Africa, Lesotho, Vietnam, Bhutan, Australia, the USA and Europe. There is something magical when you put on that helmet and no one can talk to you. In the absence of a bike, in the company of fantastic people and a good bottle of Champagne! 🍷