

# 'Finding Right Talent Most Challenging'

NAVIN SUCHANTI, CEO & MD, Sinclairs Hotels



**N**avin Suchanti is the CEO and managing director of Sinclairs Hotels, which currently owns and operates five properties in Siliguri, Darjeeling, Dooars, Port Blair and Ooty. An entrepreneur with a focus on services sector, he has 38 years of experience in advertising, public relations and the hospitality industry. Having majored in Physics, he has strong analytical skills. As CEO and managing director, apart from leading the operations and administrative team, he is responsible for implementing the company's aggressive growth plans. In an exclusive interview with **Sharmila Chand**, Mr Suchanti, shares his views on Sinclairs Hotels. Excerpts:

## ■ Will you take us through the journey of Sinclairs?

Sinclairs is based in Kolkata with a network of offices across the country. Our maiden venture was in Siliguri, which happens to be West Bengal's second most important city. The next to follow was Darjeeling, which to say the least, has top-of-the-mind awareness among tourists.

We acquired Sinclairs in 1990 with these two properties. Undaunted by the fact that both the properties were sick and the company had accumulated large losses, we acquired Sinclairs because of its inherent potential. No wonder, with new management inputs and capital infusion, the two properties were turned around in a couple of years and they became profitable.

Emboldened by this experience, the company acquired another ailing property in Port Blair, Andamans, with the idea to turn it around. This was a 24-room hotel. An expansion and refurbishing programme was launched and the property was fully renovated. The room count was also increased to 46.

The next sick hotel to be acquired was in Ooty. This property is undergoing thorough refurbishment and upgrade to a four-star establishment. The first greenfield project of Sinclairs was in Chalsa in the Dooars region, where nature plays out its exuberance. The location was selected for its scenic richness and to form a chain in north Bengal with its existing two properties in Siliguri and Darjeeling. Sinclairs Retreat Dooars in Chalsa is unarguably the best property in entire north Bengal.

## ■ How about the ongoing projects?

Our strategy is to remain the largest player in north Bengal and this has prompted us to set up a 48-room luxury resort in Kalimpong, where construction work is in full swing and we hope to play host to our guests by the middle of the next year.

We want the chain to expand in south Bengal too and in line with this strategy, we are setting up a 20-room luxury resort with extensive club and banqueting facilities in Burdwan. This property will also be commissioned in early 2012.

Having come this far, it is important for Sinclairs to have a property in Kolkata and, therefore, we are now setting up a 104-room hotel in Rajarhat, Kolkata. This will be a first-class business hotel and we expect it to be commissioned by 2014. These will increase our room inventory to nearly 500.

■ **What is the USP of your chain of hotels? What sets it apart from other hospitality majors?**

We are focused on the budget traveller. This segment is registering the highest growth rate in the hospitality industry. We provide quality accommodation and personalised services at affordable rates. We lay a lot of emphasis on the quality of food and each of our properties has a reputation for its cuisine.

■ **What has been the trend in terms of occupancy levels in your hotels?**

Other than Siliguri, all our hotels are in seasonal locations. In Siliguri, the average annual occupancy is around 65 per cent, whereas in other properties, it ranges from 35 to 45 per cent.

■ **What is your domestic-versus-international guest ratio? Do you have a guest loyalty programme?**

The present focus is on the domestic travellers. As much as 95 per cent of our revenues are from domestic travellers, while the rest is from international travellers.

In Siliguri, which is a business destination, we have Privilege Cardholders, who enjoy certain discounts when they use the hotel. If a guest has stayed in any of our hotels and thereafter stays in another property, we extend a discount to them.



Hotel Sinclairs, Ooty

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■ **How important is the role of a spa in generating business for your Chalsa Retreat?**

Currently, there are hardly any resorts in eastern India that offer a true spa vacation. Our resort in Chalsa is a perfect location for a spa. The arresting green landscape, the healthy climate, our home-grown organic vegetables and a bouquet of facilities provide the perfect spa ambience. An outdoor-cum-indoor spa is being set up within the property and we expect it to be operational by September. We have tied up with a well-known spa operator to run the same. We are confident that this will be a very significant step to increase occupancies in the resort.

■ **What is the most crucial issue to tackle in the hospitality industry?**

Finding the right talent is one of the most challenging tasks for the hospitality industry. Many new international brands have come to India and the demand for hotel professionals is growing exponentially. Sadly, in many cases, the quality of manpower churned out by mushrooming hotel management institutes is below par.

■ **What has been your strategy**

**for growth?**

We are looking to expand our chain by adding new properties, both through greenfield ventures and the acquisition route. We are actively looking at acquiring hotels, whose location, size and segment fit into our scheme of things.

■ **Would you like to consider international affiliation for your chain?**

Sinclairs is a home-grown brand and is today well recognised in its segment. We are constantly making efforts to strengthen the brand. While we are not averse to an international affiliation, we would definitely not drop the Sinclairs brand totally. As we expand, the brand will get stronger and there will be an opportunity to diversify as a hotel operator for properties not owned by the company.

■ **What are the challenges in running a chain like yours?**

Besides finding the right talent as I mentioned earlier, strict cost control and multi-tasking of the core team are some of the challenges faced by hotels in the budget category, more so for those operating in leisure destinations that are seasonal. ■