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# LIFE INSPIRED

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## THE CALL OF HOME

Monica Lai tells us a bit about herself and The RuMa, which promises a wonderful guest experience unlike any other

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FEATURE

# COMING HOME TO THE RUMA

Monica Lai shares insights on her life and a new form of hospitality that surpasses expectations

By **ROGER VALBERG**  
Photos **YAP CHEE HONG**

There is something going on in the Malaysian hotel scene. More than a few have opened this year to great fanfare but the one you may want to know about is The RuMa Hotel and Residences. Situated in Jalan Kia Peng, it is pretty much in the middle of all the action of the city. On one side you have the Golden Triangle and on the other, the KLCC developments. Throw in the KL Convention Centre for good measure and you have a quintessential, highly desired urban location.

Heading there for the interview, we found Monica Lai Voon Huey, Group Deputy Managing Director of Ireka Corporation welcoming us to this little secluded slice of peace and tranquillity.

The dream concept of The RuMa Hotel and Residences has been brought to life by Ireka Corporation Berhad. With a main door that is set off to the side, a literal giant birdcage as the reception anteroom and then on through the hotel lobby doors proper, the hustle and bustle of the capital city is forced to wait outside. And this is what Lai and her Ireka team want for you – a veritable home away from home.

As we set up for the photo shoot in the unique lobby of the hotel, she concedes that every hotel tells its guests that same thing. The proof is in the pudding though! At The RuMa, you may come and go as you please, meaning that check-in and check-out are at your leisure.

We are curious about this as hotels work the 'out by 12pm and in after 3pm' rule to give housekeeping a chance to turnover used rooms. But not so in The RuMa... as per your reservations, the accommodations are blocked off for the day. So, arrive at your whim and leave as it suits your travel plans. Suddenly, those midnight flights and the headache of what to do from noon until you have to leave for the airport disappear.

But let us take a moment to consider The RuMa itself. The lobby and the anteroom birdcage are all part of a vision of Malaysian and Western design fusion. Designer Andy Hall, of MQ Studios designed the interiors to take in natural Malaysian elements like rattan weaves and then juxtaposed that against our industrial heritage which is tin mining.

The copper ceilings of the lobby provide a vibrant edge above you while beneath your feet, large glazed tiles provide a heavenly feel. If you aren't already having an out of body experience, the double birdcage wrought-iron and timber staircase will at the very least give you pause for thought.

And so, it continues up and around the building which is operated by Shanghai-based Urban Resort Concepts (URC) which runs the PuLi resort which so impressed Ireka. Which is where we begin our conversation with Lai, a very inspiring lady and highly accomplished business leader with an engaging personality.

**Ireka is the developer and URC will be the operator. Which came first? The idea for the hotel or exploring a partnership with URC?**

Ireka has a track record of building award-winning hotels in KL and when we decided to build in KLCC, we were looking for something different – blending luxury, heritage and an unforgettable guest experience. We did not want to develop a cookie-cutter hotel so when we came across URC which is a niche brand in a luxury setting, we did not hesitate to start talks with them, because their DNA is deeply ingrained in hospitality and what they call 'Hostmanship'.

**What are your thoughts about this concept? And perhaps could you give us your ideas on 'Hostmanship'?**

Hostmanship is a word that was coined by URC, which encapsulates the unique service culture that is practiced in all their hotels. In the world of Hostmanship, guests are welcomed into a culture where people come first, and every inclusion and service is crafted with an intention. The culture of Hostmanship perfectly complements The RuMa Hotel, making guests feel at home and doing away with the usual charges such as for in-room breakfast and the mini-bar; and undue bureaucracy, such as having rigid check-in and check-out times. It's all about making the guest experience as intuitive, engaging and as human as possible.

**Can you give us an idea of the design brief for The RuMa which combines traditional and modern motifs?**

MQ Studio, based in Shanghai, was engaged for the architecture styling, interior and furniture design, and hotel styling. There are two recurring themes within the design of The RuMa Hotel. The first is a contemporary interpretation of Malaysia's colonial past, the second is driven by the name of the hotel itself – that is RuMa (a play on the Malaysian word, Rumah, which means home). Therefore, the design and conceptual approach for the hotel have been informed by both these two themes – a home that captures, in spirit, the houses of a bygone era. However, unlike their ancestral past, The RuMa Hotel will remain resolutely domestic.

The RuMa's interiors exemplify URC's hallmark design principles, where luxurious and understated design seamlessly integrate amidst a modern space uniquely crafted with cultural influences by local artisans, such as Bernard Chandran's custom-made metal Kebaya installation.

Inspiration for the hotel is derived from the interior designer, Andy Hall, walking the streets of Kuala Lumpur, rummaging through the flea markets, trawling through the internet and chatting to local Malaysians.

From the interior décor to the building's architectural design, every detail tells a story, and within every room and suite, an importance is placed on reinvigorating local



craft, culture and community. The attention to detail is breath-taking and will, in my opinion create a memorable first impression for our guests. We want to be able to create a hotel as a "Story" rich in Malaysian heritage from the moment you step onto the premises. There will be signature features, bespoke artwork and statement lighting fixtures around the hotel.

**Is it true that Truefitt & Hill will be in The RuMa's spa area? And if so, what will the ladies look forward to in the spa area? Is there something different for them?**

The RuMa's 6th floor represents an entirely new take on wellness. Unlike most hotels, the pool area, the gym, the bar, the meeting facilities and the spa are to be considered as one fluid spa-like space, where the boundaries between all the different functions are neither implied nor enforced. Immediately connected to the hotel's gorgeous 25m outdoor pool and sundeck is the SANTAI Pool bar & lounge, UR SPA, The Barber by Truefitt & Hill, and the 24-hour gym. UR SPA is about intelligent, genderless and result-driven treatments that work around our guests' schedule and combine Modern Science with Ancient Healing. Tailor-made treatments using bespoke and organic formulations by Comfort Zone, UR SPA offers anything from 30-minute express treatments to whole day rituals.

**Was the choice of setting up The RuMa at 7 Kia Peng one of several? Or did you consider other cities in Malaysia?**

Ireka is familiar with the KL hospitality scene having already got award-winning Westin KL and Aloft KL Sentral hotels under our belt. So, it did not seem too big a leap to set up the luxury The RuMa Hotel and Residences in the heart of KL. Incidentally we also own a hotel in Sandakan, the Four Points by Sheraton Sandakan which is in the harbour front area of town.

**You work alongside your brother and father at Ireka, and while some of us can't even agree on what's for lunch, what's the secret to working in a family business?**

We have our moments too! I will however say that my father has taught me everything I know about running a construction and property business successfully and with integrity and humility. I learnt two very important things from my father – to know your business well because it is the only way to lead others to do what they are supposed to do and there is no easy way out of hard work! I joined Ireka in 1993 and my father, Datuk Lai Siew Wah set up Ireka in 1967 as a sole proprietor under Syarikat Lai Siew Wah.

I am passionate about my work at Ireka and consider it a privilege to build on my father's legacy, together with my brother and Group MD, Datuk Lai Voon Hon, of growing the company to its stature and size today. We are often told how Datuk Lai Voon Hon and I complement each other. He is the one with the big ideas and creativity which we owe a lot of our iconic



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developments to, and I am the one who reminds everyone about the bottom line. We have a deep respect for each other, and have no problem agreeing to disagree when we have to. That's the business we are in.

**Your designation as Group Deputy Managing Director, Ireka Corporation Berhad and Chief Financial Officer, Ireka Development Management Sdn Bhd sounds like most of your time is taken. How do you relax and get away from 'the shop'?**

My family is my life, especially my two grown-up boys (19 and 21 years) from whom I learn everything about being in the moment, enjoyment of modern music and current trends. In turn, they (and their friends) consider me the "coolest" mum!

I am not afraid to try anything once. On the sports front, I ran for Ireka in the 2014 Rat race organised by The Edge news-group in the CEO category. I am no athlete but was determined to do Ireka proud, and subsequently came second in the women's CEO race.

Since then, I have enjoyed running and have participated in several charity runs. Recently, I ran 10km in the Danajamin charity run in aid of Autism support and actually enjoyed the experience! This is also the longest distance I have run. I am also keen on Pilates as a form of exercise and if my travel diary allows, I will try not to miss any sessions.

I am a movie buff and always enjoy a

Netflix night. I also enjoy time with my "besties" and friends. There is nothing better than sharing good food, a glass of wine and laughter with people who just "get me". It is a great way to de-stress!

**Who are the types of people who you feel would love the concept of The RuMa?**

The people who will love The RuMa Hotel are those who understand the concept of understated luxury; those who prefer personalised and intuitive service, and where the ultimate guest experience is not only a given but in the hotel's DNA.

**Could you tell us what is the philosophy of life you follow or believe in? If you could give some advice to people, what would you say to them?**

I believe strongly in working hard, getting things done and paying attention to detail (you can take the girl out of accountancy but you can't take the accountant out of the girl!). My formula for life, without sounding too pompous, is, "Make the most of everyday because it is a privilege, work hard because it really is the key to success and don't take yourself too seriously!"

**What have been the biggest challenges in your life?**

My biggest challenge is juggling a very demanding work life, being a daughter, wife and mum – all in the same breath. I have learnt to take it all in my stride and refuse to get overly stressed by it,

or at least, try to manage the competing priorities. It means having to be very organised every single day! My soul mate and husband, Leonard Yee, helps me to stay grounded and to maintain a sense of humour about life.

At a professional level, the biggest challenge is being responsible for the livelihood of over 400 Irekians who depend on the company for their salaries. My role in Ireka is to develop and implement business direction for the whole Group, and to manage and oversee the Group's resources effectively. I never take for granted the trust that our staff put in me to deliver for them.

**What do you feel have been your best/greatest achievements?**

Being a mum to two young men who are well-rounded world citizens is what I consider to be my best achievement. They are respectful of everyone they meet, and have adopted a zero-tolerance attitude to discrimination of all kinds, which I am especially proud of.

On a professional level, I am proud to have been the driving force behind a small, high-level team that led to the listing of Aseana Properties Limited on the main market of the London Stock Exchange in April 2007, a first for a Malaysian property developer. The USD162mil raised led the way for Ireka and Aseana Properties Limited to develop its brand and business interests both in Vietnam and in Malaysia.

A few proud moments are (1) the selling of the award winning The Westin Kuala Lumpur which made history in Malaysia for selling the hotel for RM1mil per room in 2007; and (2) I also led the negotiations to sell the One Mont' Kiara Mall and Office Towers in Mont' Kiara at a record price of RM333mil in 2010 and (3) sold the Aloft KL Sentral Hotel for RM418 mil, a record price for a 4-star hotel in Malaysia.

One of the most important things that Ireka invests in is its CSR programme, Ireka Cares, which I am proud to be a part of. It is in its 8th year and still flourishing. Ireka's volunteers give up their Saturdays bi-monthly to spend time with children from Homes we have adopted.

I always do my best to attend the events and to observe the bond that has formed between the volunteers and children is wonderful.

**How would you describe yourself as a person, as a mother, as a boss/leader?**

I tend to be the "go to" person both at home and at work because I am decisive, enjoy seeking solutions and usually won't duck difficult situations.

As a boss, my work ethic is quite simple - I feel a great sense of responsibility towards Ireka's staff because of my respect for the work they do, and their commitment to deliver for the company. I hope that my open and transparent management style means that colleagues can communicate with me directly and with ease.

**What do you feel are The RuMa's strengths and how do you feel The RuMa will change the hotel scene in Malaysia?**

The strength of The RuMa definitely lies in its design and culture of Hostmanship. The RuMa Hotel and Residences is Kuala Lumpur's only member of the Leading Hotels of the World, which is a collection of more than 400 luxury hotels around the world. Everything is handmade for a truly authentic experience, with almost every piece of furniture specially crafted for The RuMa. The RuMa's luxuriously appointed guest rooms and suites perfectly complement their new form of guest experience, which is unlike any in the region today.

ATAS Modern Eatery at The RuMa will also be a big draw for guests. They will be invited to rediscover authentic tastes, spices, ingredients and produce of local provenance, with dishes presented in the contemporary way unique to Executive Chef Tyson Gee. Modern Malaysian cuisine will be served. To be clear, it is not a recreation of Malaysian dishes so, there won't be curry laksa with a twist on the menu. The ATAS' vision is to showcase Malaysian ingredients and flavours, using local produce.

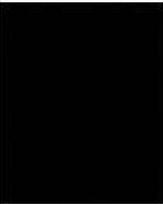
**What do you love about festive seasons? How do you usually celebrate?**

Christmas is one of my favourite times of the year. There're the decorations, which KL does so well – the malls are so beautifully decorated with Christmas baubles and it really lifts the spirit. I also enjoy Christmas shopping for friends and family, especially if I know what I want to get them. But it's also fun just finding something in a store and then thinking "wow, they would love that." I would be lying if I said that I didn't enjoy getting gifts on Christmas. I mean who doesn't like gifts? But it's definitely not what Christmas is about.

This year is going to be a quiet Christmas because my boys are going to stay on in England to catch up on revising for their exams (or at least that is what they tell us!). Usually Christmas day is spent at home with family and friends eating traditional foods like roast turkey, minced pies and Christmas pudding. We always end the day with a quiz or some sort of team game which can get quite competitive and raucous!

**What do you see in the near future for The RuMa?**

There is going to be a lot of competition locally because many of other international brands are also establishing themselves in KLCC. I am confident that The RuMa can hold its own because of its great design and unique perspective brought by its operator, URC. I think it starts from the name, The RuMa which is a play on the Malay word for home (Rumah), so the guest experience is all about feeling at home. I am so excited about The RuMa Hotel and Residences making its mark in Malaysia.



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