



A Farrer deal

The former founding chairman and CEO of Raffles International Hotels & Resorts puts his creative thinking and boldness to action again with a new hotel in Singapore, One Farrer Hotel & Spa. **Raini Hamdi** has coffee with Helfer as the hotel opens its doors September 3

A luxury hotel with conference facility in a non-luxury location, Farrer Park, raises a few eyebrows. Is location your biggest challenge?

Farrer Park is one of the most interesting and centric locations in Singapore.

Over the years, Singapore has become geographic. Before, it did not really matter where you stay; you could stay in Orchard, Marina Square area, etc, and it's all only 15 minutes away on the island. There were no hotels in the East Coast, none in Shenton Way or along the Singapore River – in fact we were one of the first hotels on the river when we built the Merchant Court (now Swissotel Merchant Court; Helfer was then head honcho of Raffles International Hotels and Resorts).

Today, it does matter where you stay, as it can take 45 minutes to get to a meeting, so being centric to what you want to do is important. We've become a large city and congestion is part of it, although the good thing is we don't have really bad traffic as in Bangkok or Jakarta.

It's natural for larger, urbanised cities to have different hubs and precincts, and there is a need for a good balance of five and four-star hotels in those locations. Singapore would not be as interesting a destination if it were not geographic.

Why Farrer Park, and how did the whole development Connexion at Farrer Park come about?

Farrer Park is probably one of the last bastions in the heart of Singapore that has not been overly-developed as a hotel destination.

When our company, The Farrer Park Company, tendered for the site, it was a large 'white site' (a planning concept which allows developers more flexibility to optimise the use of land for various uses without incurring hefty charges),

40 per cent of which was required to be a hotel.

Part of the investors is a group of medical doctors and their dream was to build the best private hospital in Singapore, so the rest of the white site became in time, The Farrer Park Medical Centre and Farrer Park Hospital with the One Farrer Conference Centre being part of the hotel component (see box).

How dependent is the hotel on the hospital/medical centre for its occupancy?

The hospital and medical centre are like a good corporate account for the hotel and will probably comprise 23-25 per cent of the hotel's business mix – families and relatives staying pre-, during or post-treatment. It's good seed business. The remainder 75 per cent is based on our ability to attract corporate, MICE and leisure travellers to One Farrer Hotel & Spa as a five-star venue in an exciting new area of Singapore.

Exactly my point, what has the area to offer and why did you decide on a five-star positioning?

Three-star hotels are what everyone has built there to-date and the way I look at it is it's only by having a five-star hotel that you can control the nature of the business.

I know that for so many of the hotels we have built, be it in Asia, Europe, the US or what have you, it is us who drive the market. And we drive the market by concept, by understanding what is required to make the market work, with a bit of passion thrown in to ensure that we achieve what we said we were going to do.

Plus, if you look at the exorbitant land costs in Singapore, it is a shame if you under-build. As well, it's not as if we're building a hotel in the middle of nowhere. Remember this is the centre

of the city. The location is good and, today, being on top of an MRT station is extremely beneficial. We find that with the Millennial generation, travelling by MRT is actually a preferred choice. The whole development too has some 900 employees, so it is important to be connected with an MRT.

Why would people go to One Farrer Hotel & Spa?

Because it is going to be a great hotel! Even if you're only in Singapore for two days, whether you walk in our gardens, swim in our pools, visit our spa, attend a meeting in our conference facility, experience in-room shopping – there are over 300 items you can buy, not online or through a traditional shopping mode, but from the comfort of your room, providing immediate gratification for your shopping desires.

That, plus I honestly believe, as we said earlier on, Farrer Park is one of the most interesting locations in Singapore. When you walk out of the hotel, you actually see Singapore. A lot of times when I walk out of a hotel whether in Singapore or New York, I really don't know where I am, it could be anywhere. I think if you ask people why they haven't stayed in Farrer Park, they would say it's because there has not been a five-star hotel there.

Secondly, there are a lot of new, very interesting restaurants and places opening up in the area. People want to enjoy uniquely Singapore places and Farrer Park is special. It is not the European town, it's not Kampung Glam (the Malay quarters), it's not Little India, it is a special wedge in Singapore's history. The original race track for Singapore Turf Club was at Farrer Park and was the site/landing strip for Singapore's first manned airborne flight in a box kite glider. The first meeting of the PAP (the ruling People's Action Party), the

first multi-racial social club, etc, were all developed at Farrer Park. So it's a microcosm of a lot of things that happened in Singapore, and all the communities that make up Singapore are there.

Are you saying just by having a five-star plus hotel is enough to open demand to a location that many overseas visitors aren't familiar with?

No, definitely not. To drive a destination, you must first understand what the destination does not have and what it has too much of, so you can come in and complement (the offering). Once you've identified that, then you have to totally focus on building a property that is not only the best in the particular area but you also have to look at what every-one else in the marketplace is doing.

We don't have the convention size facility of Marina Bay Sands, but we have a 550pax ballroom and three meeting rooms and fibre optics cabling through from Farrer Park Hospital's 18 operating rooms and our Institute of Nutrition (see box) so we can go actively after specialist medical-related/lifestyle meetings. By nature those meetings are not large and we can cater for them better than anyone else in the market, because of our ability to enable technology to make our facilities state-of-the-art.

Would medical meetings form the bulk of your conference business?

No, for a 500pax ballroom and a 243-room hotel, we must have a balance of different types of meetings and also small incentives.

As part of our concept of being a 'total environment' for work, leisure and lifestyle, in addition to the three hotels, we have 14 gardens on 20 different levels and an over 500-piece Greater Asia art collection that we've specially curated for the entire Connexion Complex. We have a number of interesting places for small groups to do meetings, receptions and incentives. These aren't necessary places you would find elsewhere in Singapore.

So we're in a sweet spot where we can take in medium-sized groups and do them really well. As part of our strategic collaboration with Samsung Electronics, we have a conferencing system where delegates will be presented with a Samsung tablet and they can do instant polling, interact with the speakers on stage, amplify their voice when they ask a question with their picture instantly appearing on the large screen – it's really cutting edge.

Do you see One Farrer competing with other precincts like the Novena

area, where Far East Hospitality also has a hotel next to a medical centre?

I think we compete with every area, although we are more centric in location than some of the others. The rates at One Farrer Hotel & Spa for a while would be more attractive than some other areas of the city, as it's a new location and we are a new independent hotel. This plus our superior facilities are good reasons for people to come as they know we're a five-star hotel and they can try it out at a lower rate for now.

What are the rates?

For the first three to six months, our opening rates for the Urban Hotel would

start at S\$280 (US\$225), for the Skyline Hotel from S\$400, the suites will be from S\$500 and the villas would fetch S\$1,000 and above.

Is this the first hotel that you've had done since the Raffles days?

We have, and continue to undertake a number of hospitality, lifestyle and mixed-use projects focused mainly in greater Asia, but One Farrer Hotel & Spa is the first hotel project we have conceptualized, developed and implemented in Singapore since Raffles City, Raffles Hotel and the Merchant Court Hotel. Singapore being our home base makes this project even more special.

AT A GLANCE: ONE FARRER HOTEL & SPA

- Part of a mixed-use development called Connexion at Farrer Park, comprising the 243-room five-star hotel and spa; The Farrer Park Medical Centre, home to more than 200 medical specialists; and The Farrer Hospital, one of the first private hospitals to be built ground-up in Singapore after 30 years
- One Farrer Hotel & Spa is positioned as a brand-setting five-star hotel whose three 'hotels within a hotel' concept and lifestyle features on their own will draw guests to the property, 25 per cent of the mix of which will be medical, 15 per cent leisure, 30-35 per cent corporates and the rest meetings and incentives
- The 'hotels within a hotel' concept comprises three styles of accommodation with a total of 243 rooms: Urban Hotel, levels 11-15, targeted at business and leisure travellers; Loft Apartments, levels 16-17, targeted at the extended stay market; and The Skyline Hotel, levels 18-



- 20, targeted at the luxury segment with suites and villas
- The hotel boasts the One Farrer Conference Centre (see below)
- There are nine F&B offerings
- The Spa Retreat offers specialised aesthetic and holistic treatments. It boasts an Olympic-sized swimming pool, Japanese-style onsen, reflexology water walk, relaxation gardens and comprehensive fitness facilities, among others.

The One Farrer Conference Centre features:

- a 668sqm Grand Ballroom that can accommodate up to 550pax for a sit-down dinner and 700pax for a reception, with live video feed capabilities from the hospital's 18 operating rooms and the hotel's fully-equipped culinary studio, the Institute of Nutrition, where cooking demonstrations and workshops can be conducted and be beamed to a wider audience
- Three contemporary meeting rooms with floor-to-ceiling panels, suitable for small to mid-sized events such as seminars and corporate seminars. Each is 104sqm in size and can accommodate up to 250 guests when combined
- Venues such as the Marquee, Flip Flop Restaurant, Sunset Bar and The Box Kite Lounge. The air-conditioned marquee seats up to 350 guests, while Flip Flop Restaurant and Sunset Bar are poolside venues. The Box Kite Lounge, the site of Singapore's first manned airborne flight, has high ceilings and lush greenery in an al fresco setting. The hotel's 14 gardens can be backdrops for pre-event receptions and evening cocktails.
- A fully equipped Technology Centre is located within the conference centre.

