

THE VISIONARIES

# Rewarding fun with old buildings

In this fortnightly series, our writers talk to people who stand out in their areas of expertise, especially those from the corporate world



BY CHRISTINA NG

LIFE has been an interesting ride for hotelier Loh Lik Peng, who was born into a family of doctors and spent most of his growing-up years in Britain.

By an act of serendipity, the former lawyer, 38, dropped his promising career in law and switched to creating designer hotels.

He now has five boutique hotels in Singapore, London and Shanghai – all because he fell in love with the idea of giving historical buildings a new lease of life.

Dressed in a crisp white shirt and khaki pants, Mr Loh appeared jovial and relaxed when this reporter met him at Wanderlust Hotel, his latest venture in Dickson Road in Little India, which was opened six months ago. He was tasting his chef's new invention at the Cocotte, a traditional French restaurant in the cosy boutique hotel of 29 rooms.

Prior to Wanderlust's opening, Mr Loh was already the proud owner of Hotel 1929 and New Majestic Hotel in Chinatown. Just last year, he took his hotel business overseas with Town Hall in London and Waterhouse in Shanghai, both transformed from old buildings, which "all tell a story", he said.

"I've never worked on a new building... The most exciting part about my job is finding an old building and imagining what it could become," he said.

That is not a surprise.

According to Mr Loh, Wanderlust was originally a school built in the 1920s and then used by the Buddhist Welfare Association as an educational institution.

Now, it is a fascinating hotel with differently themed rooms, like "industrial glam" or "eccentricity".

Mr Loh's very first hotel – Hotel 1929 in Keong Saik Road – had a colourful past as well, located right in the middle of Singapore's former red-light district.

It was originally a derelict building that no one was interested in during the tail end of Singapore's recession from around 1999 to 2001. He told my paper that because of

**Who:** Mr Loh Lik Peng, 38, founder and managing director of five boutique hotels: Hotel 1929, New Majestic Hotel and Wanderlust Hotel in Singapore, Town Hall in London and Waterhouse in Shanghai.

All the hotels are restored from historical buildings and are designed with a special theme.

**Education:** Mr Loh attended Maha Bodhi School in Singapore and went to St Columba's College, a boarding school in Ireland, when he was 12. He returned to Singapore at 18 to do his national service, and went to London to study law after that.

He obtained his law degree at Sheffield University and got his post-graduate degree and passed the Bar exams in Britain.

**Career:** After graduating in 1996, Mr Loh worked as a lawyer in Singapore with David Lim and Partners law firm for around four years. He purchased a derelict building in Keong Saik Road in Chinatown for \$3.5 million in 2000, with his parents' help, and spent around \$5 million restoring it to the present Hotel 1929.

New Majestic Hotel in Bukit Pasoh Road, which has 30 rooms and five specially themed rooms designed by Singapore's eminent creative

artists like Daniel Boey and Glenn Goei, was opened in 2008. He opened Wanderlust Hotel in Dickson Road, Town Hall in London and Waterhouse in Shanghai last year. They are all boutique hotels with a different theme. For example, Wanderlust Hotel is designed as a big playground, Town Hall has a historical background and Waterhouse makes use of raw industrial space.

the recession, he was able to buy it at a really low price.

"It did well and I have never looked back (since)," he added.

He was then a lawyer who had been practising for four years and growing tired of seeing negative faces and problems to be solved with every new client he met.

He recalled: "At that time, most of the work I was doing was bankruptcy work, winding up companies. (As a) young lawyer, it was pretty depressing making people bankrupt. It wasn't really what I signed up for."

So "by accident", he found the building that is the current Hotel 1929. With his parents as his biggest investors, he turned the old building into a quaint yet sophisticated boutique hotel with around \$5 million.

In fact, business was so good that he went on to develop New Majestic Hotel in Bukit Pasoh Road and, recently, Wanderlust Hotel.

The laid-back man with no formal design or business background said that it was not boredom or hatred of law that propelled him to make the career switch.

He said: "I enjoyed law. It's fun and rewarding. But at the end of the day, you are always solving someone else's problem, you are not there to do your own thing... Being a hotelier is different – you make people happy."

It helps that his parents are sup-

BIODATA OF LOH LIK PENG



**HERITAGE HOTELS:** Former lawyer Loh Lik Peng, who opened Wanderlust Hotel in Little India last year, owns another four boutique hotels in Singapore, London and Shanghai – all restored from historical buildings and designed with a special theme. (PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN)

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portive. His parents – his father is a paediatrician and mother an ophthalmologist – are "fairly liberal".

He said: "They were not very strict, and were happy to give (my siblings and me) leeway to do different things. I would say that they are very open."

Mr Loh's love for history and contemporary design as well as adventure and antiques has inspired many interesting ideas for quirky hotels that wow guests with eclectic design and delectable food.

Yet he does not consider himself a businessman, but more of a business-development manager. And most importantly, he grabs opportunities when they come up.

He said: "I don't have a five-year plan. You never know when the right project will come along – it's really an opportunistic process."

He added: "What's really important for me is having a rewarding experience (with) each project and having fun."

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**HELPDESK 我的字典**

**Boutique hotels:** 精品酒店  
jīng pǐn jiǔ diàn

**Derelict:** 被遗弃的 bèi yí qì de

**Laid-back:** 悠闲自在的  
yōu xián zì zài de

**Ophthalmologist:** 眼科专家  
yǎn kē zhuān jiā

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