

# He's 90 and still working

Colombo hotel's oldest employee has been welcoming guests for decades. Visitors come to meet him even if they are not staying at the iconic Galle Face

MALAVIKA NATARAJ

**I**N HIS crisp hotel uniform of a white shirt and sarong, Kottarapattu Chatthu Kuttan – popularly called “Kuttan” – stands at the entrance of the iconic Galle Face Hotel in Colombo, Sri Lanka. His white hair and thick, curving white moustache stand out on his dark face. As he smiles warmly, folds his hands and murmurs the traditional greeting of ayubowan, one cannot feel anything but welcome.

At 90, Kuttan is the oldest serving employee in the Asian hospitality industry, perhaps even in the world.

Beginning with his arrival on the island at age 19, his life has been a long journey filled with memories. Hailing from the south Indian state of Kerala, he arrived in Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon) in 1938 in search of new opportunities when his mother fell ill and then died.

Life in Kerala had become a constant struggle for him. He felt neglected and was desperately unhappy. “And in those days, movement between countries was easy,” he recalls, “and I had a relative who was already here in Colombo, living in Slave Island”.

So he arrived, filled with optimism. He had no money and had to borrow Rs75 for his passage through Rameshwaram, an expensive voyage at the time. But with hardly any educational qualifications, finding a job was hard and, in the end, he joined the household of police officer F.H. de Saram as a houseboy.

As World War II gripped the world and all the foreigners – including hotel staff – began to leave the country, a few employment opportunities in the hotel industry arose.

“He (Mr de Saram) was very well known at the time, and very well connected,” Kuttan says of his former employer. “He introduced me to the management of the Galle Face Hotel.”

That was the first day of the rest of his life. Since 1942, Kuttan has been an employee of the hotel, rising from bell boy to waiter and, finally, to an internationally known icon of the hotel. Hardworking and deeply loyal to the management, he has always been popular among the staff because of his warm and genial nature.

The late Cyril Gardiner was chairman of the hotel when Kuttan joined as a young man. And over the years, Mr Gardiner came to regard him as a special employee. Today, his son and current chairman Sanjeev Gardiner still treats Kuttan the same way his father did.

“I still remember when Sanjeev was born. As a little boy, he would come to the hotel, and it was my job to play with him and run with him around



Namaste... Kuttan at the entrance of the Galle Face Hotel in Colombo, Sri Lanka. PHOTO: MALAVIKA NATARAJ

the hotel grounds,” Kuttan says, with a fond smile. “He loves me, and I love him dearly. We have so many memories together and he takes very good care of me now.”

There is no doubt that Kuttan is special. For his 80th birthday, the management threw a lavish party for him, with a large cake that he cut and shared with all his colleagues. Over the decades, there have been many other special moments and in Kuttan’s treasure chest of memories, a few jewels glimmer extra bright.

One such bright spot was the visit of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. He held a tea party for over 1,500 people in the hotel and Kuttan, who was a waiter at the party, was too awestruck by all the splendour to even talk to Nehru. He also recalls meeting Mrs Indira Gandhi – “a very confident lady” – late Pakistan prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and even Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, who were all guests in the hotel.

It is also a well-known fact that the renowned author Arthur C. Clarke, who wrote the final chapters of his book 2001: A Space Odyssey while at the hotel, was very fond of Kuttan.

As proof of his special relationship with many people, he proudly displays an array of pins, medals and brooches from all over the world on the front of his uniform. Each was pinned on him by a VIP when they stayed in the hotel.

Any pin from a particularly special or famous person?

“They are all special to me,” Kuttan says, an enigmatic smile on his face.

So what kept him on the Emerald Isle for so long, visiting his native land only 52 years after he first left?

Kuttan fell in love with the hotel and with Sri Lanka, and despite his own relatives leaving the is-

land, he stayed on. He married Lourdes, who is Sri Lankan, and their grandchildren have had children. Having spent so many years on the island, he feels more Sri Lankan than Indian. In fact, he is more comfortable speaking Sinhalese than his native tongue Malayalam.

“I have spent the majority of my life here,” he says, but admits that he longs to go back to Kerala. “But only to visit my sisters,” he is quick to add. “This is my home now.”

The Galle Face Hotel, still Sri Lanka’s “Grand Old Lady”, has weathered many storms during its 143-year existence. Bordered by the main road on one side and the glittering Indian Ocean on the other, it is situated in the heart of capital city Colombo.

Kuttan remembers the glorious days of the British Raj, when he was a new employee when the hotel was, and still is, famous for its afternoon teas. He also remembers the more difficult years, such as during the Japanese air raid in 1942 when he witnessed a Japanese fighter plane landing on the Galle Face Green, in front of the hotel.

Given its central location, how did 30 years of civil strife affect the hotel? Kuttan says the hotel was not directly affected, although its operations were hampered during the more severe riots, like in 1983.

While there was a lot of fighting on the Green, the building itself was not touched. But now that the war has ended, he says he finally feels free. More visitors are coming to his beloved land and that makes him happy.

Kuttan’s reputation as an extremely long-standing hotel employee has been popularised by magazines with wide circulation, like Time Out and Serendip Magazine, as well as by travellers like Miguel Cunat.

Current chairman Gardiner has said in the past

**He loves me and I love him dearly. We have so many memories together and he takes very good care of me now.**

– Kuttan on his relationship with Galle Face Hotel chairman Sanjeev Gardiner



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