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Creating Bali's first integrated Ayurvedic Health and Nature Resort
Interview with the President Director of Zen Resort Bali



Dr Mahendra Shah, a world renowned expert on Sustainable Development, has had wide ranging experiences and senior level appointments in the United Nations, the World Bank and a number of International Science and Policy Research Institutions. A year ago Dr Shah came to Bali to invest in tourism and develop a holistic health resort.

L'Ultimo: Investing in Bali tourism is in a sense a complete change from your distinguished scientific and international policy carrier. Tell us about your past work and your proudest moments.

Dr Shah: I have been privileged to have had the opportunity to work on the challenges of sustainable development over the last 3 decades. It all started in 1972 when I attended the Stockholm Environmental Conference, followed by the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992 and the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development. These three world summits has put the world on notice that achieving sustainable development is not an option, but an imperative

The most challenging assignments I have had included the 1984 African famine that threatened the lives of over 35 million people across Africa and as Director of the UN Office in New York, I had the responsibility to provide timely and credible information that mobilized over US\$ 4 billion for emergency relief aid. In 1992 I had the honour to prepare and coordinate the Earth Summit report on Agenda 21 for Environment and Development and in 2002 at the Johannesburg Summit I presented our report on climate change and agricultural vulnerability, emphasizing the urgency to put the issues of adaptation to climate change on the international negotiations agenda beyond the Kyoto Protocol.

We must move from Agenda setting to real actions towards achieving sustainable development that is socially responsible, environmentally sustainable and economically viable. If we fail to do this, we will put at risk our own future and that of all living species on Earth.

L’Ultimo: How do your experiences and knowledge relate to the role and relevance of sustainable tourism development in Bali?

Dr Shah: Tourism is important in the context of a number of factors. It brings people together to share their cultures and solidarity for human progress. This is of critical importance in an increasingly globalizing and an interdependent world. Tourists’ revenues are an important source of financial resources, especially in Bali where the only other significant economic sector is that of Agriculture. Sustainable Socio-Eco-Tourism development deserves the highest political consideration in Bali. I hope to bring my experiences to bear on the substantial challenges that the recovery of tourism in Bali faces in the aftermath of devastating events of 2002 and 2005.

L’Ultimo: You came to Bali at a time when tourism has suffered a major set back. Was this a wise decision and what are your thoughts regarding recovery and repositioning of Bali tourism.

Dr Shah: In life and living the question of a wise decision is only of relevance after the fact. I have no doubt that Bali tourism development offers a great challenge and I might even add that I know of no other place in the world that has a greater potential for tourism than Bali.

Bali is an island of the Gods in every sense. The Island’s beautiful natural environment ranging from coastal marine to forest to mountain ecosystems is endowed with a rich array of biodiversity. The diverse and wealthy ecology and relative un-spoilt nature combined with a human population that practices and preserves a diversity of cultures and traditions with core moral and spiritual values are ingredients that tourists are increasingly seeking

I regard the events and the consequent set back of 2002 and 2005 in Bali as an opportunity to reposition Bali Tourism. At the same time Bali needs international support to make this happen. It is an anomaly that in the aftermath of 9/11, Mayor Giuliani of New York urged visitors and tourists to come to New York to show not only their solidarity and support but also to spend their dollars. In contrast in the case of Bali, the Governments of most developed countries issues travel warnings and urged their citizens not to go to Bali. This reaction is unjust and counter productive and the international community, especially the developed countries must make a conscious effort to help Bali recover. A cry of “Lets go to Bali” from around the world would do more than many other efforts to defeat the threats of terrorism.

We made a conscious choice to locate in North Bali as this area has so much to offer in terms of a natural environment - serene beaches, unique and rich marine environment that

is ideal for diving, snorkeling, dolphin watching and water sports, rice fields, vineyards and fragrant tropical plantations, volcanoes and waterfalls, natural hot springs and sacred temples, and most of all friendly and cultured people with genuine hospitality.

L'Ultimo: Why the focus on developing a holistic health resort in Bali?

Dr Shah: The lifestyles changes and pressures of work in the office and at home are resulting in much stress and ill health for many people world-wide. The tourists today demand not only a beautiful and natural environments and holiday activities but more importantly they seek places to relax and rejuvenate their mind, body and spirit during a relatively short holiday break. And around the world, people are rediscovering the potentials of holistic health and this is the niche market that has great potential in Bali

L'Ultimo: What your concept of holistic health?

Bali has a long tradition of traditional holistic health – be it the secrets of a Jamun drink or the pleasures of Mandi Lulur. Our concept of holistic health is to combine the best of Zen philosophy, Ayurveda, Yoga, Pranayama and Meditation. These have been practiced for over 5000- years and more and more people are discovering the utility and relevance for holistic health and well-being.

The philosophy of Zen and the practices of Ayurveda and Yoga have their origins in India. Zen philosophy considers ignorance or confusion as the main root of human suffering and stresses the development of wisdom and compassion. Discontentment and violence do not disappear by taking away the momentary objects of the discontentment and violence. Fear does not dissolve if we take away that which we fear. Zen practice is aimed at realizing no-self; this means the self that arises anew. You cannot attach yourself to it and there is no ground to separate yourself from others because true self comes into being together with others.

Ayurveda is the world's most ancient holistic medical sciences pertaining to health, happiness, and harmony. Ayur (life) and Veda (Science) are Sanskrit words. Ayurveda is the science of life and healthy living. Life based on the principles of Ayurveda resist ill health and diseases, arrests premature aging and retains youthfulness. For over 5000 years in India, Ayurveda has been the practical basis of treating the root causes of many health ailments and diseases, often giving a real cure rather than temporary relief.

Yoga is the science of human well being. The word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root Yuj meaning to bind or yoke. The individual human spirit (Paramatma) can secure eternal liberation (Moksa) through Karma (self-less work) yoga, Bhakti (spiritual devotion) yoga, and Jnana (ways of wisdom) yoga. Practicing yoga revives our consciousness and the exercises rejuvenate damaged tissues and cells. Yoga is the foundation of the biological, physical, mental and emotional well being and when practiced regularly, it is effective in achieving and maintaining good health.

Pranayama is the science and technique of controlled, regulated, and effective breathing. It is ironic we are rarely taught how to breathe air in, to hold the air in, and to breathe out. “Prana” – the air – that is inhaled and exhaled in our lungs, is the basis of life since without it we cannot survive even for a few minutes. Our lungs comprise of some 73 million cells and in normal breathing only a third of the lung cells get oxygenated. The science and practicality of Pranayama is critical for maximizing the effective capacity of the lungs, the fundamental purifying engine of our body.

Meditation is important to all aspects of our well being. Meditation is based on the principles of concentration and consciousness, without which logical and successful solutions of physical, mental, or spiritual tasks would be difficult to achieve. All of us are confronted everyday with tasks to do and this can lead to worry that in turn inhibits clear thinking towards finding solutions. A few minutes of deep meditative concentration goes a long way towards resolving the problems and worries that confront us

L’Ultimo: Ayurveda and Yoga require many years of education and practical training. This expert capacity is not available in Bali. How do you plan to create this capacity and expertise since without this Bali cannot compete with the so many very successful holistic health resorts in India.

Dr Shah: The first decision we made was to seek out expertise on Ayurveda and Yoga from Kerala in India. We were fortunate in recruiting experts that had had 7 years of formal college and university education and some 7 years of practical experience. During the last 6 months at Zen Resort, we have already trained six Balinese staff that are now skilled to work under the supervision of our staff from the famous College of Ayurveda in Kerala, India. Currently we offer some 30 different Ayurveda treatments, each targeted to particular aspects of health, beauty and well-being.

We have a long term strategy to create the capacity and skills for this in Bali, including sending our staff for training and educational courses in India. And let me add that combining the best of Ayurveda with traditional Balinese and Javanese health and beauty treatments does make our resort a unique place for the best of holistic health retreats. I am convinced that we can compete with the health resorts in India, especially since our strategy is that of developing a boutique resort that will provide a personalized service in all aspects. Bali, as a tropical paradise island with easy access and a good transport infrastructure and services has an edge over the densely populated areas. Today there is a growing demand and great scope for small luxury boutique health and nature resorts. And that in essence is our strategy in Bali.

L’Ultimo: If you had to convince a tour operator or an individual tourist to come to your holistic health resort, what would you communicate and emphasize?

Dr Shah: A place where hospitality and service are paramount. A place where the environment is beautiful and at one with nature. A place that offers a wide range of vacation recreational activities, and in this we exclude the bars and the discotheques. A place where good and nutritious food is served. A place where people can without

pressures have the possibility of contemplating their personal spiritual values, norms, relationships and lifestyles. A place that offers the best of holistic health treatments for physical, mental, and spiritual health and well-being. A place where people are friendly cultured and naturally practice genuine and warm hospitality. And importantly a place that is safe and secure. Zen Resort Bali offers all this and much more. Please visit www.zenresortbali.com and www.holisticwellnessresort.com for more in depth information.

L'Ultimo: Dr. Shah, Thank you and we wish you success on your efforts to bring a holistic health aspect that no doubt will contribute to making Bali an attractive niche market tourist destination.