

20 Restaurants That Deliver The Goods

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& SOUTH ASIA

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## Planet Positive

Saving Snow Leopards,  
Chimps & Pangolins

## Wine Wisdom

Tasting Trails in  
India & Greece

## Local Delights

- + Flavours of Tamil Nadu
- + Sri Lankan Icons
- + Winter Fare in Ladakh



Prateek Sadhu  
Andrew Wong  
Hari Nayak

*Gagyan Anand*

# The Maverick In A Chef's Hat

John Spence

HOTELIER

## THE SUITE LIFE

Had it not been for a chance trip to Goa in 1993, UK-based John Spence might not have become the proud founder and owner of the Karma Group. With loads of experience and over 30 international properties under his belt, he shares his journey with **RASHIMA NAGPAL**.

### What led you to launch your first property in Goa?

It started 27 years ago. I was exploring opportunities in the Caribbean when I was invited to speak at a conference in India. I came over and saw a huge opportunity in Goa—a beautiful location with white-sand beaches and a booming domestic market. From an international perspective too, the airlines were beginning to fly into Goa from Europe as a cheaper winter alternative than the Caribbean. For me, Goa combines the mysticism of India with a European feel. So, I bought my first piece of land, [and] put my own life savings into it.

### Today, you have 33 properties across several countries. Did you envision such an expansion?

I am deeply suspicious of entrepreneurs who say they had a master plan and they achieved it. I started off modestly. We had limited cash flow. We had one computer in the company; the sales [team] used it in the day, the marketing [team] in the evening, and the accounts [team] overnight. We lived in non-air-conditioned accommodation and shared office space in Mumbai. [But] there was a dream to create beautiful boutique resorts; I am not particularly fond of large properties. In the early days, it was just in India. Then we had opportunities to expand to Bali, Thailand, Australia, and so on. We began with a staff of 50, and now we are a team of over 2,500 people.

### What drew you towards the hospitality industry in the first place?

I was born at one end of the Gatwick Airport in England. Ever since I was young, I have had the smell of aviation fuel in my nose. My whole family is involved in the aviation and travel industries. Back in 1980, I left university after two terms to join the music business; I thought I'd be a guitarist. But I couldn't even get a gig in a punk band in London. So, I drifted into the business side of music and worked as an agent and tour manager for a number of bands. From the age of 20, I lived most of my life on the road and in hotels, travelling with bands around the world. I got bored of the music business after a while and wanted to get into travel. So, I joined a company that was developing resorts, as a junior salesman and worked my way up to be the managing director, until I started my own resort in Goa.





▲ From left: Karma Salford Hall is located on the edge of the English Cotswolds in the UK; Karma Royal Haathi Mahal in Goa.

**What are your plans for further expansion in India?**

On literally the call before this one, I agreed to acquire a resort in Coorg. We've also acquired a resort in Udaipur that opened a few weeks ago, and one just outside of Bengaluru, in Nandi Hills. We've got a new resort coming up in Goa, and we're looking at a property in Manali. We're keen to expand rapidly. We're looking at places that'd be just as exciting for the domestic market in the short term as they'd be for international tourists eventually.

**Which other places do you like in India?**

I think the cities of Rajasthan are magical. I also liked Mahabalipuram on the east coast. I don't get the time to holiday much in India, but I want to get to know the Himalayas. We have a resort in Dharamshala, but I have unfortunately not been there yet. I am also keen on going to the Andaman Islands.

**What are some of the most underrated places in the world, according to you?**

I love the Pacific Islands, and I think they have a huge potential and are largely unvisited. In Southeast Asia, Laos is underrated. In general, talking about the Indian consumer, I think there's going to be a lot more travel within the triangle

of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Also, I'm a great fan of the Greek islands; besides having resorts in Mykonos and Crete, I've been buying up on the smaller islands.

**A holiday trend you think is overrated?**

I think the whole passion of renting an unseen non-hotel inventory is overrated. It has a definite place in the tourism world, but I think that over the last few years, people have been evangelical about it being the future of hospitality.

*Mahabalipuram is one of Spence's favourite Indian destinations.*



**“Just as a village or town is usually not master-planned on day one, and acquires a soul and a sense of community organically, that’s how we like to build our resorts.”**

**A takeaway from the pandemic?**

Over the course of the last year, we've seen that when and where a resort and restaurant can remain open, it's very popular—more than usual. And that domestic tourism is the key driver at the moment. People have a pent-up desire to travel, and they're working on their bucket lists with far-off destinations. In the meantime, they are rediscovering close-by places that they've not been to in a long time.

**Trips on your bucket list?**

A trekking holiday in Bhutan. More of South America; I hear Cartagena in Colombia is magical. One of my passions in life is ancient history and archaeology—my dad and I have a bucket list of ruins to tick off.

**I hear you also have a passion for art and architecture, and you teach at Yale?**

Yes, for a non-academic person like me, it's a proud achievement. They have a fellowship where they invite people who've been successful in spite of

no academic excellence, to work with professors. So, at the Yale School of Management ([som.yale.edu](http://som.yale.edu)), where students are taught risk-aversion, my job is to say 'go with your gut and do not be afraid of making mistakes'. Similarly, at the Yale School of Architecture ([architecture.yale.edu](http://architecture.yale.edu)), I stress on the balance between form and function. There's no point designing a hotel that works brilliantly on paper but doesn't work in the real world.

**Any hospitality stalwarts who inspired you?**

In my mind, the guru of the boutique hotel world is Adrian Zecha, who started the Aman Group ([aman.com](http://aman.com)). In the urban hotel scene, the Four Seasons ([fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com)) group did fantastic things; [the founder] Isadore Sharp has been a true entrepreneur and took it to the next level.

**If you had to spend the rest of your life in one place, what would it be?**

Either on a Greek island or by a beach in Margaret River, Western Australia. [karmagroup.com](http://karmagroup.com) +

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