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Out of a (five-star) suitcase

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HE'S on first-name terms with Luciano Pavarotti and has been invited to the White House by former US Vice-President Al Gore, which also led to an Oval Office encounter with ex-President Bill Clinton. He's enjoyed a tete-a-tete with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as well during the latter's many visits to Pangkor Laut Resort.

But Hawaii-born Richard W. Riley, the new general manager of the Shangri-La Hotel Kuala Lumpur, is far from being star-struck. He is just doing what needs to be done to accommodate the needs of heads of state and government - no different from dealing with the regular guests, demanding divas included.

It's all in a day's work.

With 21 years' experience in the industry, Riley does have a few tales to tell though.

Four days after reporting for duty at the Shangri-La, for example, Riley received yet another statesman as a guest - this time in the form of German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

The German leader was in Malaysia for a state visit from May 12-14.

"As the hotel general manager, I like to be around and prepared for any and all eventualities. That guy (Schroeder) has got a sense of humour.

"He asked me why I was following him around, to which I replied that his visit was one of the highlights of my career.

"Then Schroeder asked why we had laid out the red carpet, so I explained that this was common practice here for visiting VIPs. The next day when I escorted him out of the lift, he actually nudged me off the red carpet. The German leader actually did that to me!"

The current stint is, however, not Riley's first taste of Malaysia or Malaysian-owned hotels. Prior to his arrival here he had worked at two Malaysian-owned resorts. He was the general manager responsible for the opening of the Pangkor Laut Resort (December 1991 to April 1994), and likewise the Berjaya Le Morne Resort and Casino in Mauritius (April 1994 to January 1996).

"We were at Pangkor Laut for three and a half years. My children really thought they were monkeys. The only friends they had were guests' children and the monkeys - there were about 300 of them, monkeys I mean, on the island."

And it was here that he made Pavarotti's acquaintance. The internationally-renowned tenor was a guest and he performed during the resort's opening ceremony.

Riley still recalls all the necessary arrangements he had to make to ensure that Pavarotti was more than just well accommodated.

"He had this 50-page write-up containing all the things he wanted, such as a bowl of lemons with no pips.

"We also had to bring in a one-foot thick mattress for the massage bed. In fact, we had a special bed made of chengal."

Riley also remembers having to haul a golf cart through the jungle for Pavarotti's use.

"We had put him in a villa on the hill. We had to get a golf cart up to the elevator tower so he could use it to get to the villa. There were easily 50 people in front pulling the cart and 50 more pushing it through the woods."

The effort seemed to be appreciated, for Pavarotti - who together with

Jose Carreras and Placido Domingo make up the trio of greatest tenors in the world - personally serenaded Riley.

"It was a Beatles' song. We were at Emerald Bay, sitting on a log, when Pavarotti sang Yesterday to me."

And it was also while working at Pangkor Laut that Riley met Dr Mahathir, whom he drove around in a golf cart.

"I thought him to be very progressive. He cares about the people... few politicians do."

Riley had joined the Shangri-La Group after a three-year stint in Mauritius, moving between properties in Shanghai (1996-1998) and the Philippines (1998-May 2003).

In Manila, he sort of wore two hats - that of general manager as well as security manager.

"Bombs were exploding everywhere. People were walking around with guns."

After three and a half years there, Riley asked his children where they wanted to go next.

"My daughter is 12 years old and has been to five different countries. My son said Malaysia, and I asked him why. He was very young when we were here last. He had heard some pupils at the British School in Manila going on and on about how great it was when they were here. My daughter then jumped in and said, 'yeah, it's alright by me'. I was happy. It was perfect."

Riley said he had been waiting to return to Malaysia "so I could eat".

"I like laksa, I missed the kway teow. I am happy to be back and having good kway teow and laksa."

And he is also a Mat Salleh who loves the odiferous durian.

"I know I'm weird. All my friends tell me that. My wife doesn't like them. I also like the little triangular durian cakes."

And local coffee? Nah, Riley's brew of choice is an espresso latte, made from Brazilian arabica beans.

He's also slowly reacquainting himself with Bahasa Malaysia, various words he picked up when he was last here.

"A few nights ago while I was having a drink with some of my staff from housekeeping, I said, 'satu lagi' when asking for another beer. They all looked at me in astonishment. Yeah, it's slowly coming back."

So what compelled him to join the industry?

"If you're from Hawaii, you either go into agriculture or tourism. I wasn't too crazy about pineapples."

Riley's job has also taken him to Japan, Australia and Singapore, but the China posting must be his most memorable.

It was in Shanghai that the charming 47-year-old met his Chinese wife who was working at the same hotel.

"Do you know what we hoteliers do? We tell our staff not to fraternise with other staff, but we end up marrying other 'hotel people'. That's the truth. Look at all the general managers and ask them where they met their wives. It's ironic but true."

"My wife was teaching English. That made communication easier because she was able to understand me. It was harder with the other girls because, as much as I tried to tell them I loved them, I really didn't know how," he adds, cheekily.

Today, however, making himself understood shouldn't be much of a problem as he now speaks passable Mandarin and understands the Shanghai dialect.

It was also in Shanghai that he first met Gore. The US vice-president's visit to the "Paris of the East" was followed by one from Clinton.

"Gore told the president to look me up and he did."

"Two weeks later, I was in the US for a family reunion in North Carolina. I made the mistake of telling my aunt about Gore's invitation to

the White House. She basically forced my hand and I dialled the Secret Service number on the card.

"They knew about the invite and my meeting the president in Shanghai... well, they are the Secret Service. They know everything."

The Secret Service booked him into the Capital Hilton Hotel in Washington DC and told him, "6.30pm. West Gate. Be There."

When Riley and his family arrived at the White House, Gore personally came out to receive them.

"There were some 200 to 300 people on Pennsylvania Avenue clapping and cheering us.

"When we got into the White House, Gore said there was someone who wanted to say hello and walked straight into the Oval Office where the president was.

"The president was on crutches, he had twisted his knee or something while in Australia. My son ran right up to him and sat on his lap. He mesmerised my wife... well, he is Mr Smooth... walked her through his office and showed her the things that he picked up in Australia.

"Being Chinese, she found it all an incredible experience. After all, very few Americans themselves can actually say they went to the White House and met the president.

"I'm not very American. I've been out of the country for 23 years, (but) I felt an immense sense of pride.

"It was extremely interesting. They (Clinton and Gore) didn't have to do that. They could always have said they had things to do. I came out of there, thinking `it's too bad that I didn't vote for them'."

It was only later that Riley found out he had visited the president a day after the latter broke up with Monica Lewinsky.

"When the Starr Report came out, we checked the dates," he said.

For Shangri-La Hotel Kuala Lumpur, Riley said he has established certain priorities.

"I am at a point where I feel secure enough to be able to understand what I want and believe in my ability to judge what others want in a hotel.

"It may not all be great, but I am looking at the nuances that create this. The greatest achievement would be to bring this hotel to what I believe it can become. And I believe the Shangri-La Hotel Kuala Lumpur can really kick butt."