

## RED PEOPLE

# Banking on Batik Boutique style



**DOING IT HER WAY:** Jacqueline Fong's construction of her first hotel in Kuching, Sarawak, is reaping handsome dividends

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At 35, many would already be well versed with the basics of the property market. For Jacqueline Fong, she ventured into the hotel business by setting up Batik Boutique Hotel in Kuching, Sarawak. "The idea came to me as a trigger. I believe we should always explore every trigger. So if there's one you think

is important to develop yourself, you should do it as life is short."

She uses happiness as one of the barometers of measuring success because "if it brings me joy, it's a success".

"When I started the project, everyone thought I was crazy. Why start a high-end hotel in a shophouse when everyone else is operating hostels for backpackers in shophouses?"

"I wanted to prove that small is also

beautiful and that it works. I wouldn't say I'm a daredevil but money to me is not an end; it's just a means to further my quest for more joy

"I did it my way. The hotel's personality is a reflection of the people in it ... the proprietress, the crew, the guests, everyone who walks through the doors. The 'classy, chic, cosy' tagline should reflect what we see in the hotel," she said of the philosophy behind the Batik's 15-room layout

spread over two shophouses.

The hotel has teamed up with villagers for activity-led excursions including hiking to their villages (there are over 100 in Kuching) and homestay in longhouses.

"I'm real. I do not like to be in an environment where you have to have a façade so I find myself very comfortable in a village. This is the direction where I am going right now. I'm inclined to be with nature in a raw setting."

For now, Fong, armed with a law degree and master of finance and who has over a decade of experience in investment banking having worked in Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and East Malay-

sia believes she has found her calling. "When you are so intensely into a job, you only use your intellectual mind. But the Batik becomes a creative outlet for me and broadens my social circle to a demographic which is everybody else," she said.

In hindsight, she said setting up a hotel is not for the faint hearted, more so she "didn't have very much money to start with" and when the construction stage was over, she only had RM3,000 to her name.

But all's well that ends well.

"I'm doing exactly what I want which is doing my own hotel and I did it my way," she stressed.

## Further glimpses of the hotelier

Excerpts from an interview with New Straits Times RED ...

### How do you view challenges?

I groan ... (laughter) ... and thereafter I will decide if I should pursue the challenge or not.

### Your approach to investment.

I will only invest in something if it is pleasant to my eyes and if I can imagine myself living there or being there. Batik Boutique Hotel is an example of not being the most logical of business directions if you are a pure businessman.

It's not going to earn you astronomical returns but for me, it brings me joy. The hotel allows me to develop as a person and becomes a representation of my personality and educates me and it grows together with me.

### Lessons learnt in the property business.

It's a dynamic business. The moment that one day starts to become the same as the previous day, you know that it's time to innovate again.

### Your inspiration.

I believe who you are is a culmination of the people you allow yourself

to be exposed to. I would like to credit my former housemate Sophie, an architect and partner in ZDR (Zaini Dubus Richez), who planted the seeds of good design and architecture in my mind.

The firm was the architect and interior design consultant for the Batik, and the project subsequently won a PAM (Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia) award (first prize for colour on buildings, interiors) in 2010.

Sophie also exposed me to the ideology of author Ayn Rand, introducing me to *The Fountainhead* whose philosophy I find myself following.

### Why batik as a theme?

When I was working in Jakarta, my Malaysian friend Amy introduced me to batik. We would travel by train for hours to villages where ladies make batik. We usually come away with amazing pieces purchased from the artists themselves.

I pay tribute to my obsession for batik by incorporating it into the name of my project. The indigenous name relates to visitors and potential guests who seek to connect with the

local community.

The idea is to portray me as someone who builds a hotel which represents my principles, value system and personality. Batik Boutique Hotel is my personality personified and the hotel's energy is also borrowed from the energy of myself as proprietress, the crew and the guests.

It becomes a dynamic environment and always gives a good feeling to everyone who walks through our doors.

### What are the hotel's differentiators?

The Batik needs to be genuine every day that we are open.

While the crew and I are well aware we are above all running a business and systems need to be in place, I stress that all the crew are allowed to display their individuality and interact with our guests accordingly.

It's important to connect with everyone we meet and the only way to do so is to be who we are.

The Batik is a small hotel. We don't need many guests, so we market selectively, mostly through word of mouth and online reviews. It's a hotel for people who have a "love for life" as one of

our guests aptly commented.

### How would you describe yourself?

Real. I need to be real. I prefer to avoid environments where I have to pretend to be somebody I'm not.

Investment-wise, other than this business, I dabble in real estate. I have been buying, renting out and selling property since I could first afford it.

And because of the availability of credit and my own confidence in my future earnings, I began to take risks. I have purchased and disposed of several residential and commercial units over the years. Most of my buys were decided on the basis that they looked nice and that I could see myself in there.

But now, I derive more joy managing my continuously evolving business as an investment than my relatively static property investments.

I'd probably consolidate my property holdings and direct funds to business ventures that generate more happiness.

### Plans for future projects.

Sure, but only if it makes aesthetic sense. The product, the location, the environment have to have an overwhel-

ling energy before I would consider.

Passion would be the motivator; if the business proposition evokes my passion, it's 50 per cent go ahead. The other 50 per cent obviously has to do with the numbers. If the numbers also make sense, I will want to proceed, so watch this space!



Fong wants to prove that **small is beautiful and that it works.**