

Walking Inn

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After Lemon Tree, Patu Keswani has set his heart on a new concept-budget hotels

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Patu Keswani loves to draw diagrams. In his Safdarjung Enclave office, there is a whiteboard with several crosses and circles, marking where his next hotel is going to be. He reaches for a piece of scrap paper and draws a timeline to illustrate what he's talking about. With a dog-who-hates-women in his office reception, a little purple clip holding together his ponytail and miniature cigars that he smokes from a box throughout the interview, Keswani is not what you would call run of the mill.

Neither are his hotels. Lemon Tree is the three-star property he started in Gurgaon a year ago after he quit the Taj group. "No matter how much you process the hotel industry, there's still a margin for error," says Keswani. "It's a fascinating business."

Now Keswani is launching a new hotel venture called Red Fox next year. The USP? The tariff will be as low as between Rs 800 and Rs 1,800 per night depending on which city you're in. "We provide safety, a young, fresh feel and yes, the rooms are a little small, but they're comfortable. And you may not have room service, but you have a 24-hour coffee shop."

One of his favourite analogies is about the car industry in India. "Twenty years ago, there were high-end cars like Mercedes and low-end ones like the Ambassador. Now we have cars for every single segment. You can tell a lot about the country's economy by looking at its cars." Similarly with hotels. Keswani noticed that there were five-star hotels and guest houses, but nothing for the middle space." There were some hotels which were four star and wanted to be five stars, but they just weren't."

Enter Lemon Tree. It originally started as a low-rung three-star, hoping to attract customers from both the five stars and the guest houses. "But we found that while the guest house customers loved it, the five star ones weren't too happy," he says. "We basically had to provide the full service of an upmarket hotel."

While Keswani now has a happy clientele and Lemon Tree has moved to the upper level of three-star hotels that still didn't provide accommodation to a budget commuter. Hopefully, his

Red Fox project will be able to fulfill the needs of this segment.

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